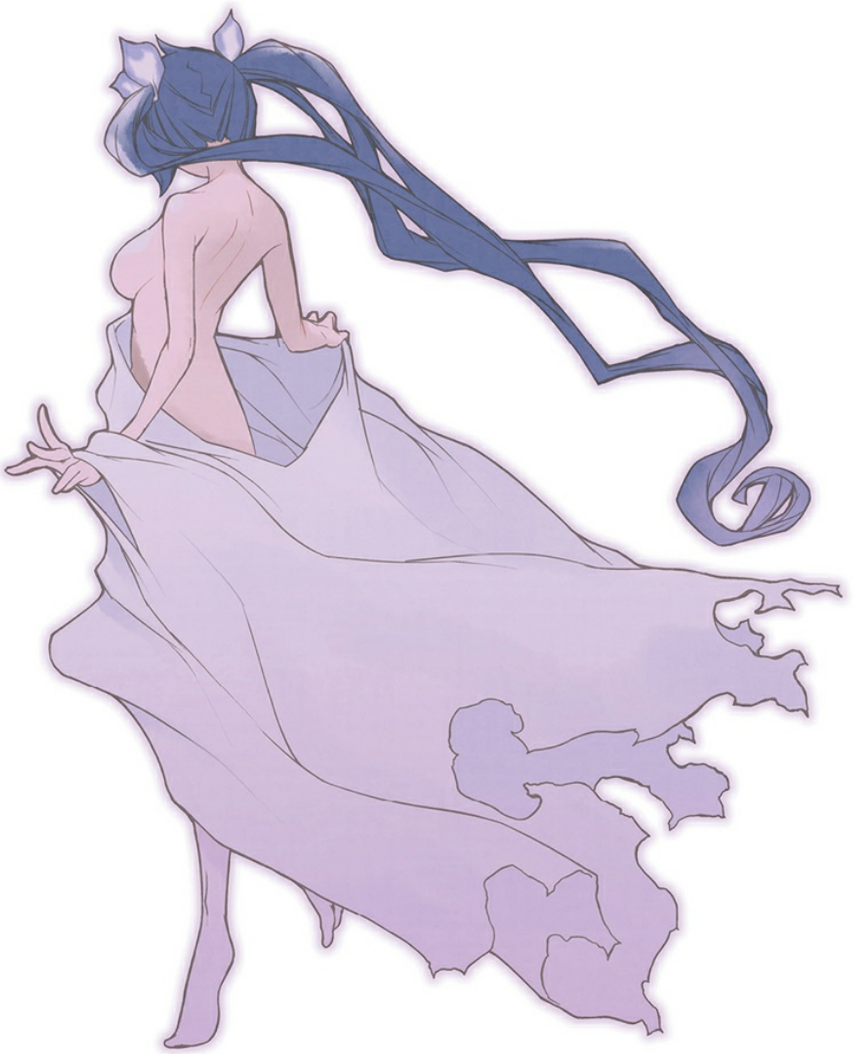
Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA



Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon? 15

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ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

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PROLOGUE **ADVENTURERS' REST**

INTERLUDE **GROWTH, THE PRESENT, AND RYE BREAD**

CHAPTER 1 **A DAY OF DEPARTURE, A DAY OF BEGINNING**

INTERLUDE **MY HOME, MY FAMILIA**

CHAPTER 2 **HEY, WORLD**

INTERLUDE **DOES CINDERELLA DREAM OF HAPPINESS?**

CHAPTER 3 **THE CINDER GIRL**

INTERLUDE I, HIS ADVISER
CHAPTER 4 GUILD ALONE
INTERLUDE THAT NEVER-COOLING IRON
CHAPTER 5 BLUE FLAME
INTERLUDE ELVEN UNREST
CHAPTER 6 MEETINGS AND OATHS
INTERLUDE THE STRIVING PRINCESS AND THE WATCHFUL SHINOBI
CHAPTER 7 TALES OF TIMES PAST: THE BLACK BIRD AND THE GOLDEN FOX
EPILOGUE HERO'S ELEGY

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VOLUME 15

FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?, Volume 15

FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Paul Starr

Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA vol. 15

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue: Adventurers' Rest

Interlude: Growth, the Present, and Rye Bread

Chapter 1: A Day of Departure, a Day of Beginning

Interlude: My Home, My Familia

Chapter 2: Hey, World

Interlude: Does Cinderella Dream of Happiness?

Chapter 3: The Cinder Girl

Interlude: I, His Adviser

Chapter 4: Guild Alone

Interlude: That Never-Cooling Iron

Chapter 5: Blue Flame

Interlude: Elven Unrest

Chapter 6: Meetings and Oaths

Interlude: The Striving Princess and the Watchful Shinobi

Chapter 7: Tales of Times Past: The Black Bird and the Golden Fox

Epilogue: Hero's Elegy

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*.

LILLILUKA ERDE

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

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*.

MIKOTO YAMATO

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

LYU LEON

Formerly a powerful elven adventurer, she now works as a waitress at The Benevolent Mistress.

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 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. Soon the supporter Lilly, the smith Welf, the Far Easterner Mikoto, and the renart Haruhime have joined *Hestia Familia* alongside him. After enduring numerous adventures, *Hestia Familia*'s arduous expedition has finally come to an end, and with the help of many people, they've safely returned to the surface. There, in the warmth of the sun, Bell and the rest of his familia can enjoy a brief moment of peace…

EINA TULLE

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

CHIGUSA HITACHI

Another member of *Takemikazuchi Familia*. A kindhearted girl, she has been friends with Mikoto and Ouka since childhood. Not naturally suited to fighting.

MIACH

The head of *Miach Familia*, a group focused on the production and sale of potions and other recovery items.

DAPHNE LAULOS

Former member of *Apollo Familia*, along with Cassandra. Joined *Miach Familia* after *Apollo Familia* lost the War Game.

SYR FLOVER

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

CHLOE LOLO

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

HEPHAISTOS

The deity of *Hephaistos Familia* and Welf's former patron goddess. Has a long and checkered history with Hestia.

AISHA BELKA

A daring, lustful Amazon in *Hermes Familia*. Formerly a member of *Ishtar Familia*.

SOMA

Lilly's former patron god. Though he once cared for nothing besides the brewing of his divine liquor, now his priorities seem to be beginning to change.

OUKA KASHIMA

The captain of *Takemikazuchi Familia*. With his shield in hand, he takes the lead in protecting his companions in the front guard. He and Welf fight like cats and dogs.

TAKEMIKAZUCHI

The deity of *Takemikazuchi Familia*. The god of combat and martial arts, he boasts tremendous skill in the art of war and has instructed Mikoto on a range of techniques.

NAHZA ERSUISU

Originally the sole member of *Miach Familia*. Jealous of women who get close to Miach.

CASSANDRA ILLION

Like Daphne, she joined *Miach Familia* after *Apollo Familia*'s defeat. She is quite attached to Daphne, who is caring toward her.

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.

MIA GRAND

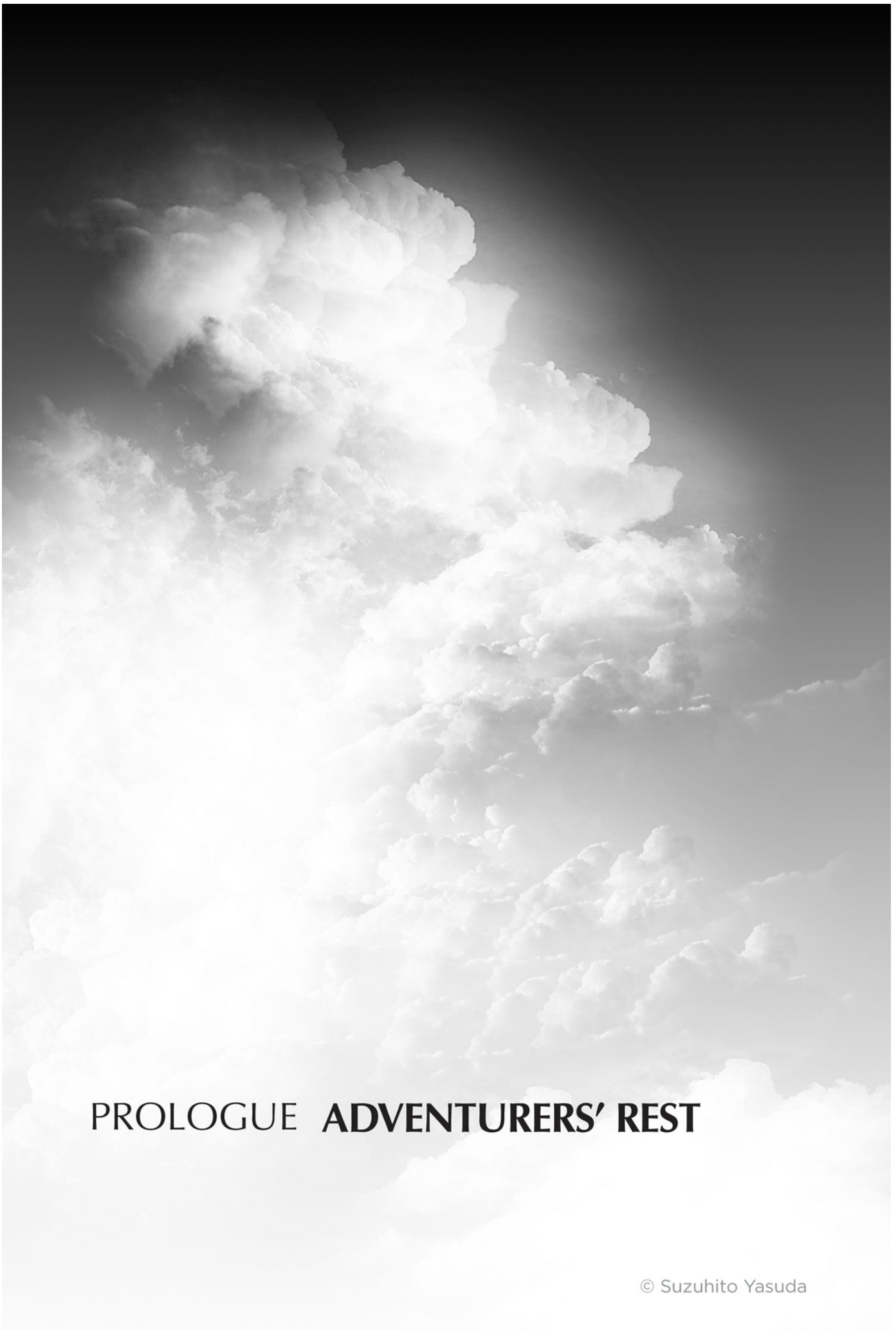
The owner of a tavern called The Benevolent Mistress. Relatively tall, despite being a dwarf. Strong enough to send adventurers running away in tears.

TSUBAKI COLLBRANDE

A half-dwarf smith belonging to *Hephaistos Familia*. Currently at Level 5, Tsubaki is a terror on the battlefield.

RUAN ESPEL

A former member of *Apollo Familia*, now employed at a tavern called The Hidden Home of the Prums. Has the inferiority complex common among prums.



PROLOGUE **ADVENTURERS' REST**

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PROLOGUE

ADVENTURERS' REST

"Bell, you're…!"

"Mr. Bell, that looks like…!"

Welf and Lilly cried out, grief-stricken.

"Oh no, Master Bell, it's…"

"Sir Bell, could your left arm really be…?!"

Haruhime and Mikoto likewise averted their eyes from the sight.

Standing before his assembled comrades, Bell solemnly prepared to speak.

"It sort of just happened…"

Bell's arm was immobilized. More specifically, his armor-clad left arm was cradled in a sling. It was unmistakably set in a medical cast. His hollow laughter rang out underneath a clear blue sky.

"Li'l E and I were talking about how that was seeming kinda long for a follow-up appointment. Was Dea Saint in a bad mood, then?"

"Yes, very. I didn't realize Amid could *get* that mad."

They were on a street in the northwest street of the city known as Adventurers Way. Bell had just emerged onto the broad avenue from the white stone building that was *Dian Cecht Familia*'s infirmary and was greeted by members of *Hestia Familia*, *Miach Familia*, and even *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

"I heard you had a high-spec supporter item equipped, but this seems…"

"I did, but…it turns out I really wasn't supposed to move around too much, so…" Bell rubbed the back of his head sheepishly with his empty right hand in response to the exasperated look he received from Ouka.

It had been two weeks since the conclusion of the joint-expedition—which

included the encounter with the moss huge, Jura Harma's atrocities, and the desperate march through the deep levels.

Bell had badly injured his left arm in his fight against the Juggernaut, and although he'd equipped a supporter as a protective measure, he'd ended up overtaxing his arm anyway. That inevitably earned him a thorough scolding from Amid during his follow-up appointment earlier that day.

The terrifying tongue-lashing he'd received from Dea Saint—a girl often likened to an exquisite porcelain doll, and famous for her calm, collected demeanor as much as she was for her skill—had been harsh enough to singe Bell's white hair.

"So now you're in a cast to stop you from wrenching it around anymore…" Lilly sighed.

The cast was made not of bandages and plaster but dir adamantite. Despite the light weight of the refined metal, it hammered home the healer's intent, which was: *Thou shalt not move*.

When Bell arrived for his checkup, Amid's fury had been evident. "She said that if I didn't listen to her, the next time she sees me, she'll tie me to the infirmary bed," said Bell, shivering at the memory of what he'd endured a few minutes earlier.

Amid lived up to her reputation as a kind, professional healer who never, ever turned her back on a patient, but for Bell, that guarantee was now as terrifying as any dragon's flaming breath. He'd learned his lesson that there was nothing so fearsome as the rage of a beautiful woman—especially one who was normally gentle.

"*Dian Cecht Familia*'s a bunch of quacks…Bell, it's still not too late! Leave it to me—some ultra-special medicine and a custom therapeutic diet will have you back in action in no time." The sleepy-eyed chienthrope Nahza patted Bell heartily on the shoulder.

"That medicine and food sound extremely expensive, so we'll pass."

Miach Familia and *Dian Cecht Familia* were business rivals, and Nazha and her comrades in *Miach Familia* were friendly with *Hestia Familia*. This time, though,

they had referred their regular to Amid. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say they had *entrusted* him to her, believing that her renowned skills could heal him, just like when *Dian Cecht Familia* provided Nahza with a prosthetic arm after she had lost her own limb in the past.

While her patron god Miach was relatively forthcoming, Nahza seemed determined to deny that Bell was in good hands, even though her grumbling was ultimately in jest.

“That’s a shame…If you came by our place, I thought maybe Cassandra could get that talk she’s been wanting to have with you and finally get rid of some, shall we say, frustrations…?” Nahza added a mischievous laugh and a sly grin at the end.

“Wha—?!” Cassandra cried out hysterically, her face turning red as a berry.

“Cassandra’s been frustrated recently…? Does she need someone to hear her out or something?” asked Bell, confused, at which point, Cassandra immediately lost all semblance of composure.

“N-no! I was just anxious about whether I should go see *you*! But since you were injured, I was worried that maybe I’d just be imposing on you! So, um, that’s why…um……anyway, it’s nothing to worry about! Right? Isn’t that right, Daphne?”

“Don’t drag me into this…”

Cassandra’s words had only become increasingly incoherent as she received a withering look from Daphne next to her.

“Oh, but I did promise that we’d have a nice long chat once the expedition ended, didn’t I? Let’s do that next time I visit the shop,” said Bell.

“Ah, you remembered!…Waaaah! Daphneeeeee!”

“Why are you clinging *to me*?!” Daphne finally raised her voice at her friend, who had fallen to pieces the moment she saw Bell’s friendly smile and was currently attempting to hide behind her.

As Bell watched the scene unfold with somewhat perplexed bemusement, Welf spoke up. “That reminds me, Bell, what about that elf girl from the tavern?

Are you expecting her to swing by?”

“Lyu? Mia’s place is so busy that I don’t think she’d have time to come,” said Bell. “Also, it kind of feels like she’s reluctant to meet up lately…almost like she’s avoiding me,” he added vaguely.

In front of *Dian Cecht Familia*’s infirmary were gathered representatives of every familia that had participated in the alliance. As all of them had endured the grueling expedition together, they had assembled to greet Bell, whose injuries had been the most serious.

The only one absent—aside from Aisha, who’d grumbled about being summoned by her patron deity—was Lyu.

As Bell worriedly contemplated the possibility that he’d somehow unknowingly offended Lyu (elves were a notably meticulous race, after all), Lilly’s expression shifted as she put the pieces together.

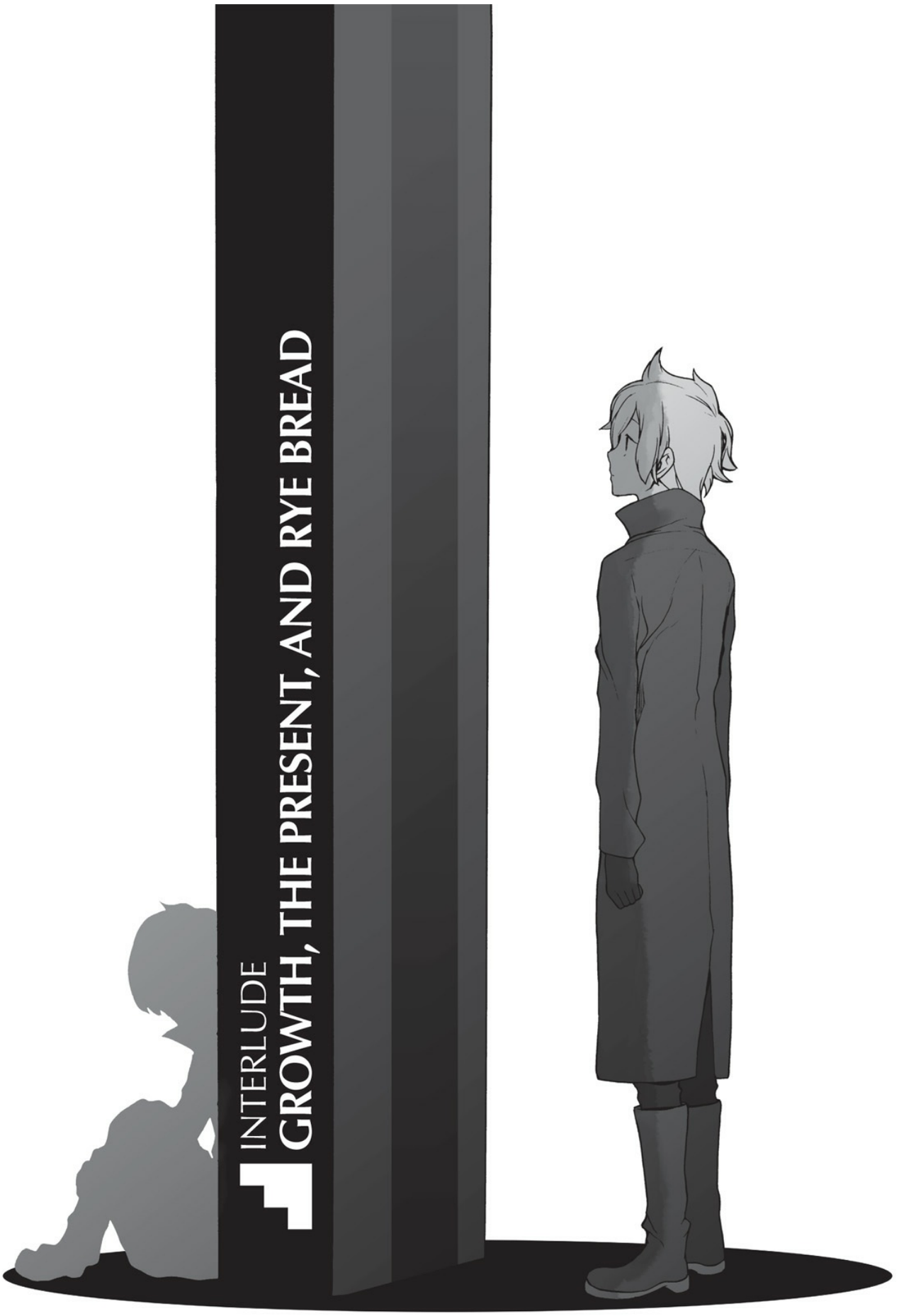
But she said nothing. There was nothing *to* say. She merely grumbled. “First Miss Cassandra and now Miss Lyu…? No, it can’t be. It simply cannot.”

Haruhime cocked her head curiously.

Cassandra, her face still burning from embarrassment, peeked out from behind the frustrated Daphne. “So, er…Bell? With your arm in this condition, will going into the Dungeon be…?” she asked tentatively.

Bell nodded with a smile. “Yes. With the expedition now over…I think I’ll take it easy for a while.” He peered up at the endless blue sky. There wasn’t a single cloud, as though nature had deigned to grant a moment’s reprieve to a group of adventurers who’d overcome terrible hardship.

“After all, my goddess once told me that resting is part of an adventurer’s job.”



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INTERLUDE

GROWTH, THE PRESENT, AND RYE BREAD

Bell Cranell

Level 4

Strength: I0 -> C676 Defense: I0 -> B701 Dexterity: I0 -> B724 Agility: I0 -> B718 Magic: I0 -> C55 Luck: G -> F Immunity: H -> G Escape: I

Magic

Firebolt

- Swift-strike magic

Skills

Liaris Freese

- Rapid growth
- Continued desire results in continued growth
- Stronger desire results in stronger growth

Argonaut

- Charges automatically with active action

Ox Slayer

- When fighting minotaurs, all abilities are exponentially enhanced

"Bell, what did you do?" were the first words out of Hestia's mouth as she updated Bell's Status. She wore a severe expression as she regarded the boy's back, but her question came out in a baffled monotone.

Because he was still wearing the cast, Bell was forced to sit in an uncomfortable posture and winced awkwardly as he underwent the Status

update.

They were in an unoccupied room on the first floor of Hearthstone Manor, the home of *Hestia Familia*. There had been much to do since their safe return from the expedition, and Hestia was only now administering an overdue Status update. Or more accurately, she had been.

Since the Status update required the follower to be shirtless, the two of them were alone together in the room. Hestia paused her work and laid her hands on her knees.

Hestia was tempted to throw on her usual cheerful smile and make a show of wiping her forehead like she usually did after a Status update. However, that would have been nothing more than refusing to come to grips with reality.

Bell's ability score total was over 3400.

That was unmistakably a personal best for the boy. It might even have broken a public record.

If some god's follower had *wanted* to—say, by saving up a bunch of excelia over time by forgoing regular Status updates and then cashing in on a really big one—in that kind of scenario, it wasn't impossible to hit similar numbers, so it had probably been done at some point…But there wasn't any point in making that comparison because with such a dramatic number, saying "Check out how much my follower grew in a single adventure" didn't even count as a brag.

Why? Because the amount was proof that the adventurer in question had survived a series of utterly brutal encounters, and if any of them had gone badly, they wouldn't even be around anymore.

"Uh…" said Bell, accepting the Status update paper with a tremendously awkward expression. "…I almost died like eight times."

I figured as much.

Hestia had heard all about the expedition. The moss huge alone would have been bad enough, but they'd faced other exceptional opponents like the lambton and the Juggernaut, not to mention how they ended up being chased into the deep levels and nearly dying in the process of wandering around down there. Just hearing about it made her nearly pass out. Actually, she *had* passed

out.

And now, as she looked at the numbers on Bell's Status that corroborated that harrowing story, she couldn't help but cradle her head.

"…Bell, would you tell everyone else that I'll update their Statuses another day? I'm sorry, but I'm seriously tired today…"

Hearing Hestia speak in such a lifeless tone, Bell immediately looked very apologetic.

"Oh, sure…I-I'm sorry…"

When Bell's Guild adviser eventually heard about this, she'd probably slam her head into the table, Hestia thought. *I sure sympathize with that*, she thought. *Next time she checks on Bell, the two of us oughtta go drinking*. Hestia stared into space, distracted by the daydream.

The truth was that Bell seemed on the verge of leveling up, but Hestia kept that to herself.

It was just a hunch of hers, after all.

Maybe she was wrong.

He'd only just hit Level 4, and it hadn't been long since the last Denatus, and if she were to conveniently omit the fact that Bell was ready to level up again after such a short period of time, it *certainly* wasn't because she was worried the other gods would go into utter robe-wetting convulsions at such an unheard of revelation. It wasn't, honest! Honest!

As Hestia argued with herself internally, she heaved a long, deep sigh. "… You've really grown, haven't you, Bell?" Then, summoning her confidence, she continued. "From the time we met until now, you really have grown so much."

The boy only blinked in response as she smiled at him, the very first person to ever join her familia.

"I'll be back soon."

Having finished my Status update with Hestia, I head out from the manor. My

plan today is to take it easy and go on a walk to nowhere in particular. It's true that I need to rest, but before anything else, I want to deal with this reaction to being on the surface after wandering the deep levels for so long. It feels like my body's saying it wants to bask in the sunshine.

Given my immobilized left arm, I probably shouldn't move around too much, but I figure it'll be all right as long as I don't push it.

Plus, this is my chance to take a leisurely stroll around town.

"Man, feels like it's been a while since I've walked around town with you like this, Bell."

"Yeah, I don't think we've done much of anything with just the two of us in a long time."

Welf's taken it upon himself to watch over me while my arm's in a cast. He came along even though he only just finished repairing both my weapons and Mikoto's. Lilly wanted to come along, too, but since the deadline to submit the report detailing our expedition is coming up, she's gone to the Guild instead.

Given the list of Irregulars we'd faced, and the fact that we'd ventured into the deep levels, Lilly had strongly resisted being the one to deliver the report to the Guild. Her reasoning:

"If it becomes public knowledge that we made it to the deep levels, it's quite possible that our familia rank will go up. And if that happens, don't you suppose our Guild dues will rise accordingly? Because they will, you know. And what if the Guild is like, 'Okay, your next goal is the thirty-eighth floor!' Huh? The most obvious goal for our next expedition mission will be 'reach a deeper level,' which will only be even harder, and Lilly's not Mr. Welf, but it's still tempting to say 'You gotta be kidding me!' Even the lower floors are still dangerous for us without Aisha or Lyu supporting our party. Forget about the deeper floors! But it's possible that we'll get stuck with a truly punishing mission or quest, so the clearly, obviously, and unmistakably superior choice is to hide the fact that we ever reached it in the first place!…Also, we're still totally in the red after the forced march of the expedition we just finished."

—is what she said in so many words.

No one, not even a god, would casually dismiss the words of a trusted adviser who said that much without taking a single breath from start to finish.

I also noticed that when she got to the part about being “in the red,” a darkness deeper than the thirty-seventh floor filled her eyes. Haruhime and I could only shiver in fear at her outburst. Welf and Mikoto didn’t seem to have anything to say back to her, either.

Although to be honest, since Ouranos and Fels knew about what had happened, my guess was that she didn’t need to be quite so worried about reporting to the Guild what happened…

In any case, we ultimately decided that Lilly would go and say that our expedition ended in failure and that *Hestia Familia* would accept the according penalty, keeping us a middle-tier faction in the eyes of the city for a little while longer.

The truth was, there hadn’t been time for us to collect the required drop item after our encounter with the moss huge, so we technically did fail our mission. If I close my eyes, I can still see Lilly’s grumbling form as she set off for the Guild headquarters, carrying a purse holding the not-insignificant amount of money we owed them. As a side note, she also forced Haruhime to go with her so she could at least familiarize herself with Guild processes.

In the meantime, Mikoto’s minding the manor with Ouka and the others from *Takemikazuchi Familia*, who came by to check in on how we’re doing. Hestia’s at her part-time job.

“Hey, Bell. Ever since we’ve been back, you’ve been jumping out of bed in the middle of the night, yeah?”

“…How did you know?”

“I mean, my room’s right next to yours. So…is it because of how long you spent in the deep levels?”

“Yeah…We couldn’t rest for more than five minutes at a time down there, and we never knew when monsters might attack. I think my body’s still sensitive, even though we’re back on the surface,” I explain to Welf as we walk side by side down the street.

Welf shoots me a sympathetic look, probably worried about whether suddenly getting thrown into the deep levels has left me with some kind of deep-seated trauma.

“That’s rough, buddy. Does that mean you’re not getting any decent sleep?”

“I-I’m fine! Really, it’s nothing! Anyway, I guess Haruhime must have noticed because whenever I wake up, she’s been coming to my room to check on me.”

“…Hmm?”

“I mean it’s probably also because she’s an animal person, but apparently in the Night District, they’re taught to be very sensitive to whether a client isn’t sleeping well, so…!”

“…Hmmm?”

“So she’ll hold my hand until I can fall back asleep, or we’ll read heroic epics together…It’s sorta like what I imagine it would’ve been like to have an older sister, I guess? It’s really nice…er, I mean…Well, anyway! I’m fine, so don’t worry about me!” My face is burning after I reveal that Haruhime’s been visiting my room at night. I only brought it up to keep Welf from worrying too much, but his expression has become unreadable. Wait, why’s he making that face?

“…You better never, *ever* let Hestia or Li’l E hear about that.”

—We’ve been fighting so much recently. It’d be nice to release some of the tension that’s been building up for a while now.

That was my thought process.

This is just my guess, but I bet that top-class adventurers like Aiz make it a priority to spend some time on the surface without a specific goal or destination whenever they get back from an expedition. Wandering around just like I am right now, staring up at the sky, mingling with the crowds.

Maybe it’s a kind of ritual to reclaim your sense of self…Somehow, after being in the Dungeon for too long, the surface becomes a harrowing place. What should be a relaxing time becomes tense and stressful. It’s like everything just feels off.

I guess the best example is how I’ve been overreacting to even the slightest

sound by leaping out of bed. You could call it an occupational hazard: Dungeon Sickness.

If you can't get used to feeling safe, can't convince your body and mind to relax, then even restful things provide no rest.

That's why I think times like this are important for adventurers.

"Hey, isn't that Little Rookie…? I mean, Rabbit Foot?"

"Ignis is here, too."

"Hey there, boy! Not headed to the Dungeon today?"

"Got some fresh fruit in today. How about taking some home?"

"Hey, bro with the white hair! What happened to your arm?"

"Get hurt in the Dungeon?"

"Wow, that's gotta hurt!"

I'm drawing attention as I walk through the town with Welf. A couple of humans—also adventurers—regard us from a distance. An older dwarf man and animal-person lady minding the front of their produce store call out to us. A couple of demi-human children innocently bump into us, too.

Is this the proof that I've reached Level 4 and become a second-tier adventurer? Hestia's well-liked so that probably has something to do with it, but I'm hearing encouragement like "hang in there!" from people I don't even recognize now.

We pass two gods, and I happen to overhear their conversation. "If only I'd let him into my familia way back when!" "Salivating over Bell, eh?" "Argh, I wanna rewind time!"

I have no idea how I should feel about that.

"You're a bit of a celebrity…no, a full-fledged man-about-town! How's it feel?" Welf teases.

"I—I mean, I'm happy, but…also confused," I answer honestly, embarrassed.

I think back to Wiene, and everything that happened with the Xenos. Back then, I was the focus of the city's despair and malice. To go from that to where I

am now, with the townspeople looking at me with smiles on their faces, makes me realize how much I've been through.

That's right.

So much has happened.

Then, just as I indulge in some sentimentality for once—I hear a surprised voice from in front of me. "Ah…"

When I look, I freeze in my tracks. It's a human man wearing slightly shabby clothes. He looks to be maybe twice my age. His black hair is long enough in front that it almost reaches his eyes.

As the two of us study each other, unmoving, Welf's face becomes wary. This encounter's so sudden that my mind has completely blanked out, and I can't explain why.

The man looks like someone you might run into on any street corner. He makes a terribly awkward expression, then turns on his heel and tries to escape.

"E-er!" I quickly exclaim to his back. "Thank you for the rye bread!" I cry out and give a hearty bow.

I immediately sense his surprise. When I look back up, I see him turn around, wide-eyed. As I straighten, we stare at each other for another moment.

Then he finally exhales and smiles at me. "Look at you…You've really gone and turned into an upper-class adventurer. And you're just the same as ever."

"…"

"Far as I can tell anyway." The man scratches his nose, then narrows his eyes as though something's occurred to him. "Ah, listen…you might not want to hear this from me, but…" He casts his gaze downward and scratches his head, seemingly having trouble finding his words. Eventually, he decides on "You hang in there, lad."

"…I will!" I immediately reply with a huge smile.

I'm so happy.

I have no idea how many people have seen me and given me words of

encouragement today, but the support of this one person makes me unreasonably happy.

The man seems a bit flustered at my smile, and this time he succeeds in escaping.

“You know that guy, Bell?” Welf finally asks, after having silently watched the exchange.

I search for an answer to give to my friend, now wearing a curious expression as he wondered about the unfamiliar individual.

“Yeah…he did me a favor a long time ago.”

It’s true.

Before I met Lilly or Welf, or even Hestia. Back when I’d just arrived in Orario and didn’t know up from down. Back when I was trapped between my own hopes and fears.

Back then, could I have even imagined the person I am now? Someone who’s met so many people, gone on so many adventures, and surrounded himself with such a familia—such a family?

…There’s no way.

Like most people, I’m sure my past self could never have predicted this future.

It’s *because* I can’t see the future that I push forward with everything I have as the present steadily becomes past.

I look up.

Overhead stretches a beautiful blue sky.

Orario’s sky, too, seems changeless even as it changes.

Back then, when I still had so much to learn, the spring sky was warmer than it is now.

In the present, the weather makes it clear autumn is just around the corner. A pleasant breeze ruffles my hair as my thoughts are drawn toward the boundless sky.

I let myself fall into the memory of that first day.

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CHAPTER 1

A DAY OF DEPARTURE, A DAY OF BEGINNING

“The city of Orario has everything.”

That’s what he told me when I was young.

“Fetching young ladies, of course—those elves you’re so fond of, goddesses with voluptuous figures…and of course, even your soul mate. If you’ve an urge to go, then go!”

Back then, all I could do was hold on to my dreams in one hand, with a book of fairy tales in the other.

“If you play your cards right, riches and fame could be yours, too. But once you set foot there, like it or not, you’ll be drawn into the ebb and flow of history. That’s just the kind of place it is,” he said, neither smiling nor angry, only simply stating a fact. *“But…that’s exactly what gives you the chance to be a hero. So, if you’re ready, go.”*

That’s what my grandfather told me.

“I’ll say only this: Don’t compromise yourself for anyone. Not for a spirit, nor for a god.”

I remember his words well.

“Don’t blindly obey. Decide for yourself.”

I remember his eyes.

“This is your *story.”*

I’ll never forget the way he smiled.

He’s gone now, but I hold dear all the many things he told me.

Somehow, I can tell those memories are going to keep popping up as they please for a long, long time.

“Hey, kid. You can see it now.”

Ka-tunk, ka-tunk.

I slip out of a dream to the noisy jostling of the cart and open my eyes. I’ve been sleeping curled up around some hay bales, but when I hear the voice belonging to the old man driving the cart, I hastily poke my head out to see.

“…!”

A single sight greets me as the cart crests a small hill on the well-maintained road. My jaw drops as I stare dumbfounded at the stunning view.

“This is amazing!”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s what everyone says when they see Orario for the first time, boy!” The old man driving the cart—a human merchant—laughs in amusement at how I’m trembling in astonishment.

Up to this point on the road, the main highlight has been the distant but still clearly visible towers that greet me every time I look up. The scale of the sight that now greets me, though—it’s on another level. My village upbringing leaves me at a complete loss for words.

The Labyrinth City of Orario.

The center of the world, where one can find riches, fame, and fated encounters.

It gives me goose bumps to be able to lay my eyes on the place that served as the stage for so many of the adventures from my beloved stories and epics about legendary heroes.

“Thank you so much, mister! I’ll be all right from here!” I give my thanks to the kindly merchant who’s brought me this far and leap out of the cart, shouldering my few belongings as I rush down the road that leads to the awesome metropolis.

“Hey! You’ve quite a ways until you actually reach the city, boy!”

“It’s all right! I’ll run!” I say over my shoulder with a wave and a smile. Then I

turn back to the city and charge up the hill toward it, as though propelled by my uncontainable excitement.

The old man was right. It takes quite a while before I reach the high stone walls.

I'm exhausted, gasping and sweaty, but now that I'm face-to-face with these walls that looked gigantic even from a distance, I feel yet another wave of wonder.

They're high enough that craning my neck to see the top is actually pretty painful, which only adds to their overwhelming grandeur. As the barrier surrounding the only labyrinth in the entire world, the stately, imposing walls have endured since ancient times.

I finally come to my senses and make up my mind to enter the city, joining the end of a long line of merchants, carts, and travelers that snakes out from the entrance.

"Next!" My turn finally comes while I'm distracted, scanning the line for anyone wearing a sword and armor. Awkward with nervous energy, I approach the two gatekeepers.

"Have your entry permit?"

"Uh…D-do I need something like that?"

As I flail at the demand for documents, one of the guards, an animal person wearing a black uniform—he must be one of the Guild members I've heard about—immediately laughs. "Well, you're obviously not a merchant…You've come to be an adventurer, right?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Then you're fine. Hundreds, maybe thousands of aspiring adventurers come to this city. There's not enough time in the world to question them all," explains the Guild member as he directs me to turn around and bare my back.

When I do as I'm told, he holds a lamp-like object up to my back.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Checking whether you've got a Falna. It's a test to keep out foreign spies."

He explains that it responds to something called “ichor,” but to a country bumpkin like me, it’s just all mumbo jumbo.

Right as I’m starting to worry, the other gatekeeper, a man with a sword at his waist, speaks up. “Looks like we’ve got more new blood!”

I can tell with a glance—he’s an adventurer.

On the shoulder of his rumpled clothing there’s a crest. Looking closer, I can tell it’s a design patterned after an elephant’s head, the emblem of his patron deity’s faction—his *familia*.

The dark-skinned, scruffy-bearded adventurer has a presence that even I can sense. Before this adventurer, a person who has the life I so badly want, someone who lives the life I admire so much, I feel an emotion that’s something like nervousness.

“So why’d you come to Orario? Don’t tell me you’re here for something boring like just earning your keep. Is it money? Fame? Women?”

Being casually spoken to by one of the adventurers I’ve dreamed of becoming catches me so off guard that I just blurt out the truth. “Uh…umm…! I—I came to meet people in the Dungeon…!”

The human man’s eyes go wide, and he laughs so heartily that it draws attention to us. “…Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is the first time I’ve ever met anyone who actually came out and said straight up that they’re looking for a hot date in the Dungeon! You’re funny, kid!”

My face is burning up after saying something so embarrassing.

“Hashana, we’re on duty,” his Guild mate reminds him.

“C’mon, don’t be like that. You Guild guys are all too serious about work,” says the adventurer with a shrug and a grin.

Apparently, Guild members and adventurers both get assigned to guard duty. I finally realize the fact when, out of the corner of my eye, I notice there are two distinct types of people putting on black uniforms at a station by the gates.

My test seemingly over, the Guild member puts away his magic item. “First thing you need to do is go to Guild Headquarters to register as an adventurer.

That's where you'll get your orientation."

"Oh, thank you very much!"

"However, registration requires you to have a Falna…In other words, you must join a deity's familia to properly register as an adventurer." The Guild member delivers a well-practiced explanation of the process for becoming an adventurer.

Familia. The organizations established by the deusdea—gods and goddesses who hailed from the heavens.

By entering into a contract with one of the deities, the inhabitants of the mortal plane could become one of their followers and gain certain blessings.

And a familia is a family that sticks together through the good times and the bad.

My heart begins to pound as I faintly recall the knowledge my grandfather shared with me.

"Anything you want to know? Now's your chance. I'm an open book." The adventurer who thought my answer was hilarious is offering advice after raising a good-natured laugh.

A moment of hesitation later, I look upward to meet his gaze. "What's the most important thing for an adventurer?"

The compactly built, medium-height adventurer answers without any hesitation. "Finding a good god to serve, I'd say." He folds his arms, giving me a confident nod and a smile. "That's the one place where the Guild won't look out for you at all. Picking a good god is when an adventurer—or, rather, the god—really shows what they're made of. Other than that…probably luck."

"Luck…"

"Yup. It's the most important thing an adventurer can have." Then he adds, "Good luck, greenhorn!" and pats my back.

His smile makes me so happy that I immediately return it and say, "Yes, sir!" and make for the opening gates.

My chest swells with excitement, nervousness, and anticipation as I pass over

the threshold and a whole new world opens up before me.

"Whoa…" The city streets that greet me are more beautiful than anything I imagined while outside the walls.

A broad avenue leads directly from the square just past the gates where I'm currently standing. An orderly stream of horse-drawn carts flow past shops that line both sides of the wide road. The streets of Orario, arrayed around the magnificent white tower at its center, are more dazzling and busier than any rural farming village could ever hope to be.

I walk down the avenue, excitement coloring my cheeks. It's obvious to anyone who bothers to look that I'm a new arrival. I can't stop myself from turning my head from side to side and exclaiming at each new wonder.

So many of the people walking the streets are demi-humans! And then there's all the adventurers, decked out in weapons and armor!

My eyes light up at the sight of elegant, sword-bearing elves and dwarven knights with great axes strapped to their backs. The childlike prum sorcerers with their pointed hats and staves are just as enchanting.

The village where I was raised had only humans and the occasional animal person, so the sheer number of races walking around like it's a given is already enough to thrill me. The din emanating from the crowd is strangely heartening.

The word that comes to mind is *exotic*.

For the first time, I'm seeing the Labyrinth City with my own eyes.

Every sight and sound is so fresh and awe-inspiring. I've never been more excited in my life.

"…? What's that?" I've been wandering aimlessly south along the avenue that leads from the north gate for quite a while, then encounter a crowd that seems to be forming for something.

I approach the throng. "Um, excuse me! What are people gathering for?" I ask.

"It's *Loki Familia*! They're back from their expedition!"

Loki Familia? Expedition…?

The young human man who answered me looks at my uncomprehending face with suspicion. “What, did you arrive in Orario, like, yesterday? What kind of hayseed doesn’t recognize the name *Loki Familia*?”

With an exasperated expression on his face, the man explains.

Loki Familia is one of the top adventuring groups in the city. Evidently that makes them one of the few parties in the city—and even the world—that are worthy of being called “first-tier adventurers.”

And apparently, they’ve just returned from an expedition into the farthest reaches of the Dungeon—the labyrinth that lies beneath the city.

The top familia in the city.

When I hear those words, I can’t resist joining the crowd to try to catch a glimpse of them. The onlookers keep their distance from the adventurers, making space for them as they pass, almost like they’re afraid to get too close. I manage to poke my head through a gap and finally get a good look at the adventuring party in question. All I’d been able to see before that were flashes of battered armor.

The first ones I spot are a formidable dwarf knight and an elf mage—or is that a high elf? They’re all carrying heavy packs, and their unfamiliar weapons and staves gleam in the sunlight. They look for all the world like a band of heroes returning triumphantly from the field of battle.

Every single member of their party has the presence of a seasoned adventurer.

It hasn’t even been one day since I arrived in Orario and I’m already witnessing a scene straight out of a legend. Here I am with the rest of the crowd, looking on in astonishment.

“Hey, look!”

“That golden hair! Those golden eyes—!”

“It’s the Sword Princess!”

Now it’s not just the gathered onlookers watching from a distance raising their voices in excitement, but passerby adventurers as well.

The Sword Princess…? I think—but it only takes a moment for me to realize who's gotten them so worked up.

Long, golden hair and silver armor. A single, sheathed sword.

The adventurer passes by before I can make out her face through the small gap in the crowd I'm peering through, so all I can see clearly is the back of a girl about my height, her long hair shimmering like so much gold dust as she walks away.

Could such a delicate girl really be part of the top group of adventurers?

My eyes continue to follow the vividly sparkling golden hair walking among the seasoned fighters as the heavily laden group disappears down a side street leading away from the main avenue.

"'Sword Princess'…Is she a literal princess?" I repeat the name under my breath as I move on after the crowd dispersed.

I can't afford to be dazzled by the sights of the city forever, though. Now that I've arrived, the first priority is finding a place to stay. It's a basic fact of travel. Or at least that's what the people in my village told me.

I start looking for a cheap inn, keeping my head on a swivel and occasionally summoning my courage to ask passing strangers for recommendations. The money I'm carrying is everything that was left in my grandfather's house after he died, and it's all I have, so I can't spend it carelessly.

Reaching the center of the city, I enter a grand, spacious plaza centered around an alabaster-white tower—the entrance to the Dungeon. I stop in front of it briefly before heading over to the eastern part of the city, where I've heard the inns are concentrated.

The wider avenues there are dense with fancy redbrick hotels, but the establishment I enter is one of the wooden buildings on a shabbier street. It's a snug little two-story affair with the word INN scrawled on its signboard. I don't mean to be rude, but it definitely looks like a cheap place to stay.

"Excuse me…!" I say as I open the creaky door. A middle-aged human man behind the counter looks up from the pamphlet he's reading.

“Looking for a room?”

“Er, yes. I’d like to stay for a short while…”

“Eight hundred valis a night. No meals.”

—Eight hundred valis?!

How expensive is this place?! That’s not even close to what I had in mind!!

From what the people in my village said about their trips to local markets, I’d been expecting to pay maybe two or three hundred valis at most, but I guess this is what you can expect from Orario. They don’t call it the center of the world for nothing, after all.

What am I gonna do?

Just getting a room is going to run through a good chunk of my money, but I don’t think other inns will be much cheaper.

“If you stay three nights, it’s two thousand valis. If you don’t like it, the door’s right there—”

I pounce on the innkeeper’s offer of a better rate if I pay for three nights up front. “I’ll take it, please!”

“—Huh?”

He lifts his eyes from the news pamphlet he’s unsociably reading and stares at me. I add, “Thank you very much!” as he regards me curiously.

At this, the innkeeper shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Uh, sure thing,” he says, returning to his reading.

I take the key he slides across the counter and dash upstairs to my room.

A room with a lock and a key! This is city life! There was nothing like this in my grandfather’s house.

The room is furnished with a bed and not much else, but it’s more than enough for me. Having gotten a bargain on top of ensuring I’ll have a place to stay for three days has definitely improved my mood.

I decide to go right back out into the city, so I leave all my belongings except my money in my room and head back down the stairs. “Thanks, I’ll be back!” I

shout toward the front counter on my way out of the inn. There's no reply from the grumpy innkeeper, but I pay that no mind as I pick up speed after reaching the cobblestone street.

I know that in order to become the adventurer I long to be in both name and reality, first I have to join a familia and then register at Guild Headquarters…But before that, there's something else I want to do.

There's a place I promised myself I would visit when I finally made it to Orario.

After asking for directions, I learn that my destination is nearby in the southeastern section of the city. Some people warn me about the Daedalus Street slums that are apparently close by, but I don't run into any trouble before I reach my destination.

It's a cemetery packed with countless graves.

"…"

This is a public burial ground in Orario called the First Graveyard, also known as the Adventurers Graveyard—the final resting place for those who fall in the Dungeon.

There's no one else present in the spacious area where I emerge after taking a long set of stairs that lead away from a side street. Murmuring in surprise at the sheer number of white gravestones, I make for the center.

Eventually a giant jet-black monument comes into view.

Its noticeably different from the other markers…because this is a memorial dedicated to heroes from ancient times.

"It's…"

My eyes go wide as I take in the five-meder-tall monument.

The *Dungeon Oratoria* was like scripture to me when I was a child. It's a miraculous tale of heroism, a historical account spun from the very soil of Orario.

The great heroes who appear in its pages risked their lives to turn back the tide of monsters that flowed endlessly from the underworld—and it is before the grave of those heroes who I've idolized for so long that I now stand.

"…"

Names from the stories I know by heart are carved into the black stone. It feels like my body has been set aflame as my gaze passes over each name. For some reason, I find myself on the verge of tears.

Dozens of flowers have been left at the foot of the monument. Even now, these great heroes still receive gestures of respect and admiration from the people. Having brought nothing but myself, I hang my head at my lack of forethought, before straightening and closing my eyes.

From here on out, I, too, am an adventurer of Orario.

I may never manage to become a true hero…but maybe I can get just a little bit closer to the world those legends inhabited.

I make my silent wish as the clear blue sky watches over me.

The next day, I begin my search for a familia to join.

"Status" is another word for the blessing of receiving a Falna from the patron god of a faction. Without one, you can't call yourself an adventurer in the Labyrinth City.

I muster all the energy and determination I can before presenting myself at the home base of one of the city's many familias, marked out by their unique emblems.

…Or that was my original plan anyway.

"Rejected again…"

It's already afternoon. I pause to rest in a plaza shaped like a half-moon that's facing a busy avenue. Ten failures in a row calls for a break.

I sit on a stone curb, my head drooping gloomily.

Clearly, it's not as simple as just wanting to join a familia. In contrast to my burning determination, the reception I've gotten from all the familias I've visited has been incredibly cold.

Most of them turned me away on sight.

On top of obviously coming fresh from the countryside, the only occupation I can really claim to have any real experience in is farming. And I'm showing up totally empty-handed to boot, without a single weapon to my name. Everything about me screams "peasant." There isn't a single reason why any familia would consider me an attractive recruit.

If I'd been someone more accustomed to hard labor, or if I had experience as a blacksmith or some other type of craftsman, maybe I would've been treated differently.

"Race probably has something to do with it, too…"

When I was trudging away from my tenth rejection, I passed a male elf who had come to meet with the familia that had just turned me away. They greeted him with open arms.

I really feel the barriers of race in the turned backs and sneering faces I'm met with at seemingly every door. I heard before that humans and prum are generally looked down upon as potential adventurers when compared with other races.

It's not surprising that the fierce Amazons or the keenly perceptive animal people receive better treatment—to say nothing of the graceful, magically attuned elves or the powerfully built dwarves, who are strong enough to take on the monsters in the lower levels even without divine blessings.

Maybe a completely average human like me has little to be proud of.

No—the problem probably lies with me specifically, a country boy who can't even hide how much of a hick I am.

"…Gh!"

After sighing again for the umpteenth time, I smack my cheeks and look up. There's no point in feeling sorry for myself. If I have enough energy for that, I have enough energy to find a familia that will let me into their ranks.

I've asked around a bit, and it seems like most of the well-established familias aren't accepting new members at all. I should be looking for one that's more

up-and-coming, with an adventuring party that's a bit shorthanded.

In order to fill my empty belly, I buy some potato puffs at a nearby stall with the curious name Jyaga Maru Kun. They cost a mere thirty valis, which my coin purse is thankful for. They're quite filling, too.

While I wrestle with an inexplicable feeling that I'll be seeing a lot more of this food stall in the future, I plunge back into the bustling streets of Orario more determined than ever.

Then—two days later.

"A-another day of total failure…" I begin to stagger back to my room, roasting in the evening sunlight that lances over the western lip of the giant walls encircling the city.

Orario is shockingly big and walking all over the city from dawn to dusk is exhausting.

And there still hasn't been a single familia that's willing to take me in.

I've rushed around to all the groups that have flyers posted at various street corners advertising openings for new members, but as soon as they compare me to the other applicants, I'm turned away.

"…"

I can hear laughter. A god and their followers are walking side by side, chattering happily about something.

My lone shadow seems to bind my feet to the ground, keeping me from moving. All I can do is look down.

Finally, I force myself to move again and trudge over to the inn where I'm staying, my pathetic face painted red by the sunset.

Today's the third day of my stay, so I go to inquire about extending it.

"With the extension fee, that'll be twenty-five hundred valis."

"Wha…?" I say, surprised at the higher price.

“You only paid for three days up front. That’s one less room that I’d been planning to rent out to other customers. Gotta make up that difference. It’s a fee for my trouble,” the innkeeper explains brusquely.

I guess he has a point. I fish my coin purse out of my backpack and leave nearly all my remaining money on the counter. As the innkeeper sweeps it toward himself with his forearm, I turn and make for my room on the second floor.

I decide to climb into bed without dinner.

“Another day of disappointment…”

I stare up at the wooden ceiling as I cover myself in the bed’s thin blanket.

My money’s about to run out. If I can’t find a familia willing to take me in within the next three days, I’ll be sleeping outside.

At every familia’s headquarters I’ve checked out, the people who greeted me have been adventurers. If I can’t get them to take me seriously, then my only other option is to appeal directly to the gods. These last few days as I’ve walked around the city, I’ve seen quite a few deities…but I’ve been far too intimidated to call out to any of them and just clam up instead. Besides, they’re nearly always accompanied by some security. If I carelessly approach one, the only greeting I’ll get is a nasty glare. I’ve gotten so many already.

The only time I met a god who seemed like he was willing to let me into his familia, he said something rather strange—“On the condition that you become my personal toy, cutie!”—so I ran.

That was a pretty scary encounter, though I’m still not sure why…and it’s probably the reason I still find it nerve-racking to approach gods directly.

“…Is it even possible to meet a decent god?”

It’s gotten quite dark outside while I’ve been lost in my thoughts.

I recall the words of the adventurer I spoke to at the city gates. He said that picking a good god is where an adventurer really shows their ability.

He also said it would come down to luck.

Am I ever going to meet a god who wants me? A familia that’ll welcome me

home?

“…”

When I first came to Orario, I was brimming with so many feelings that I thought I’d burst—so much hope, anticipation, and excitement.

But now all I feel is the chill in my hands and feet. A lump of ice has settled in my chest.

Anxiety, loneliness, despair.

This sense of isolation is beyond anything I’d experienced back in my village. It’s something I’d never felt even once when I lived with my grandfather.

The only thing that comes close is the grief I felt when I lost him.

For the first time, this vast-walled birdcage of a city feels unbearably cold.

Night has fallen, and the light of the city’s magic-stone lanterns flickers uncertainly.

The ceiling I’m peering up at is dim and indistinct in the gloom.

…It’ll be all right.

Tomorrow…I’m sure tomorrow will be all right.

However.

“Don’t come back. We’ve got no room for dead weight here.”

It was like the world was sneering at my futile attempts to comfort myself the night before.

“You, an adventurer? Try coming back once you’ve found a supporter to carry stuff!”

All I found waiting for me was cold gazes and refusals.

“Try bringing some coin with you and maybe we’ll consider it! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Before I knew it, three more days had passed without finding a single familia that would accept me.

“…Thank you for putting me up these past few days,” I told the innkeeper behind the counter the morning I was supposed to check out of my room.

I don’t have any more money to pay so the end result is obvious.

Miserable as can be, I don’t even bother looking up. I say nothing more as I leave through the front entrance. Then, just as I’m about to close the door on my way out—

“…Aww, hell!” The innkeeper who’s just been reading news pamphlets behind the counter musses his hair in sudden consternation. At first, I assume he’s getting up because he’s mad about something, but instead he reaches somewhere beneath the counter, then comes around and suddenly thrusts it in front of me. “Here, take this.”

“Huh…?”

He’s holding out a bagged loaf of rye bread.

I hesitate to accept it only for the gruff innkeeper to force it on me. “Listen, boy…You be a little more skeptical from now on, all right? You won’t make it otherwise.” His black hair is still swaying as he gives me a stern warning.

Then he turns his back to me as though to ward off any emotional moment and shuts the door behind him.

As I peer down at the bag in my hands, I feel a sudden heat in the corners of my eyes for some reason that I can’t quite place.

I bow deeply toward the closed door of the inn, holding tightly to the sack of bread.

“…Time to go.”

Putting the inn where I’ve spent the last six days behind me, I set off.

The sky above Orario is clear and blue again. The springtime air is warm and pleasant. I find myself unconsciously staying in the shadows of the buildings lining the streets.

After I stop and sit in a quiet corner and eat the whole loaf of rye bread, I begin my search for familias I haven’t been rejected by yet.

On many occasions, I pass adventurers sporting formidable equipment or beautiful clothing. They're heading to the center of the city where, beneath that white tower, they'll be able to enter the vast labyrinth. There, in that monster-infested lair of evil, they'll live out new tales of heroic adventure.

The gods watch over the adventurers embarking on new legends of their own while the people of the city breathlessly await the stories of their travels. Today, like any other day, begins with the happy anticipation and smiles of countless people.

Surrounded by those cheerful voices, I walk the city alone.

And after I'm turned away from the sixteenth familia…I finally collapse exhausted on some street corner.

"…"

I lean against the wall of a building, my strength depleted, staring blankly at the foot traffic passing by on the street.

Is there a place in this city for me?

Is there someone here who will even look at me?

I feel as though the ground I'm standing on has been cut adrift from the rest of the world. The footsteps and clamor of the city feel distant, and no one seems to notice or care that I exist.

It's like I'm a lost child, wandering all alone through the city without a destination or a home.

The anxiety and solitude are overwhelming.

"I…"

I came here to Orario in search of connections and bonds.

I couldn't resist the yearning for heroism beyond my station, and so I came here to the Labyrinth City. Unwilling to abandon the memories my grandfather left me, I came.

But…the truth is…

What I really wanted was…

“…”

I rise unsteadily to my feet, my face downcast, my eyes hidden by my disheveled hair. Without any idea of where I ought to go, I make for a dark alley in order to get away from the busy avenue. Nobody pays any attention to me. I’m all alone.

“Heeey! You there! The back alleys are pretty dangerous, so I’d steer clear if I were you!”

Which is why when someone calls out to me, I don’t understand what’s going on at first.

“Huh…?”

I am absolutely, completely, utterly certain of this: I will never forget this moment.

“Th-thanks but…um, who are you? All alone in a place like this…Are you lost, by any chance?”

“…Uh, I think you’re the one who looks lost here.”

Her appearance. Her voice.

“So, um…the thing is, I’m recruiting for my familia. Just so happens I’m looking for adventurers to join up, so, y’know, uh…”

The hand she reaches out to me.

“I’ll join! Please let me join!”

“…R-really, you will? Even if it’s my familia?!” she asks with a beaming smile when I grasp her hand. “My name’s Hestia! What’s yours?”

The warmth of the voice that asks my name.

“It’s Bell…Bell Cranell.”

The joy filling this moment makes me want to weep.

I’ll remember every last detail for the rest of my life.

I met a goddess.

Here in these streets full of meetings and partings, in the Labyrinth City where

tales of adventure begin every day, in this place where heroes are born—I met a single goddess.

“This is your *story.”*

My story, I’m certain, began on this day.

The day our familia started.

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INTERLUDE
MY HOME, MY FAMILIA

INTERLUDE

MY HOME, MY FAMILIA

The sun seemed to hurry down past the edge of the city walls, perhaps because summer was ready to give way to autumn. Stars twinkled in the deep blue of the night sky.

The streets of Orario thrummed with life, as they always did—magic-stone craftsmen were finishing their day's work, merchants were networking to secure access to valuable commodities, and the deities of powerful familias were enjoying themselves at the feasts and parties held by those hopeful merchants. Smiths, herbalists, bards, and prostitutes were hard at work as well. What arose from the heady mix of people and occupations drawn together by the Dungeon was a hedonistic energy. It was an atmosphere found nowhere else but the Labyrinth City, the so-called center of the world.

The adventurers returning from the Dungeon fit right in as seemingly every last one of them headed straight for a tavern.

All eight of the city's main streets were packed.

But amid all that, there were those who did not venture out into the city, out of austerity or frugality. Or honorable poverty. Or abject destitution.

Their reasons were many, but there were familias that shied away from the clamor, choosing to pass the time at home, instead.

"Huh, so you ran into Wiene?"

"Yes! Despite the time and place, I was overjoyed to see her!"

Wearing a maid's pinafore, Haruhime chatted happily with Hestia in the spacious living room of Hearthstone Manor.

Dinner concluded, the members of the familia were all relaxing. Hestia was seated on the living room couch and having a pleasant conversation with

Haruhime, who had finished her chores.

“I think this is a little strange to say when we’re discussing dear sweet Lady Wiene, but…she has become so very strong. She really has.”

“Really now? Huh, so she’s not a little crybaby anymore…Ugh, lucky you. I wish I could’ve seen her, too. But gods can’t go in the Dungeon.”

“I-I’m sure there will be other chances! P-perhaps you could sneak into the Dungeon with Master Bell and—”

“Heh, I actually did that once before with Hermes and got a real earful from the Guild for my troubles…If we got hit with that kind of penalty fee again, there’s no telling how our supporter might take it out on us, Haruhime.”

The conversation in Hearthstone Manor was by turns envious and hopeful as they happily discussed another dear member of their family who had spent time with them in this very home.

Haruhime, who was training to be a maid and who often found herself minding the manor, had many opportunities for pleasant conversation with Hestia. The young goddess’s personality being what it was, it had not taken long at all for them to become quite accustomed to each other after Haruhime joined the familia.

She was a modest and polite girl. Though initially timid as a fox cub, once she was comfortable around someone, her smile was kinder and gentler than anyone else’s. These were all components of Haruhime’s charm. Her surprisingly strong will was another part of it, too.

Little wonder that Wiene had taken to Haruhime before Hestia.

“Listen, Haruhime…You’re a hard worker, and I’ll always support you in whatever you do, but…all I ask is that you don’t pull anything weird with Bell, got it? I know I’m saying that all the time, but still. Especially at night.”

“Hweh?!”

Setting aside the time Haruhime had tried something inconceivable on the boy based on certain preconceptions she held, Hestia had a soft spot for Haruhime.

And for Lilly, and Welf, and Mikoto, too, of course.

She wondered if this was love.

Love in an affectionate, parental sense. Love for her irreplaceable children.

While they'd been away on their expedition, Hestia had taken care of the manor with help from members of *Takemikazuchi Familia* and *Miach Familia*, but even with them around, the house had been somehow empty. Maybe that was why she felt that way.

Though she was answering her own question, Hestia decided that maybe it *was* love after all.

"Hey, sorry—anyone know where the black tea leaves are?" Welf poked his head out from behind a cupboard.

"Ah, excuse me. Lady Hestia, just a—" started Haruhime, rising to her feet.

"It's fine, it's fine, off you go."

After watching the bobbing golden hair and fox tail patter off, Hestia turned her gaze to the rest of the room. There in the middle of the space, Bell, Mikoto, and Lilly were clustered around a circular table with carved wooden legs. They focused all their attention on some weathered game pieces.

"Ah, so now that Lilly's pawn has entered Mikoto's territory…that means it's promoted, right?"

"Precisely, Sir Bell. As is, this position threatens my formation…!"

"Hee-hee! Lilly's got the hang of it now. Miss Mikoto, I shall be claiming victory today!"

Apparently, the three of them were engrossed with a board game from the Far East called shogi. While they were out buying dinner in the market, Lilly—yes, the notorious spendthrift Lilly—had taken an interest in the novelty and bought it with her own pocket money.

To be fair, it was an interesting curio from a distant island nation, and even Bell, still moving around awkwardly in his cast, had gotten sucked into the game.

“To think that my familia can afford luxuries now. ’Tis well, ’tis well!”

The board game was one such indulgence; the black tea, another.

Hestia leaned back and stretched, feeling a deep sense of satisfaction. They had come so far since the familia’s founding.

(Back in the beginning, each day was a struggle, and we had to scrimp and save every last morsel.)

And of course, there was no leeway for any sort of treats or comforts.

The novice Bell did his best to contribute whatever he could, but the first priority was food, and the second was food, as were the third and fourth. And, whenever they managed to get that far, the fifth was magic-stone lanterns.

But now their familia had actual assets, including this very manor, which they’d won from Apollo in the War Game.

“And…things are so lively now.”

Haruhime exclaimed in delight at seeing Welf’s tea-brewing technique—a relic of his noble Crozzo upbringing. It was obvious from his awkward smile that he felt somewhat complicated about his skill even if he enjoyed the praise. Lilly was fiercely determined to finally score a win against Mikoto, who had been indulging her all day long while Bell raptly watched them play. This was the familia Hestia had pictured in her mind the day she first came to the mortal plane.

The long, lonely nights from just half a year ago were now in the distant past. Hestia was no longer alone.

“…”

Hestia stood wordlessly from the sofa and walked over to the hearth set into the living room wall.

It was still only autumn so a crackling fireplace wouldn’t be needed for quite some time, but Hestia decided it couldn’t hurt. She bent down and began rummaging for materials, arranging firewood like she was building a small house in the hearth.

“Goddess, what’s the matter?”

She turned and met Bell's curious gaze. "Oh, Bell. What happened to the shogi game?"

"Mikoto squeezed out a win. Lilly wants a rematch."

Hestia looked over and saw the frustrated Lilly arguing her case while Mikoto generously humored her.

"Oh, I don't know. I just felt like using the hearth."

"You did say you wanted a house with one someday."

"Oh, did I say that?"

"You did! You said that it was because you were the patron goddess of the sacred fire, of sheltering flame…and that it was the hearth that filled a home with light."

Those *were* her words. Though she may have forgotten, her words had undoubtedly left their mark on the boy in front of her.

Hestia returned Bell's cheerful smile. "Bell…the truth is, my goal at first was to create a familia bigger even than Loki's."

"Th-that's…I don't know if 'ambitious' is the right word. 'Grandiose' and 'reckless' also come to mind…"

"Maybe at the time, sure. But not so much now, right? We're making headway as a proper familia now. It's not out of the question for us to catch up to Loki."

"…Oh, you might be right."

Bell squatted down beside Hestia as they talked, and she readied a flint and steel. Bell was impressed by the practiced ease with which Hestia struck the steel to light the kindling despite her usual clumsiness.

At first, there was only smoke.

Slowly, gradually, the wavering flame almost seemed ticklish as it spread to the firewood bit by bit.

Hestia's eyes twinkled as she watched the brightening hearth with Bell beside her. Eventually he spoke up again, a smile spreading across his face.

“Sometimes…I think about the church basement we used to live in. I’m happy Lilly and the others joined our familia, and I love our new home, too, but… sometimes I miss it.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Me too. After all the racket we used to make about someday moving into a big, fancy house no matter what, now that we’re actually here, I find myself thinking ‘Gee, that little old place was kinda nice,’ or ‘Gosh, I’d like to go back to when it was just Bell and me.’ I swear…like goddess, like child. We’re awfully selfish, huh?”

Their first home had been a tiny alcove hidden away beneath an old abandoned church. Before Bell came along, Hestia had been there alone in the cold, dank place.

“So much has happened since then…” As those words tumbled from her lips, Hestia was suddenly overcome with emotion.

Perhaps the boy next to her was feeling something similar. He turned to look at Hestia, lit by the hearth’s firelight before he spoke. “Goddess, would you like me to rub your shoulders?”

“Bwuh?” Hestia’s eyes shot open at the unexpected question. “Bell, even given our relationship, that could very easily be interpreted as sexual harassment.”

“I’m not quite sure what you mean by that, but—I-I’m sorry. I just wanted…” Bell shrank away apologetically, scratching his cheek in embarrassment before continuing with an awkward smile. “You work so hard for all of us, so I wanted to do something for you, that’s all…”

Perhaps it was something like the affection a child felt for their parent, or the warmth that comes when a loved one suddenly comes to mind. Or perhaps they were simply the words that occurred to him as the first member of her familia, the one who had experienced all the joys and sorrows alongside her from the very beginning.

Hestia felt as though a flame had been kindled in her chest.

“In that case, will you do me this one favor?”

“Ah, yes! What is it?”

Hestia said nothing and stood. She then sat back down directly in front of Bell and leaned back into his chest, as though she were on a rocking chair.

“Stay with me, always.” She looked back up over her shoulder and smiled at him.

She expected him to flinch away at the sudden intimacy, but he didn’t.

Although his expression betrayed surprise, Bell merely smiled down at her.

It was such a gentle smile that Hestia couldn’t help but let herself lean farther back into him.

Bell silently accepted her.

“Bell?”

“Hmm?”

“A familia is pretty nice, huh?”

“…Yes, I think so, too.”

The two sat there on the carpet, quietly gazing at the hearth’s fire. That alone was more than enough to comfort body and soul.

Perhaps they didn’t look like soul mates, but maybe some would have pegged them as brother and sister. They might have also seemed like an old married couple with many years behind them. *Not that it matters*, Hestia thought.

Once Lilly or one of the others noticed, they’d be immediately peeled apart.

But until then, Hestia let herself enjoy the boy’s warmth.

The fire in the hearth sparked and crackled.

Their faces were illuminated by the warm light.

Hestia was certain that this was happiness. For this boy to become her very first follower and to have him at her side like this could be nothing less.

In the quietly dancing flames, she glimpsed the flicker of a memory and smiled.

CHAPTER 2
HEY, WORLD

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CHAPTER 2

HEY, WORLD

The stars dotting the night sky glimmered as if to guide the travelers below.

There in the darkness, one boy stood alone.

He had stopped atop a small crag a short walk from a nearby peaceful mountain village. The night wind ruffled his white hair as he remained still in front of a grave.

The wood-and-stone marker was a grave in name only. There were no remains laid beneath it. Its only purpose was to substantiate the loss of someone precious.

The boy made no move to leave the place. Any doubts or pleas for help and counsel directed at the gravestone were simply returned as self-questioning. His only source of love and protection had been torn away and it would take time for him to be able to answer his questions on his own.

As he continued to stand there, blinking his rubellite eyes, the open night sky suspended above the mountains watched over him.

Then—

"—A falling star."

A bright flash appeared overhead.

The boy looked up with a start and saw a blue glint of light.

Trailing countless flickering motes in its wake, the dazzling pinprick streaked across the night sky, leaving a beautiful arc of light behind it.

The moment was over in seconds. The blue star disappeared somewhere to the far west of the boy's village.

"Could that have been…a god?"

The boy's intuition said that he might have just seen a god descending from heaven to earth.

But it would be half a year before he would set out for the Labyrinth City of Orario and receive the answer to his question.

It was gentle moment.

As the beasts and monsters scattered, the blue falling star that streaked across the sky slowed as it neared the ground.

As though intent on avoiding a flashy, troublesome arrival, the falling star—a blue sphere of light—hovered in midair before slowly coming to a soft landing. The faint outline of a person was visible for an instant before the ball of light shattered into a thousand glimmering shards.

Just as the flash faded from sight, a single girl was left in its place.

Her beautiful features put her on the indistinct threshold between "child" and "young woman." Raven hair spilled across her back and her frame was petite, save for a surprisingly generous bust.

The girl who'd slipped from the night sky stood barefoot on the grassy plain—on the earth.

"Huh! So this is the mortal plane!"

She spoke in a clear voice while looking out across the open country with preternaturally blue eyes. The edge of a forest was faintly visible in the distance. The scent of grass was in the air. An owl hooted in the distance.

Her soft, round cheeks flushed at the flood of sensation that hit her all at once.

The girl—the goddess Hestia—composed herself and studied her surroundings for a short while longer before flinging her arms wide and shouting.

"It really *is* different from the heavens! It's finally my turn to come down here…This is where my life in the mortal realm begins!" Hestia's eyes sparkled as she peered up into the sky with a triumphant expression on her face.

Eventually, she thought to examine herself.

She had restrained her arcanum so as not to infringe on the rules that all the deities had agreed to follow during their time among the mortals. Consequently, the body she currently inhabited boasted none of her heavenly form's omnipotence.

Her slender arms and legs were every bit as weak as they looked, but Hestia regarded them with satisfaction. At a glance, she was quite happy with how they had turned out.

"Now, then…I shouldn't have landed too far." Hestia scanned the area as a quiet night breeze gently played with her sable hair. She turned left and right to check the plains lit by the moon and the stars, and the moment she looked back over her shoulder, she let out an "ah" at the sight of her destination.

"There it is."

Almost too far away to see, a lone pure-white tower reached for the night sky.

Still barefoot, Hestia set off across the plain, occasionally hitching a ride in the carts of passing merchants as she headed straight for the Labyrinth City Orario and its white tower. Even among mortals, her destination was known as the center of the world, and it occupied a special place in the hearts of the gods as well. The young goddess received directions from a friendly, devout merchant woman, and by the break of dawn, Hestia reached the walls that separated the city from the world beyond.

Despite some confusion and bewilderment at the stern warnings of the Guild's gatekeepers that any gods or familias planning to reside in Orario would not be able to leave the city as they pleased, Hestia completed the complicated entry procedures and finally passed through the northern gates.

"That inspection sure took long enough. Don't know why there are so many rules just to enter the city and find a place to live…but I guess that's all part of the charm of this world!" Hestia smiled despite feeling beleaguered after the lengthy holdup at the gates. In contrast to the heavens, where everything was

free and unrestricted, the mortal plane was refreshingly inconvenient and limiting.

“So this is Orario! I like the look of it!” exclaimed Hestia once she’d gone far enough to take in the sight of all the buildings lining the streets. Calling this city the center of the world wasn’t just for show. The stores and streets were enough to impress even a goddess.

Every direction was filled with structures large and small—shops and cobbled streets, inns and bell towers, squares and spires—creating a unique atmosphere that couldn’t be found in the heavens, even among the fabled pristine gardens and sparkling waterfalls that spilled from clouds.

The sun had already climbed high into the sky.

Hestia had reached the city walls early in the day, but the delay at the gates had consumed most of the morning.

Never feeling compelled to wear shoes even back in the heavens, she let the bottoms of her soles patter against the cobblestones as she explored. Walking along one of Orario’s main avenues, Hestia beamed as she watched the vibrant throngs of demi-humans and laughing children all around her.

“Okay, I can’t just sightsee forever. First things first—it’s time to find Hephaistos. I wonder where she is…”

Hestia was counting on her friend who’d come to Orario before her to provide some assistance with establishing a foothold in the city.

She couldn’t say exactly how many centuries it had been since her dear old friend had said, “I think I’ll try my luck in Orario,” and embarked on her own journey.

Having no proper knowledge of the city—or rather, no *firsthand* knowledge—the effectively ignorant Hestia was just about to ask some passing children if they knew where to find Hephaistos, when—

“Huh? Aw, c’mon, don’t tell me that’s really…” came a voice from behind her.

Hestia turned to look over her shoulder only for her expression to instantly sour at the sight of her old enemy.

“Hmm?…Ugh! Loki?!”

The red-haired, red-eyed goddess rolled her eyes at the sound of her name. “Ugh, it really is Itty-Bitty! Just my luck…”

That’s my *line*, Hestia thought. Loki was a trickster with an unmatched reputation for mischief in the heavens. More importantly, she had been a thorn in Hestia’s side countless times.

“Lookin’ at that bumpkin outfit you got on, I figure you must’ve just arrived down here, eh? Don’t tell me you wanna set up here in Orario, shorty.”

“What if I am?!”

“Hee-hee-hee! You’ve got no clue what you’re gettin’ yourself into! Orario’s not a place where a lazy, homebody goddess like you can make it, y’know.”

“What’d you just call me?! You got some nerve!”

After enduring the patronizing suggestion that she wouldn’t cut it outside the heavens, it was all Hestia could do to hold back from flying at Loki in a rage—but then she stopped short.

A demi-human standing demurely next to Loki spoke up in a hesitant voice.

“Um, Loki? That goddess, is she…?”

“Don’t sweat it, Lefiya. This sad excuse for a goddess doesn’t need an introduction…You can just call her ‘Shortstuff’ or something.”

Loki’s insult was infuriating, but there was something else Hestia couldn’t ignore. In addition to the beautiful elf standing beside Loki, there were other lovely girls—animal people and humans, too.

It can’t be! Hestia didn’t do a very good job of hiding her shock. “L-Loki, those children, are they—?!”

“Finally noticed, eh, shrimpy? That’s right, they’re all precious members of my dear familia.”

Familia.

Children of the mortal world who’d received a god’s blessing. A deity’s followers—their faction.

Loki's followers all carried full bags; either they were in the middle of a shopping trip or returning home from one. The girls Loki had proudly introduced shrank away, their expressions awkward and worried, but the sheer size of *Loki Familia* on display shook Hestia to her core.

This is Loki we're talking about!

The walking incarnation of mischief and trouble herself!

How did she get the children of the mortal realm to (apparently) worship and follow her?!

"…H-hmph. Well, this is Loki we're talking about, so it's not like any familia of yours would be any good—" began Hestia in an attempt to retain what little remained of her composure.

"Ignorance really is its own punishment. Just so you know, out of all the Dungeon familias, we're counted among the top adventuring groups in the whole city."

"Wh-what?!" Hestia's eyes shot open as the smug Loki looked down at her. "Liar! There's no way a trashy goddess like you would have the strongest familia!"

"Hey! Who you callin' trashy?!"

"If a failure of a goddess who chokes on her booze so bad she throws up is leading a top familia, I guess this world must be coming to an end!"

"You big-titted whelp, why I oughtta—!"

This flare-up was just the latest round of a never-ending quarrel that had been a constant fixture in the heavens.

As people walking along the street began to give the feuding goddesses a wide berth, the elf panicked and cried out, "Wait, Loki! Please, stop!"

But this was like the opening bell of a fight. The two deities flew at each other, hurling insults while pulling hair and pinching cheeks in an embarrassing display. When Loki's followers finally pulled them apart, both of them were winded, their shoulders heaving as they smoothed tousled hair and caught their breath.

“*Haah, haah*…Damn, I can’t move like I used to.”

“*Huff, huff*…A couch potato like you couldn’t cut it even back in heaven!”

Loki wiped the sweat from her chin and looked up with a nasty grin.

Hestia turned her back on Loki’s exasperated followers and looked down.

“Whatever. Go ahead and try as hard as you can. Knowing you, you’ll run from Orario with your tail between your legs after your familia doesn’t get even one child. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

As Loki raised a raucous laugh with her familia arrayed behind her, all Hestia could do was grit her teeth as she stood alone.

“—And that’s how it went down, Hephaistos!” a red-faced Hestia explained to her friend.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! You really got trounced first thing after coming down from the heavens, didn’t you?”

They were inside a large building that resembled a volcano, located in the northern part of the city. After Loki had left the scene of their battle, Hestia had managed to find Hephaistos’s base of operations and received a warm welcome. In the goddess’s chambers, Hestia furiously recounted her spat with Loki to the eye-patch-wearing Hephaistos, whose shoulders shook with unbridled laughter.

“I’ll show that stupid Loki by making the greatest familia ever! I’m gonna make her rue the day she picked a fight with me!”

“Well, well. That’s quite a goal. You do know Loki’s crew is the top familia in the city, right?”

“Like I care!” Hestia shot back across the table.

Despite saying her aspirations were unrealistic, the amused-looking Hephaistos seemed to be regarding Hestia’s enthusiasm and energy with a certain amount of affection.

“You just got here, and you can barely tell up from down. We were friends back in the heavens, so I’ll help you out until you get on your feet. If there’s anything you need, just let me know.”

“I appreciate it, Hephaistos!”

Hestia thanked her friend even as she pictured Loki’s loathsome face. *Just you wait!* she thought. Familias were directly tied to a god’s status in the mortal realm, and Hestia burned with determination to assemble a massive familia so she could get some serious payback.

Just then, she heard the sound of the room’s door opening.

“Hey, boss, we bought too much at the stall. Want some? Ah, whoops, are you still talking?”

“No, it’s fine, Tsubaki.”

One of Hephaistos’s familia members, a half-dwarf woman, entered the room, carrying a large paper bag.

Hestia’s nose twitched at the tantalizing aroma of oil and salt that emanated from it, and she stared intently at the bag. “Um, Hephaistos, what’s that?”

“Street food you can find anywhere in Orario. They’re called—”

“—Jyaga Maru Kun, young goddess. Want one?” offered the half-dwarf with a smile, completing her mistress’s sentence. She, like Hephaistos, wore an eye patch.

Hephaistos smiled wryly at the scene—her follower trying to feed a deity before even bothering to introduce herself first, and her old friend regarding the potato snack with deep interest. Eventually, Hestia embraced the unknown and helped herself to some.

“—!”

Immediately after popping one into her mouth, Hestia exclaimed, “I-it’s so good…!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Damn right!”

Beside the cackling half-dwarf, Hestia stared wide-eyed at the potato puffs,

trembling in shock. This was the moment she first experienced one of the many pleasures of the material world—the joy of good food.

And this was the beginning of her downfall.

"Pfft…hee-hee…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Three months later.

Hestia giggled, sprawled out on the sofa in *Hephaistos Familia*'s guest room, where she'd been allowed to stay until she established a familia of her own. In front of her was a book and on a plate next to her was a mountain of potato puffs.

She would eat one, return to reading and then laugh. Before long, she would eat another, starting the cycle all over again.

There was no evidence that she had ever left the room or would anytime soon.

When Hephaistos stopped by the guest room, she admonished the small goddess.

"Uh, Hestia, you need to hurry up and start recruiting children for your familia. You should know that getting one established is no easy tas—"

"Yeah, I'll start tomorrow," said Hestia without looking up from her book.

This had been the newcomer goddess's life for the past three months.

Starting with the potato snacks, Hestia had concerned herself with nothing save the mortal plane's dazzling offerings of food and books. Hestia, like many deities, had fallen prey to these earthly pleasures, and in doing so, had shown her true nature.

Namely that she was deeply lazy.

Hestia had tended toward a life of idle reclusion even during her time in the heavens, but after being introduced to various earthly pleasures, she had taken her enjoyment of idleness to incredible new heights. She spent entire days cooped up in the guest room, requesting potato puffs and new reading material

from the Goddess of the Forge's followers.

Day after day, Hephaistos would come to warn her, only to have Hestia reply with assurances that she would "start tomorrow." Once tomorrow came, Hestia would forget all about forming her own familia…until finally, Hephaistos's reserve of patience for the idle, self-indulgent Hestia ran dry.

"Get oooouuuuut!!!"

"Bwuh?!"

Hephaistos dragged Hestia out of her home and kicked her to the curb, where Hestia collapsed awkwardly.

"Wh-what're you doing, Hephaistos?!" Hestia began to protest, looking up—only to be greeted by the sight of a crimson-haired, crimson-eyed goddess of fury, arms crossed and legs set in a wide, intimidating stance.

"I've extended you the generosity of letting you stay here, and yet day after day you do nothing but slack off…"

"H-Hephaistos…?"

"It was my mistake to indulge you like this. You should get a taste of how harsh this world can be. And don't darken my doorstep again!" After the enraged Hephaistos had thoroughly terrified Hestia, she slammed shut the gate to her home.

Cast out of her host's splendid abode in such a sorry state, the young goddess wobbled unsteadily to her feet.

"What's her problem? I was just taking some time to enjoy myself a little. It was barely three months!" Hestia grumbled. As a deity who still viewed everything through the lens of someone who would live forever, she did not understand.

Or to be more accurate, reality had not sunk in yet for her—that she no longer lived in the heavens but in the world below.

"Well, whatever. I'll throw together a familia and find a place to live in a snap. After all, this is to get back at Loki!" As she finally remembered her original goal, Hestia began to walk away from the home of *Hephaistos Familia*. Her

destination was a large avenue where humans and demi-humans thronged.

“When it comes to who I want in my familia…I definitely want children aiming to become adventurers. This *is* the Labyrinth City, after all!” said Hestia as she stood at the edge of the wide street.

Even the lazy Hestia grasped that finances were the chief priority in the world of humans. She scanned the passing traffic for children who seemed like they hadn’t been recruited by other gods yet.

*I don’t think I’d get along with this child…there’s a nasty one…and that one’s too young…*Hestia’s divine blue eyes studied the children passing by—Amazons, animal people, prums, and more. Despite her flaws, Hestia was still a divine being who could sense the inner nature of mortals. If she exchanged a few words with them, she could gain a solid grasp of their personality. “A mortal can never deceive a god” was a well-known saying by residents of both worlds.

As she continued to watch for a likely candidate, Hestia’s eyes lingered on a certain elf girl. “Found one!” said Hestia as she approached her.

The girl wore lightweight gear and was conspicuously outfitted with a bow and quiver. She looked every bit like someone who wanted to make their living as an adventurer.

Hestia called out in a chummy voice. “Greetings, elf lass! From the look about you, I’d wager you haven’t entered a contract with a god yet. Care to join my familia?” Standing up straight and proud so as not to tarnish her heavenly gravitas, she hailed the elf with energy and good cheer.

The elf looked up and down at the shorter Hestia, carefully appraising her.

“Pardon me, Goddess, but may I ask your name?”

“It’s Hestia!”

“*Hestia Famila*…I don’t believe I’ve heard of it. If it’s a new faction, where are you based out of? How many members do you currently have? What is the pay range?”

“Huh? Wha—?” Hestia flinched at the elf’s flood of questions.

Perhaps discerning something from Hestia’s complete inability to answer, the

elf warily narrowed her eyes, the expression on her frigidly beautiful features shifting.

“What is your familia’s operating model?”

“Uh, well…I—I was thinking it’d be nice to make some money in the Dungeon…”

Spearing the goddess with a freezing gaze, the elf halted Hestia’s weak attempt to obscure the fact that she had no plan whatsoever.

Without so much as a word of parting, the elf turned her back on the crestfallen deity. The child’s form quickly receded, as though declaring her time had been wasted.

“She…she looked at me like I was *garbage*!” Hestia was stunned. No goddess deserved such treatment, and yet—!

As a recent arrival in this world, Hestia had no way of knowing that Dungeon-oriented familias generally made their preparations outside the city before entering Orario proper. It was difficult to make a living on expeditions into the Dungeon without preparing a certain amount of personnel and funding in advance. If nothing else, it was apparent to everyone else that *Hestia Familia* faced a difficult path.

Aspiring adventurers regularly put their lives on the line. It was obvious that they would favor richer familias that could provide at least some measure of support and comfort.

“W-well, who cares! I’ve just gotten started—I’m sure if I keep inviting people, *someone* will want to join!”

On the contrary, the notion that a lone goddess would be able to secure recruits and everything else she might need within the city was absurd. For the children, it was obvious that there was nothing to be gained from serving under Hestia other than suffering.

The truth was that here in Orario—and generally anywhere in the mortal realm—it was universally known that worthless, feckless gods could be found all over, and it was common sense to avoid getting involved with them.

With a familia that was nothing but talk, lacking both plans and money, the young goddess had naturally been lumped in with that merry band.

In a word, she was untrustworthy.

She continued to approach children with her invitations until the sun went down—and was turned down by every single person she encountered.

“H-how did I not get even a single yes?! Is this what life in the mortal realm means?!”

Gaining the faith—or rather, the trust—of another was a difficult thing.

For the first time, Hestia experienced how merciless this new world could be.

“Waah, Hephaistooos…”

“Hestia…It hasn’t even been a full day since I kicked you out.”

After spending a single night on the streets, Hestia decided she had no choice but to return, crying, to her friend. After undergoing her baptism of reality, Hestia threw away her pride and groveled before Hephaistos—and in the days that followed, continued to scrounge for any generosity Hephaistos might spare.

“Hephaistooos…”

Sometimes she would plead that she had no money.

“Hephaistoooos…”

Sometimes she would say it was impossible to find a job.

“Hephaistooooos…”

Sometimes she would appear there soaking wet and head drooping, begging for shelter from the rain.

Hestia, who had realized that she was helpless without her arcanum, had become a magnificent headache for Hephaistos.

She couldn’t continue coddling her old friend, but neither should she let her fall by the wayside. At her wit’s end, the scarlet-haired, scarlet-eyed goddess

heaved a deep sigh.

“This is a onetime thing, got it?”

And then, fully aware that she was being too lenient yet again, she gave Hestia a place to live.

In the basement of a shabby old church at the end of a forgotten, lonely alleyway, there was a small hidden room.

“Th-thank you, Hephaistos…!”

“This is seriously your last chance, okay? I mean it. I gave you a lead on a part-time job, too, so after this you’re on your own.”

There in front of the church that her dear, generous friend had led her to, Hestia nodded. “All right!”

Once Hephaistos turned and left with an exhausted sigh, Hestia ventured down into her new home—the basement of a half-ruined church.

“Ugh, what’d Hephaistos hoist onto me…?” Hestia grumbled, looking at the state of the hideaway. It couldn’t even be compared to the quarters she’d been provided before.

Paint was peeling off the walls, and cracks were beginning to show underneath. A lone magic-stone lantern hung from the ceiling.

A few basic furnishings like a bed and sofa had been brought down, perhaps because Hephaistos was sympathetic even then, but they were clearly well-used.

“No, no, I need all the help I can get…Just need to make myself at home!” Hestia shouted, mostly to convince herself, as she started cleaning the room.

She checked for magic-stone items, beginning with the faucet, and arranged everything to best accommodate her small frame. By the time she finished, night was beginning to fall outside. Hestia stood in the center of the room and regarded her handiwork as she caught her breath.

“…It’s kinda empty.”

The words fell unbidden from her delicate lips.

The room was cramped and should have felt almost claustrophobic, but Hestia couldn't help thinking there was too much space for just one person.

"I was used to being alone in the heavens, but…Loki's and Hephaistos's places seem so lively and fun." She remembered the faces of the children, the members of those familias.

Though Loki's children treated her like a great nuisance, their happy expressions revealed their affection for one another. Meanwhile, Hephaistos's familia obviously adored her, and she always had a smile ready for them. And many of the other gods and goddesses Hestia had encountered so far seemed happy, too. Somehow fulfilled.

She'd never seen any deities look like that in the heavens.

"…Damn it, I'm *not* lonely!"

Even Hestia could tell how empty those words were as they echoed off the walls in the cold basement.

She went still for a while. Then she extinguished the magic light and climbed into bed.

"I wonder what the children of my familia will be like…"

What sort of child would take her hand?

Hestia undid the plain thread that held back her hair and lay down on the bed, her thoughts still swirling. Loneliness and uncertainty resided within her, but there was also a bit of anticipation. Anybody living in the material world would have instantly recognized how Hestia felt as she mulled over what tomorrow might bring. Those emotions were mixed and indistinct even as they urged her on into the future.

Her mind still full of such thoughts, the goddess Hestia closed her eyes.

After that, Hestia's struggle began—this was the true beginning of her life in the mortal realm.

Self-sufficiency was a basic requirement of life here. She had to be able to

feed herself through her own efforts.

Every attempt to scout a familia member who would help support her had failed, and her days had been dominated by a chain of setbacks and defeats.

With her omnipotent arcanum sealed away, Hestia's life was full of hardship and her mind was completely occupied by what Hephaistos had referred to as the harshness of the material world.

This world also had amusements. It had novelties. It had delights. But above all, Hestia was learning firsthand that it could also be painfully uncaring. When she'd made a mistake with the cooking equipment at the Jyaga Maru Kun stall where she worked, it ended with the whole place burning to the ground. After becoming saddled with a heavy debt for her disastrous error, she actually broke down into tears.

But even amid such tribulations, there were moments of good fortune.

"Hestia! Working hard as ever, aren't you? Know what, have this potion."

"Ooh! Thank you, as always, Miach!"

"There you go again, Lord Miach, giving away our potions…! As if there's any point in giving them to a familia with no adventurers!"

Miach was well-known as a soft touch among the gods who led business-oriented familias. Accompanying him was Nahza, a chienthrope. Hestia had never met Miach before descending from the heavens, but as a fellow member of the impoverished class, he and his familia had helped her many times.

"You're Hestia? Wait, if you're here, that must mean…"

"Is that you, Také? Those clothes, don't tell me—"

""Jyaga Maru Kun?!""

Renewing her friendship with Takemikazuchi, a god she'd known since her days in the heavens, and finding out that he, too, was toiling under the same potato snack business in order to stave off poverty also helped lift Hestia's spirits. Her other coworkers doted and fussed over her as well, thanks to her childlike appearance.

Before long, half a year had passed since her arrival in Orario.

Then, one clear day three months after Hephaistos had cast her out…

“Turned down again…”

Hestia’s fiftieth familia invitation that day had been refused. Her shoulders drooped.

She had no idea how many children she’d approached since she’d come to Orario. When Loki would stop by her Jyaga Maru Kun stall just to make fun of her, Hestia had no way to fight back.

Hestia dragged herself home, ruminating on another fruitless day—when her eyes fell upon a certain boy.

(A human child, huh…? He looks even worse off than I am, and that’s saying something…)

His shoulders were slack like hers, and he also trudged listlessly down the street. His hair was pure white, like a rabbit’s, or perhaps like freshly fallen snow. His eyes were a vivid rubellite, and he had a slender build.

Watching him from behind, Hestia found herself strangely drawn to the boy and decided to follow him. It was true that Hestia felt a certain kinship with anyone who struggled as much as she did, but it was the sadness she sensed in his expression that she couldn’t leave alone.

She pattered after him, staying out of sight. Her clumsy attempt at stealth earned her judgmental gazes from other pedestrians on the street, but she managed to gather that the boy was looking for a familia to join. She watched as he went from one familia’s home to another, knocking on their gates only to be immediately turned away. The boy seemed to be an aspiring adventurer, but his obviously rustic appearance meant he was bound to be rejected immediately without even being allowed to meet the familia’s god.

As Hestia registered all this, she wondered, *Is this my chance…?*

She couldn’t help but hope that he was someone who might accept an invitation into her familia.

Even from a distance, Hestia liked what she saw. He seemed unsophisticated, shy, and above all—pure of heart. She got the sense that his soul was as

unblemished as his hair.

Unable to keep her cool, Hestia crept closer with some rather unseemly skittering.

“Still, I have to say…” As she continued watching the boy from behind as he mingled with the crowd, Hestia found it a rather lonely sight.

Hestia, on the other hand, was brimming with anticipation and anxiety at the prospect of finally recruiting a follower.

He was truly a child, fundamentally unlike a deity like her, who would live forever.

She watched the forlorn boy closely as he searched for a place to belong.

As if I could just abandon him when he’s making that kind of face!

Hestia was the goddess of the hearth, patron deity of the light that protected the home. The eternal flame that offered salvation to supplicants and welcomed lost, hurt children.

And with an undoubtedly lost child right before her eyes, Hestia raised her voice.

“Heeey! You there!”

Those unremarkable words would set everything in motion.

But the goddess was still unaware. There was no way to foresee how that boy would change her life forever.

She didn’t know—*yet*.

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INTERLUDE
DOES CINDERELLA DREAM OF HAPPINESS?

INTERLUDE

DOES CINDERELLA DREAM OF HAPPINESS?

“Congratulations, supporter. You’re going to level up.”

It was the day after Bell’s Status update.

Hestia had held off on telling Lilly the results of her update so she could present them in front of the entire familia.

“Huh?” said Lilly, not fully comprehending what she’d just heard. It seemed like time froze for a moment. Then she continued, her expression unchanging. “Who is?”

“You are.”

“I’m what?”

“Leveling up.”

“Where?”

“Right here.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

There was a moment of silence in the living room where Bell and the rest had assembled. And then—

“Y-YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSS!!!!”

Lilly thrust both her fists into the air, letting loose an uncharacteristic shout of triumph.

It was a full-bodied expression of victory that startled Mikoto and Haruhime while Bell and Welf both jumped back in surprise.

“Here’s the result of your last Status update before you leveled up,” said

Hestia lightly, stifling a laugh as she offered Lilly a sheet of paper.

Lilly practically leaped to see the contents, still breathing heavily from her cry of joy.

Lilliluka Erde

Level 1

Strength: I81 -> H106 Defense: H144 -> 189 Dexterity: G265 -> 298 Agility: E417 -> 468 Magic: E499 -> D500

Magic

Cinder Ella

- Shape-shifting magic
- Target will assume the form envisioned at the time of casting. Without a clear image, spell will fail
- Mimicking an existing form is recommended
- Activation chant: “Your scars are mine. My scars are mine.”
- Deactivation chant: “Stroke of midnight’s bell.”

Skills

Arter Assist

- Activates automatically when weight carried exceeds a certain threshold
- Amount of assistance is proportional to weight carried

Command Call

- Expansion of telepathic communication range while shouting above a certain level
- During melee combat, area increase is determined by scope of battle
- Directions will be transmitted only to receivers with the same Falna. Maximum distance depends on the sender’s level.

This was her final Status at Level 1.

Leveling up involved acquiring a large amount of excelia by accomplishing various deeds and required raising at least one ability to the sixth rank.

In this case, it had been Lilly's magic that had gone from I-rank to D-rank, as it had risen quite dramatically over the past month. She'd used her shape-shifting magic to sow confusion in the battle on Daedalus Street during the operation to help the Xenos return to the Dungeon. And just a few days earlier, she had finally crossed into D-rank.

There was also the matter of great deeds.

Although she'd had relatively few opportunities for direct combat, the many brushes with death Lilly had survived had apparently been worthy of a level-up.

The decisive factor must have been the encounter with the moss huge and the Amphisbaena in the most recent expedition, but even without that, Lilly had overcome many challenges that were extremely impressive for a Level 1 supporter: her kills in the middle levels, the battle against the Black Goliath, the War Game, and all the events surrounding the Xenos.

More than anything else, it was her triumph over a black mark on her history, Soma.

Her progress was a natural result of everything she had been through.

Furthermore, this level-up was the affirmation of the value of Lilliluka Erde's entire life, from the moment she'd been given a Falna and inducted into a familia upon birth.

On top of everything else, she'd developed a new skill, too.

As Lilly gazed down at the paper, she trembled with emotion.

"So, what do you want to do for your development ability? Resistance is an option, but it looks like you could go for Compounding, too."

As Hestia reviewed the possibilities, Lilly pounced. "Th-that's the ability that Miss Nahza has, isn't it?! Back when I was a thief, anytime I wanted to fool an adventurer, I'd pretend to be busy using Compounding to whip up an item!"

Evidently the reason Hestia had deferred Lilly's Status and not immediately leveled her up was to give her the opportunity to discuss the choice with Bell and the others before settling on a development ability.

Lilly was excited all over again, but now she agonized over the choice—

although it was an enjoyable sort of dilemma.

Compounding was a development ability often acquired by herbalists, and it was chiefly used to create medicines. It could raise the efficacy of items like recovery potions to the point where they almost seemed like magic, closing wounds instantly and more.

Essentially, if she chose Compounding, she would be able to make potions and potentially all sorts of other things—which would significantly cut down on certain item expenses!

Lilly had never thought of herself as an herbalist, but in truth she found the possibility quite charming. The ability to make potions as needed on her own would be a serious financial coup. The idea lingered tantalizingly in her mind, particularly as the one in charge of the familia's money. If she became decent at it, there was even potential to sell some of the items she made and *make* a little money.

Still, Resistance could be useful, too, even if it's less exciting…

Simply by passively preventing harmful Status ailments, Resistance was powerful. It was especially sought after by those who went on Dungeon expeditions, and it wasn't an exaggeration to say that high-level adventurers who ventured deeper into the Dungeon considered it essential. There were certain things that were simply impossible to do without it.

Lilly agonized.

Then, after much deliberation, she chose Resistance.

While Compounding was extremely appealing to her for its utility in item creation, Lilly's true goal was to continue being Bell's supporter.

To not falter in the Dungeon.

To be ever at his side, ready to aid him however she could.

Being of use to the party, and therefore to Bell, was her highest priority.

It wasn't as simple as the Far Eastern proverb "For rice cakes, go to the rice cake shop," but the reality was that they considered Nahza as a close ally and could count on her to provide whatever items they needed. It stood to reason

that an experienced, talented herbalist would be able to produce better items than someone who'd only just started out. Lilly could continue to haggle with Nahza while relying on her for whatever they needed, as she always had.

Everyone had their strengths.

Lilly decided to prioritize her role as supporter.

"Congratulations, Lady Lilly!"

"This is amazing!"

"If I'm not careful, Li'l E's gonna surpass me!"

Surrounded by Mikoto, Haruhime, and Welf, Lilly found herself showered in praise.

I'm so happy!

I really am!

I almost thought this day would never come!

Lilly felt as though she had finally been accepted.

Accepted by a reality she'd once loathed so bitterly.

Accepted by a world that now, thanks to so many people in her life, seemed to shine brightly.

"I'm so glad for you, Lilly!"

But more than anyone else…this boy had changed her.

Thanks to him, she'd found the strength to stop living as the sad girl covered in cinders and start being true to herself.

He had saved her.

And now that boy looked at Lilly with a beaming smile. No matter how much he grew and matured, his easy smile never seemed to change.

There was a time…when I really wanted to make his life hell.

Deep down, Lilly felt an indescribable emotion as she thought back to their first meeting. The relish she'd once had at imagining how thoroughly she would swindle that lost little lamb—or rabbit—was still a good memory somehow.

Despite being a dark moment in her past.

“What’s wrong, Lilly?”

“…Nothing! Not a thing, Mr. Bell!” She shook her head and returned Bell’s smile with one that was every bit as bright.

Then she repeated her oath—a promise she would keep no matter what happened.

“Lilly’s gonna keep supporting you, from now till forever!”

“~♪”

Lilly hummed a cheerful tune to herself as she walked through the city. With her newly promoted Status, she was now officially Level 2. She found it impossible to hide her delight.

“The expedition ended in failure, and our familia was almost on the brink of bankruptcy, but…turns out there are rewards that you can’t put a price tag on!” She jumped and twirled like a kid who’d just received their allowance.

Without anyone around who could identify her as one of *Hestia Familia*, she was showered in the smiling, fond gazes of the adults occupying the storefronts she walked past.

Normally she would’ve resented being identified as a child, but for the moment, it didn’t bother Lilly one bit.

If she consciously flipped the “switch” on her new abilities, the speed that she could run and the distances she could jump would change dramatically. She could probably leap from the street right up to the second-story roof of one of the nearby houses if she really wanted to.

Even as she considered how it would take both time and training to become accustomed to her new abilities, Lilly was brimming with excitement at her newfound potential.

“Oh, come to think of it, the familia might also get promoted because of Lilly…?”

Would the tax they had to pay go up? Would it be better to keep her level-up a secret?

She mulled over the various possibilities, but finally burst out in a delighted and entirely out-of-character laugh.

“Who cares? Yippee!”

She was unbelievably delighted.

“Heh-heh…Now it’s time to deliver this along with the good news.”

Cradling a bag in both arms, Lilly ran through the streets as they began to fill up.

“Hey! Are…are you Lilliluka Erde?”

“Huh? Who…Mr. Ruan?!”

Ruan Espel, the fellow prum she’d suddenly run into, had the dress and air of a knight’s page.

Once a member of *Apollo Familia*, he was currently a free agent and Lilly seemed to recall that he was currently working at the Hidden Home of the Prums, a prum-only tavern.

“What are you doing around here?”

“…I’m on errands for the pub. What, isn’t it obvious?” said the prum boy—a year older than Lilly—showing off a shopping bag that was quite large given his physical size. His lip curled into a sneer, seeming to indicate that perhaps he still held a grudge from the War Game. “What about you? Going around giggling like a little kid. What’s got you in such a great mood?”

Not even Ruan’s curt tone could ruin Lilly’s mood. She thrust her chest out proudly, still holding her own bag in both arms. “After our expedition finished, I leveled up! Lilly has joined the ranks of the Level Twos!”

Ruan’s shock was both instant and loud. “Wh-whaaaaaaaaat?!” Pedestrians stepped around the two prums to avoid their little melodrama as it played out in the middle of the street. “Y-you’re kidding me, right? There’s no way a prum could level up that easily! Hell, weren’t you weaker than me to begin with?!”

“Well, I have my magic, as you are surely aware, Mr. Ruan! This is the result of all the practice I’ve been putting in!”

Ruan’s disbelief was unrelenting, but as he gradually accepted the truth of Lilly’s words, his attention drifted away.

He slumped. His expression distorted in shame as he glared at Lilly with dark eyes. “Damn it…Why is it only you…? I’ve…I’ve been…”

Lilly froze.

She knew that expression.

A scant five months earlier, she had worn the same look.

Envy and jealousy. A heart coveting that which didn’t belong to her. The constantly gnawing feeling that the smiles of others was unbearable.

And in Lilly’s case, there was hatred as well.

Looking at Ruan only to see her past self, Lilly soon regained her composure.

“You know, Lilly had a really, really hard time, too. I worked so hard I nearly died. It’s not something worth being jealous over!” She made her argument with a single raised finger, trying to reverse the sudden gloom that had sprung up.

“Ugh…I—I get that.”

Whether he realized that his jealousy was misplaced or felt miserable at his own inability to do anything, Ruan scowled.

Lilly knew all too well what it was to feel inferior, and she knew she’d gotten carried away in her excitement.

But she did not try to comfort Ruan, because she understood that sympathy was the most painful thing of all for someone in his position.

Ruan pursued the subject no further and was obviously trying to change the subject. “…So what gives? You came out by yourself for something? I assume you’re not reporting your level-up to the Guild. That bag you’ve got…Is it money?” He looked at the sack Lilly was holding, perhaps having heard the coins jingling from within it.

“Oh, this is for—”

That was as far into the sentence as Lilly got before her ears caught the sound of a certain familiar voice.

“Lilly, sweetheart?!”

“—!”

Lilly held her breath. In an instant, through a gap in the crowds, her keen prum eyes spied an elderly couple who seemed to be coming in her direction.

They were still a ways off.

The moment she was hidden from sight by the press of the crowd, she recited the short, familiar chant.

“Your scars are mine. My scars are mine.”

It was a blazing fast spell; no one had time to notice.

The high-speed transformation happened amid the swish of a traveler’s cloak, the turn of a wagon’s wheel, the hefting of a dwarf’s heavy load. The only one to see Lilly briefly cloaked in a gray light before she became someone else was Ruan, whose eyes went wide at the near-instant effects of her spell.

The astounding casting speed was a benefit of her new level—the proof of her newfound strength.

But more than that, her tactician’s eye—that ability to maneuver into a brief blind spot—was a prize earned through constantly escaping death during the expedition.

The “girl” whose transformation none but Ruan had witnessed now slipped into the crowd as she walked toward the elderly couple.

“Lilly, dear…wha—?”

“I’m sorry, is something the matter?” The “elf girl” tilted her head in confusion as though she’d only just noticed the couple. She had long, pointed ears, and wide, almond-shaped eyes. Her clothes only looked similar to a red outfit worn by a certain Lilliluka Erde.

The old human couple gave her awkward smiles, either convinced that they

had the wrong person or perhaps simply disappointed.

“Oh, our apologies, dear. We mistook you for someone else. You look so very much like a girl we used to know, we just…” said the old woman apologetically. She held a flower bouquet in her arms, and it seemed like they were on their way to deliver it somewhere.

The young elf girl looked up at their kindly smiles, but it was the silent Ruan beside her who spoke up. “I heard you say ‘Lilly.’ D’you happen to mean Lilliluka Erde, of *Hestia Familia*?”

“…Yes, that’s right,” came the regretful reply from the old woman.

The old man, her husband, continued in her stead. “We run a flower shop, you see, and…some time ago, she used to live with us, and we did something quite awful.”

“…”

“Though…we weren’t aware of how terrible it was at the time. We were thinking only of ourselves, and without taking even a moment to consider that poor girl’s burden, we kicked her out. After showing her only the most meager kindness, we drove her away, and…”

The old man spoke as though he were delivering a confession. As the couple stood in the middle of the street, they were bathed in the irritated and even resentful gazes from the pedestrians who flowed around them.

“There’s always money being left in front of the store, you see…as though she’s saying ‘I’m sorry.’ At first, we thought she was mocking us, but the payments always come with flowers. Always flowers, the exact ones we’d told her we like…”

As the old man’s voice caught, Ruan stole a glance at the elf girl’s hands.

Those small hands held a pouch filled with gold coins.

“…Well, *Hestia Familia*’s become a pretty well-known group. Ask around for where their home base is and I’m sure you’d have no trouble finding it. If you wanted to see her, couldn’t you do it any time you wanted?” Either out of capriciousness or consideration for the girl next to him, Ruan feigned innocence

and asked the question the elf girl would never have been able to.

“We don’t even know how we would begin to approach her…No, that’s not it—if we really did go, we don’t know what we would say or do, you see…” said the old woman. She seemed to imply that, as the ones who’d cast Lilly out, they had no right to have regrets or deliver apologies.

There beneath the expanse of the clear blue sky overhead, the old couple’s faces were dark and heavy.

An overwhelming, oppressive silence fell among them. It was a sight Lilliluka Erde didn’t want to witness.

Which was why—

“…Sir, Ma’am.” The elf girl spoke. “Would you give me those flowers you have?” she said with a guileless smile, trying to dispel the darkness that colored the couple’s faces.

“Wha—?”

“I’d like to have those lovely flowers you’re carrying.” She held out the pouch containing the gold coins and gestured to the bundle of white flowers the old woman carried.

“W-we couldn’t possibly…these are just what we didn’t sell today, and that’s far too much money. Much too much for these meager flowers—”

It wasn’t Lilliluka Erde but simply a nameless elf girl who gently interrupted the old woman to speak. “You see, today something really good happened for me. Something that makes me feel like everything I’ve gone through has been worthwhile. That’s why I’d like to buy that bouquet from you…with those feelings and these coins.”

It was the girl’s true desire. Though her form was a deception, her words were true. She smiled, hiding her sadness behind her eyes.

After a moment, the stunned couple’s faces finally brightened. It was as though they were looking through the elf girl in front of them and seeing someone else entirely. Her smile was sad and lonely—but also somehow happy.

“Thank you…Miss Elf.”

The old couple didn't say Lilly's name. But they gently patted her head, as though she were a treasured granddaughter.

The girl's cheeks colored, and her face split in a great smile.

The old couple said their good-byes, turned away, and disappeared into the crowd.

Then, Ruan spoke. "…Hey, you really okay with that?" His voice mingled with the sound of the hustle and bustle around them, and he'd probably guessed more or less what had just transpired.

"It's fine." Once again going unnoticed by anyone else, Lilly dispelled her magic disguise. She held the bundle of flowers to her chest, still looking in the direction the old couple had gone.

"Seeing Lilly would've only upset them. It's better this way."

"…"

"I ruined the place they once gave me…and now that I've finished paying them back for all the trouble I caused, it's over." Then, to banish the melancholy mood, she smiled brightly and continued in a joking tone. "And anyway, I'm just as bad as them. No, I might be even more scared to meet them. Even after leveling up, I guess I'm the same weak little prum I've always been."

After a moment of silence, Ruan spat his disagreement at her. "The hell you are." The prum avoided meeting Lilly's eyes. He hadn't been sure whether to say it. "You're strong. Way stronger than me…"

Lilly smiled.

It was a smile of gratitude.

And the swaying white edelweiss flowers in her arms seemed to smile, too.

"…"

Meanwhile, the god Soma looked up.

"What is the matter, my lord?" asked Chandra, a dwarf with a wine gourd

affixed to his waist.

They were in the headquarters of *Soma Familia*, in the third district located in the southeastern part of the city.

Soma was in his chambers settling accounts with Chandra, his chief lieutenant, but suddenly he paused by the window.

His long hair hid his eyes, and he ignored Chandra, instead facing out the window. “That girl…she’s grown.”

“…?”

“Just…a feeling I have.”

Even after her conversion to another familia, the traces of the first Falna etched upon her would not necessarily have disappeared completely. Like a scar, the ichor a child had been administered would remain on their back, as proof they’d once sworn themselves to a different god.

Soma didn’t think of it as a bond, per se, but he had the distinct feeling that the girl had taken a step closer to the gods.

“That girl—you mean Lilliluka Erde?”

“…Yes.”

“I don’t really get it, but…if you’re interested, shall I go to *Hestia Familia* to inquire about her?”

Chandra had only been promoted to captain of the familia a few months earlier, but he was quickly learning how to interpret his god’s terse, cryptic statements. He’d incidentally just laid his hands on a record book of former members of *Soma Familia*, and he flipped through it to find Lilly’s entry.

When he found it, seemingly written in Soma’s own hand, only the absolute barest of information, like her gender and race, was recorded.

Soma was silent in response to Chandra’s question, but at length he shook his head slowly. “No…leave it.”

“Hmm, why?”

“I…have no right to approach her.”

“‘No right’?”

“I abandoned her once. And…she has since slipped my grasp.” Soma said nothing more.

Realizing that no explanation would be forthcoming, Chandra shrugged. “You’re as inscrutable as always.” He easily hefted a large crate over his shoulder and carried it out of the chamber.

Alone now, Soma gazed through the window at the streets of Orario that spread out below. “Congratulations, little Lilliluka Erde…” he said to the girl who was surely somewhere in that city, his voice tinged with regret and admiration. “You’ve grown so much,” he murmured with a smile on his lips.

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CHAPTER 3
THE CINDER GIRL

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THE CINDER GIRL

Lilliluka Erde was brought into this world fifteen years earlier.

She had heard that it was the most tumultuous time in all of Orario's long history.

This was caused by the failure of the Three Great Quests.

Two familias reigned at the top of Orario, and their adventurers were the strongest in all the world. They took up the legendary task of slaying three ancient and powerful monsters, but the final one, a dragon king, defeated and utterly destroyed them. This irreparable loss of strength was nothing short of a death knell for the two great familias.

The sudden weakening of the two most feared factions in the city invited the rise of evil.

In those times, the forces of darkness openly roamed Orario, as though in mockery of the despair mortals felt as they watched their hopes and dreams crumble away, or perhaps simply reveling at the sudden opportunity.

Led by an extremist group known as the Evils, lawless brigands and marauders raised the curtain on a new era of chaos in Orario.

New factions replaced the old. Now considered failures, the previous rulers were driven out, and two rising familias, each led by a different goddess, feuded over which would stand as Orario's new hope. One after another, various deities and their familias took up the cause of justice, hoping to settle this latest conflict.

It was a time of terrible upheaval in Orario, when good struggled against evil, order against chaos.

In those days, crime was commonplace and committed with impunity to the

sound of outlaws cackling.

Such was the era into which Lilliluka Erde was born.

“Spare some coin, please…”

Lilly’s memories of the world began when she was three years old.

The first thing she learned was how to beg. She would stand in the street, barefoot and clad in rags, holding both hands out to any and every person who came near. If it hadn’t been for the Status inscribed on her back, she would probably have died in a ditch somewhere by then. As it was, she was doing as her parents told her, standing in place until darkness fell and the moon rose, waiting for sympathy or coin to fall into her hands.

“Go bring us some money” was nearly all either of her parents ever said to her. Her prum mother and father said little else to the young Lilly, and Lilly never had any memories of them ever acting parental in any way.

Lilly and her parents belonged to *Soma Familia*.

The warped clan had been formed by the god Soma for the sole purpose of making the perfect liquor. In service of their god’s costly predilections, the familia was organized by giving the member who brought in the most money the greatest prize—which was a taste of Soma’s divine liquor.

Despite his arcanum being sealed away, most of those involved in the production of Soma’s exquisite spirits were hopelessly captive to its allure, and competed fiercely to earn money for it. They would give anything to have the chance to taste his literally heavenly liquor just one more time.

Lilly’s parents were no exception. They had no qualms about using Lilly to earn money, even when she was but a toddler.

Before long, they were dead.

Apparently, they had ventured into the Dungeon in search of money—or more precisely, in search of anything that would get them Soma’s liquor—and had been immediately slaughtered by monsters. Lilly only learned of their demise from the derisive laughter of the other familia members, and although

she barely understood the emotion of sadness, she knew that she was now entirely alone.

There was no one who cared what happened to her. No one who even thought about her.

Life continued, but her days were only full of misery; she continued to beg for money, occasionally rummaging through garbage like a stray.

"…I'm…hungry…"

As she looked down at her emaciated arms after days of going back and forth from the familia's home to the streets where she begged, a certain question came to her more often: Who had taken care of her before?

Who had looked after her before she had become aware of herself? Before she could walk? She couldn't imagine that her derelict parents had done anything. Despite her young age, Lilly was full of doubt.

Then one day, Lilly had found herself wandering the rooms of the familia's home in search of food, urged on by the growling of her stomach, when she suddenly encountered her god—Soma.

"Ah…God…"

"…"

He was an enigmatic deity. His long hair obscured his eyes, and he said nothing, making it impossible to know what he was thinking. Despite the familia's odd arrangement of focusing the adoration of its members on the divine liquor itself rather than their resident deity, Lilly was well aware that the other followers were terrified of their unearthly leader.

Soma stood right in front of Lilly, looking down past his forelocks at her with those inky black eyes of his. She felt a phantom throb in the Status on her back and scampered around a corner of the hall to hide.

When she dared to peek back around…her eyes immediately fixed upon a paper bag that Soma held. From within the bag wafted a faint smell of oil and salt; it was filled with morsels of potato, fried to golden perfection.

Lilly's stomach growled audibly. As she looked down and rubbed her empty

belly, Soma wordlessly approached her.

Lilly cowered in fear as his shadow fell over her—and then he held out one of the Jyaga Maru Kun snacks.

Wide-eyed, Lilly looked back and forth between the offered food and the unchanging face of the god who offered it. Finally, she tentatively accepted it.

She opened her little mouth wide and bit down. First came the *crunch* sound of the warm, fried coating, then the creamy, savory potato flavor filled her mouth.

Her whole body quivered with pleasure at the experience of eating the first proper food she'd had in a long time.

After finishing and licking her fingers clean, she tried thanking the god with her still-awkward words. "Uh, um…Thank you…very much."

"…"

As expected, Soma did not reply.

Some moments later, Soma resumed his walk, heading away from Lilly, who followed behind him uncertainly.

Her little feet pattering against the floor, she trailed Soma into the familia's inner sanctum. She hesitated at the room's threshold, but while Soma did not say anything, he also didn't send her away.

He placed several more helpings of the potato treats on a plate, which he set on a chair.

It took Lilly some time to realize that they were meant for her.

As Lilly began to eat with gusto, Soma—who had found a single mouthful to be sufficient for his dinner—began work on a mixture of various plants in the corner of the room, which seemed to be the ingredients for his liquor. The grinding sound of his mortar and pestle echoed.

This sound, it's…

Once her hunger had been banished, Lilly's eyes began to droop, and she had the feeling that she had heard that sound before. It was almost like a lullaby

from her past, a sound that slipped between the spaces of her dreams rather than lingering in living memory.

The hypnotic rhythm of the sound put Lilly to sleep in no time at all. As she lay curled up on the floor, a teardrop fell from her eye like a shard of crystal.

Finally, strong hands that belonged neither to her mother nor to her father picked Lilly up. As she was laid in a bed and covered with a soft blanket, the tears never stopped falling from her closed eyes, though she had most likely fallen asleep.

There, beside a god who would not speak, Lilly experienced the love of another person for the very first time.

That was the first and last time she ever felt warmth from her god.

The great turning point in Lilly's life came just after her sixth birthday.

After finishing her day of begging or scavenging, it had become her habit to go to the silent Soma's chambers, and so time had passed, until the day a familia-wide meeting was called.

All the members of the familia, except Soma himself, were ordered to assemble.

"Thank you all for coming. As of today, I will be acting as the head of this familia, directing our activities in place of Lord Soma."

The man standing on a hastily constructed platform there in the familia's dingy meeting hall was named Zanis. In the constant struggle for divine liquor among elite members of *Soma Familia,* his considerable ability had seen him rise to Level 2. Lilly had heard whispers that he had gotten his position by eliminating the previous captain, who he'd seen as an obstacle.

Her feeling of unease persisted as the man—a human who looked to be in his early twenties—snapped his fingers, whereupon cups were distributed to all present.

"Starting now, *Soma Familia* will be working toward even greater expansion. The times in Orario being what they are, we will recruit more members to

better ride out the waves of history. These spirits have been bestowed upon us by Lord Soma in anticipation of our great work.”

A loud murmur arose in the hall.

The new recruits, lower-ranking members like Lilly whose lips had never touched the divine liquor, fixed their gazes on the spirits they had received, just like everyone else in the room. Despite knowing perfectly well that Soma would never simply hand out the divine liquor—which Zanis had clearly stolen from the cellar—its sweet, cool aroma beckoned, and they brought their cups to their lips.

The young Lilly did the same. Unable to resist the spell of the divine liquor, she slowly lifted her cup.

Zanis narrowed his eyes behind the spectacles he wore as he raised his own cup. “A toast—to the advancement of our familia.”

His lips curled in a malicious smile.

A moment later, once the divine liquor wet her tongue—

“_____”

—Lilly became nothing more than an animal.

After that, Lilly never went to Soma’s chambers again.

Instead, she began descending into the Dungeon where her parents had died—a place she ought to have feared and shunned.

She needed money—no, she needed the divine liquor.

—I want it!

—I want to taste it again!

—No matter what it takes!

Her eyes glossy, she became desperate to fulfill the quotas Zanis set. Following exactly in her parents’ footsteps, she became another adventurer seeking the glow of magic stones.

Her transformation into a wine-thirsty ghoul complete, she never once noticed Soma's hopeless, despondent gaze following her from the upper floor of their home.

Nor did she notice Zanis's scheme—that using the divine liquor, he'd disrupted the familia's management, completely separating the followers from their god.

"Bring in money so that our familia might prosper! Our lord commands this!"

The demands for coin became increasingly onerous. The familia's administration had never been so harsh before, and it was not an exaggeration to say that it worked mostly in the personal interests of its new chief. But bewitched by the spell of the divine liquor, its members took no notice, and they numbly fell in line, desperately hoping to hear the magic words: "You may have some divine liquor."

The Guild had not managed to curtail the constant acts of villainy perpetrated by the Evils and other outlaw groups, which only increased its leader's reputation for cunning.

Soma Familia's corruption spread quietly—and far.

"Huff, huff, huff…"

Meanwhile, Lilly, a mere impoverished prum, continued to flounder, far from the machinations of her organization.

Wielding a knife in her bloodied hand, she slaughtered low-level monsters like goblins and kobolds in the Dungeon. She clearly couldn't attack them head-on, so she hid in the shadows, holding her breath for fear of being caught and eaten herself, and would only ambush a lone monster after careful calculation.

Nonetheless, she soon found her limits—the meagerness of her money could not properly pay for equipment and repairs for important items, and her battered body threatened to give out. It was the cruel reality of her high-risk, low-reward life. Every trip into the Dungeon took her further into the red.

Even begging her god to update her Status did no good. She had reached the end of where her own practice and effort could take her, and in the end, to her deep misery, she simply lacked much talent as an adventurer.

So it was then Lilly was forced to become a supporter.

Thus began her days of exploitation.

“Wait! P-please, wait! This isn’t what we agreed!”

“Your sniveling cost us serious profit! You should be glad you’re getting anything at all!”

Lilly avoided Dungeon trips with members of her own familia, since they constantly stole what little pay she might earn, but working as a porter for other parties, the tiny Lilly was constantly on the receiving end of cruelty.

Adventurers skimmed her share of loot as a matter of course. She was often scolded for infractions she had no memory of committing and forced to work for free, while other times, her personal weapons and potions would be stolen outright.

Once, some adventurers she had been working with were spending their Dungeon earnings in a rowdy tavern while Lilly clung to their boots in hope of a chance at scraps.

She asked for her share, but what she got was a kick that sent her flying. As she crumpled and winced in pain, something else fell to the ground—a paltry chunk of bird meat.

A laugh rose in the tavern, as if to say *There, beg for your dinner!* and Lilly would never forget the adventurers jeering for as long as she lived.

Humiliation and despair swirled in her heart. There wasn’t a single day when her cheeks weren’t dampened with tears.

A full-time supporter. An object of disdain.

She had never felt such bitterness toward the hand the gods had dealt her and the cruelty of the world as she did in this moment.

Why…why do I have to…?

It was also in this moment that the spell of the divine liquor began to weaken.

The return of sobriety always brought on a dismaying feeling, a terrible desolation that assaulted Lilly. She even felt rage at Soma and his divine liquor

for driving her into a corner.

But there was no going back. Lilly was already gaining a reputation among lower-level adventurers as a good way to boost profits.

There was no one in her own hopelessly twisted familia who would come to her aid or give her protection. She would only ever be a tool in their eyes—a thing to be used.

There's no one left who's ever helped me…

Lilly couldn't remember the face of the one person who'd once offered her a meal. What should have been a warm memory had been scattered like so much sand in the wind—either washed away by the unnatural craving the divine liquor inspired or crushed under the endless days of suffering.

Having lost even her memory, Lilly now only slogged through her days in order to remain alive.

I want to die…but…

Everything was so painful, so lonely, and such a struggle. She hated it. She constantly thought about throwing her life away.

But Lilly knew. She knew the burning pain that came with the rake of a monster's claws. The strangling sobs that followed the impact of an adventurer's boot.

She couldn't bring herself to risk death, for fear of experiencing still worse pain.

"—!"

Then one day, unable to bear another day of exploitation, Lilly ran away—from the adventurers and from her familia, with great tears falling from her eyes.

She wanted to renounce her connection to her god, to disguise herself as a commoner and find some small measure of happiness.

But the adventurers would not allow even that.

The moment she understood that she could never run from *Soma Familia*…

The moment she realized that she would continue to suffer at the hands of other adventurers…

…was the moment she saw the wreckage of a flower shop owned by an elderly couple she'd been living with.

"Nana, Nono?!"

The incident occurred at the hands of adventurers who were a part of *Soma Familia*. Under the magical thrall of the divine liquor, they stole anything worth selling and utterly destroyed the home Lilly had found for herself, as though to send the message that this had happened because she was there. Thanks to the constant strife in the city at the time, neither the Guild nor any other faction had any capacity to deter such crime, so no investigation of any kind would ever be made.

Like their flower shop, the old human couple who ran it had also been punished. Lilly had been a sort of live-in errand girl, and she was out when the attack came. When she returned and saw the damage, she began to run toward the old man and woman with her arms outstretched.

And the couple—who'd given her a place to stay and treated her like a granddaughter—brushed her hands away and rejected her.

"__"

Their usually kind eyes were filled with accusation and hatred.

The old man had been badly beaten and sat weakly on the ground, blood trickling from his lip. Behind him, his sobbing wife tried to support him. They had only just welcomed Lilly into their home, and this had been their thanks. They looked at her as if she were filth.

Lilly's heart broke under their accusing gazes.

Wait—

The old man's lips moved.

Wait, please, don't say it, Lilly cried out with all her strength—but not a single word left her mouth.

—Call after me.

Call my name.

Call me Lilly with the same kindness you always used and pat my head the same way.

Tell me it's okay if I don't do a perfect job sometimes, like you did once.

Tell me you need me.

Help me.

Don't throw me away.

If even you two abandon me, then I…

"—I wish we'd never met you."

Something broke inside Lilly.

The old man's words carved themselves into her soul, and from the wound, something precious began to flow.

After being cast out by the old couple, Lilly wandered the city like a walking corpse, and at some point, she realized night had fallen, and it was raining.

"Ha…ha-ha-ha…"

Lilly stood in the middle of an empty alleyway and laughed as the downpour slid off her. Raindrops met her small cheeks and formed streams as they rolled down.

The lovely clothing the old couple had given her as a gift was soaked in the increasingly severe weather, turning it into a heavy burden.

No one will ever call for me. No one will ever rely on me. No one will ever need me. No one will ever help me.

She was alone.

There was no helping hand to be found.

Any time this unkind world allowed her some sweet dream, she would always come crashing back down to cruel reality as soon as she woke.

Lilly understood that now.

She understood all too well that so long as her cursed familia's brand remained on her back, freedom and safety would always be out of reach.

She continued to laugh.

Buried beneath her laughter were sobs trying to get out.

After that day, her eyes became wild and desperate.

Lilly continued working as a supporter.

Whether she was directly supporting *Soma Familia* or other adventurers, she was always careful to pretend to be a faithful, groveling servant. No matter how she was abused, no matter how hard she was worked, she kept a doll's smile on her lips and ice in her eyes, biding her time until the moment she could be freed from her familia's bonds. She would no longer run nor try to rely on another. She could not bear the thought of causing anyone else harm—nor the thought of being betrayed by kindness yet again. Her every waking hour was focused on acquiring enough money to pay her familia's severance fee.

It was around this time that Lilly started to dabble in pickpocketing. Having endured so much hardship, she no longer had the luxury of being idealistic. Day by day, her skill at thievery improved.

Of course, her reputation as a good moneymaker ensured that Lilly was still constantly exploited, as she always had been.

"Tch, this is all ya got?" An animal person named Kanu clicked his tongue in irritation at Lilly—who had fallen to the ground after the thrashing he'd given her—as he examined the coin pouch he'd taken. He was one of the members of *Soma Familia* who continued to take advantage of the defenseless girl.

As Kanu and his gang looked down on the exhausted Lilly, a slender-faced human watched from a step away, his hands clasped behind his back. "You're working rather diligently for someone who doesn't drink Lord Soma's divine liquor, Erde. Is there something you're after, perhaps?"

Lilly didn't answer Zanis's question and simply continued to stare at the floor.

"…"

She hadn't had a single drop of the liquor since that first taste. Unlike the other familia members who regularly exploited her at Zanis's discretion, she abhorred the liquor and feared its effects.

Kanu, ever the faithful underling, gave Lilly's head a kick at her failure to answer their leader's question. "Boss, we oughtta just sell this trash to a brothel. Even a runty prum like her could bring in some coin there."

"—What are you doing?"

Just as Kanu turned to Zanis with a raucous, vulgar laugh, someone walked by the familia's courtyard where they were gathered. Her head still muddled, Lilly heard a low, rough voice and managed to turn her eyes in its direction.

"Ah, Chandra. Well, the thing is…"

Lilly's blurry vision noticed the outline of a stocky, thickly muscled dwarf. As the dwarf listened to Kanu, his brow furrowed. "No brothels. Stop this."

"…And why not? Are you actually gonna cover for this kid?"

"If an outside familia tried working one of their own in the Pleasure Quarter, they'd be taken for a spy. You really want to attract *Ishtar Familia*'s attention?"

"Uhh…" Kanu and his lackeys openly winced at the dwarf's point.

Lilly remembered him—the dwarf named Chandra had recently joined the familia, and being Level 2, he was making quite a name for himself. She summoned the last of her strength to look up, picturing the face of this dwarf who was somehow not trying to harm or oppress her.

As usual, Zanis alone looked down at the beaten Lilly. "Hmph. Well…" he began, narrowing his eyes as though considering Kanu's objection. Lilly glared vacantly into those eyes of his, as they glinted behind their spectacles with the posturing of a someone who wanted to be seen as a man of reason.

Eventually, his mouth curled into an unpleasant crescent. "Chandra's right. There's no need to invite pointless suspicion. We'll let Erde keep working for the familia like always. Heh…That'll be more fun, too."

Zanis laughed, as though Lilly's frigid, utterly resentful gaze was amusing to

him.

Lilly had been silent during the entire exchange. She balled her hands into fists. The pain and rage she felt banking a dark fire deep within her.

This was not the only incident. Everything she'd been through fueled her vengeful heart.

As she stared at the hateful adventurer looking down on her with that smirk, Lilly distinctly felt the whispers of her grudge begin to overflow.

As more days and months passed, Lilly approached the age of thirteen.

She began to make good on her wish for vengeance.

In the pouring rain, a wild, angry shout rang out through the back alley.

The confused footfalls and yells of dismay of several adventurers were clearly audible to the beautiful young elf girl over her own ragged breaths.

Her feet splashed in puddles as she ran, and when she had finally evaded her pursuers, she stopped and leaned against a wall.

As her golden hair became soaked in the rain, she forced herself to control her breathing, then quietly spoke.

"Stroke of midnight's bell."

The instant she murmured the chant, her body was wreathed in a veil of ashen light.

The next moment, the form of the elf girl who'd stood there moments before had vanished, replaced by Lilly, her chestnut-brown hair plastered to her cheek.

Her breath and body both shaking, she opened the bundle she was carrying.

Inside were adventurers' accessories—rings and bracelets that sparkled gold and silver—as well as drop items from rare monsters and even a magic knife.

Lilly's eyes welled up, and a smile reached her lips. "I did it…*I did it!* Serves you all right!"

This was the fruit of her magic, Cinder Ella. The spell had appeared during a Status update half a year earlier, and she'd used it to slip away from the adventurers.

She'd disguised herself as a harmless, charming elf supporter and approached some adventurers—and then while accompanying them into the Dungeon, made off with their valuables.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Lilly raised her voice in a genuine laugh for the first time in years. She was filled with a dark pleasure.

She could still hear the bellows of the adventurers she'd robbed. She did her best to control her impulse to gloat, but the urge to laugh was too strong.

Now that she'd dispelled the magic, she was no longer the elven thief they were looking for, and thus she was beyond their grasp. All she needed to do now was transform again and sell off her loot to make some serious, untraceable money.

Lilly looked up at the sky in triumph.

Every adventurer who ever made me suffer is gonna get what they deserve…!

There were undoubtedly other ways that Cinder Ella could help her earn money. She could have certainly found a different way to make her living.

But after enduring so much suffering, Lilly's bitter grudge would not allow that. Those stores of rage and grief compelled the little girl to swear revenge against adventurers.

In her old life she'd stayed alive by drinking muddy water, but today would be a clean break from that. She would take back everything that adventurers had stolen from her and win her freedom by her own hand.

Guilt threatened to well up within her, but she brushed it away, sealing it deep in her heart. Lilly forced herself to keep smiling.

After a few more moments of amusement, it was time to go.

The rain was little different from the rain on the day she'd been cast out by the only people who ever openly showed her any kindness. As it soaked her, Lilly dragged her bleeding, battered body out into the hazy city and

disappeared.

After that day, Lilly played at thievery constantly.

She would lay traps for adventurers in the Dungeon, snatch anything valuable they had, then beat a quick retreat out of the labyrinth. Occasionally the adventurers, enraged at being betrayed by a mere supporter, would escape the trap and pursue her, but her transformation magic was perfect, and no one could catch her. The few times she lifted valuables from members of her own familia helped sate her grudge ever so slightly.

She did her very best to ignore the emptiness she felt underneath her dark pleasure. In fact, she used the strength of her rekindled anger to wrestle such pathetic feelings to the ground, asking herself if she'd forgotten everything that had been done to her.

As she continued to avenge herself upon adventurers, two years quickly passed.

Lilly looked into a barrel filled with water, and realized it was her own eyes that had become stagnant.

She was in a cheap inn she was using for a hideout. That day she had again lured some adventurers into a trap, spilled crimson blood, left monster corpses —and she was so dirtied with cinders that she had to laugh.

As she stared into the barrel, a children's story came suddenly to her mind.

Perhaps it was the old flower shop couple who'd read it to her. She couldn't precisely remember where she'd seen it, but it was a very common story.

The story was about a shabby girl always covered in ash and cinders. Thanks to a spell cast by a mischievous fairy, she was transformed into a girl of extraordinary beauty. Seizing her chance to enjoy this brief dream, the girl went to the palace, where the prince fell in love with her at first sight. As the spell began to break, she fled the palace, but the prince searched for her the next day. He came for her, and although the spell had been broken, they still lived happily ever after.

Lilly looked at her bloodied, cinder-caked face in the water barrel and found herself harried by doubt.

When the deception of the transformation magic faded—did anyone who would reach their hand out to her true self exist?

"…This is ridiculous." Lilly sneered at both her thoughts and at her reflection in the mirror.

Alone in the room, she curled up in the bed's dusty sheets as she blotted out her desolate feelings with her hatred of adventurers. Her cold hands had forgotten what the warmth of another person felt like. Outside the window, the moonlit sky above looked on.

It didn't exist.

There was no such thing as a prince who would come save her. Those were only for children's fairy tales.

In fact—there was no such thing as a hero at all. Nobody was coming for her.

Which was why today, too, she would put her mask on, pretend to be an innocent little girl, and swindle another foolish adventurer.

Her next prey was an easy choice—an obviously greenhorn human who'd actually tried to defend her from another enraged adventurer. Just as she was wondering what this boy could possibly have been thinking when he came to the aid of a grimy-looking prum he'd never even met before, he'd said something ridiculous like "I couldn't ignore a girl in trouble" or something. It was so stupid, so absurd, so utterly unheard-of, that all Lilly could do was laugh.

He had hair as white as his words were innocent, and his rubellite eyes were just like a rabbit's. The unmistakable traces of the countryside were still all over him. He had to be a recent arrival to the city.

She could smell it on him—that bottomless, good-natured naïveté.

The environment he'd lived in had blessed him, unlike a certain miserable prum. He had obviously never experienced any real suffering.

So Lilly would educate him. She would teach him of this city's dirtiness, its harshness, its cruel indifference. She would teach him that without divine favor, reality would mercilessly grind him to dust.

The price for this lesson would be the jet-black knife he carried that so ill-suited him.

She would dirty his pristine heart as her own had been and cloud his eyes until they looked like hers.

She would stain him as she had been stained.

Betrayed, he would cry out, and not a single soul would believe him. And he'd never say anything as utterly inane as "I couldn't ignore a girl in trouble" to anyone ever again.

He was such an obvious rube; it wouldn't even take long.

Besides, if she could lay her hands on that masterwork knife of his, she might finally have enough money. She might finally be able to free herself from her familia.

Now, to dirty herself with cinders and begin the con.

So yet again, Lilly called out to an adventurer, believing that her only hope was to keep deceiving both herself and those around her.

"—Hey! You there! You with the white hair!"

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INTERLUDE
I, HIS ADVISER

INTERLUDE

I, HIS ADVISER

“Th-the deep levels…” said Eina unsteadily.

She slumped forward onto the table, dizzied.

Sitting awkwardly across the table from her was Bell Cranell, an adventurer under her jurisdiction. Through an open window, the balmy afternoon’s sunlight streamed into the headquarters of the Guild.

There in the consultation box, Eina was midway through hearing about the expedition that had concluded a few days earlier.

When the party had returned to the surface, Eina hadn’t immediately gotten the chance to hear what had happened—largely due to Bell’s condition. Afterward, with one thing or another—like reporting and processing the heavy toll the recent events had exacted upon the high-level adventurers—it kept being pushed back.

Which was why she was only hearing about everything now.

When she’d heard the words *deep levels*, she’d just about fainted.

“…So you’re telling me that after you got pulled down by the wormwell, you spent four days wandering the deep levels?”

“Yes…Then, Lyu…Gale Wind came to our rescue, so we managed to survive…”

“Can you be more specific?”

“We were about to die trying to escape the Colosseum, so I used an explosive, which made the floor collapse, and then we stumbled onto an unexplored area.”

Eina had been slowly lifting her head up off the table in the soundproofed room, but as Bell’s explanation continued, she clasped it in both hands and groaned loudly.

Rivira's leader, Bols, had dropped by the Guild, so she'd heard that there had been some kerfuffle involving Gale Wind, but based on what he'd said, she'd thought that was the extent of it. Could anyone have imagined that the outcome of a skirmish with moss huge would have led to an encounter with a wormwell controlled by the notorious Jura Harma, a battle with a heretofore-unknown Irregular, and finally a fall into the deep levels? No one. Not even a god.

Bell spoke haltingly as he carefully chose his words, but apparently Ouranos knew about the Juggernaut creature. If this had been divine will that went right over the heads of the Guild's top brass, Eina would keep silent about said monster, too, but in truth, she had no idea what was going on. She'd even been surprised to learn that Bell apparently knew Gale Wind personally.

As far as his familia went, Eina heard that they planned to keep the fact that they'd reached the deep levels a tight secret. This had been at Lilly's instigation, who undoubtedly wanted to avoid a possible hike in the fees they might owe the Guild.

This was technically illegal, but given the circumstances, there was certainly an argument to be made that they had every right to submit a false report.

So Eina decided to cooperate—however…

"By the way—what do your abilities look like after your latest Status update?"

"Um…my highest is a B."

Whap. Eina fell forward onto the table again, her hands spread flat against it as though she'd been knocked over mid-cry.

That was already the second time it happened since they started their talk.

Ugh, my head hurts…

Eina felt battered, despite only having to listen to Bell recount events.

The parchment on which she had been writing with a quill pen had rapidly become useless. She had started out imagining that she probably wouldn't be able to file the report, and indeed it was totally impossible. The report of Bell's ascension to second-tier adventurer, including the account of his familia's

expedition, would have to be shelved.

Hestia Familia's first expedition, a mission issued by the Guild, would be recorded as a failure. Eina was certain that adding any unnecessary embellishments beyond that would simply make the seams in the story stick out, so she decided to sweep the entire issue aside with that single word.

In that moment, she decided that she'd agree on a cover story with Lilly, Bell's strategist.

Anyway, it'll give Bell some time to do some studying.

She had no idea what was going to happen with the boy next.

He needed intensive, one-on-one instruction. Desperately. She pushed up her glasses and summoned her resolve. That was also the moment the poor boy's fate was quietly sealed.

"……"

Her mind racing, Eina exhaled.

She looked up, certain her eyebrows were raised. "Stand up, Bell."

"H-huh?"

"Just stand up!" she ordered with an expression that might've seemed harsher than she felt.

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Eina stood as well, then walked around the table to stand face-to-face with Bell. She extended her hand, and the nervous Bell squeezed his eyes shut, clearly certain he was about to get yelled at.

And then—

"Huh?"

She embraced the boy, holding him close, and spoke the words that were in her heart. "Bell…thank you for coming back."

There wasn't much difference in their height, but after closing the distance between them, Eina could tell that Bell had become much sturdier than he looked.

“I know I’ve said this many times, but…there have been many adventurers who didn’t.” As she murmured into Bell’s ear, she felt him tremble for a moment.

Eina had met a great deal of adventurers. Those who never returned far outnumbered the ones who did, and Eina wasn’t the only Guild worker who felt that weight; they all did.

“You came back from a very dangerous place. You could’ve easily died, but you didn’t, and…I’m glad.”

“Miss Eina…”

“So thank you, Bell…”

She meant it.

Eina had been responsible for another adventurer, once.

But she hadn’t come back.

She and Eina had been about Bell’s age at the time. Maybe that was why she remembered it so well. Perhaps she had subconsciously associated her sadness with Bell and had found some measure of peace.

Even after so many adventures, he’s still here…

The heartbeats she felt from the boy’s chest were proof that this was neither a dream nor an illusion. Eina was painfully aware of just how precious and unlikely it was that he was still standing right in front of her like this. All the more so given that he’d returned from the deep levels.

She couldn’t help but bare all her emotions. To express the happiness and relief that welled up within her at being reunited with him.

“I’m so glad I get to see you again…”

His white hair brushed against her cheek. Somehow it carried the scent of snow.

Bell had been stiff with nervousness, but he relaxed, and she could feel him smile. Eina smiled, too.

After some obvious hesitation, he brought his right arm up and patted her

back gently, as though to reassure her.

A new wave of affection for him overflowed within her, and Eina squeezed Bell even more tightly.

However—

Normally it was hidden by her uniform, but despite being a half-elf, she had a fairly impressive bust for a woman of elven descent, and as it was pressed against Bell's chest, it audibly brushed against his dangling left arm. It may as well have been a plaster cast, considering how it froze his arm in place.

Bell turned red.

Eina did likewise, though she had initiated.

In a flash, Eina grabbed Bell's shoulders and pushed him away. The moment now behind them, the two sprang back from each other, their faces both bright red as they regarded one another.

"I—I have to go get some notes! So, so many notes! So many notes that if you study them all, you'll be able to go all the way down to the fiftieth floor with no problem!" Eina tried to retreat from the confined space with an obvious excuse.

In spite of this declaration that amounted to a death sentence for him, Bell immediately went along with it in his desperation to dispel the sudden awkwardness. "Y-yes, that's perfect! Wow, I'm so happy!"

As Bell gestured for her to go as she pleased, Eina hurriedly turned and tried to make her escape, but—

"Um, Miss Eina!"

She was stopped short by Bell's voice. She flinched, then looked hesitantly back over her shoulder—

—where she saw Bell bowing deeply to her. "Thank you so much! Everything I learned from you is why I made it back at all!"

Eina's emerald eyes widened.

All that monster knowledge he'd acquired had been useful.

The information she'd given him about the deep levels had kept him alive.

That's what Bell was saying.

She turned back around to see the boy smiling at her bashfully, his cheeks still red-tinged. Eina didn't know how to react as she was torn between all-consuming joy and an unbearable embarrassment. The two conflicting emotions warred within her as she returned an awkward smile accompanied by the furrowed eyebrows that told of imminent tears.

Eina made her exit successfully this time, putting the consultation box behind her.

"…Aaaaaaaaugh! What am I *doing*?! I mean, I'm happy he made it back alive, but at this rate Bell's going to sue me for the sexual harassment that deities are always talking about." She was still blushing to the tips of her pointed ears as she walked briskly, muttering recriminations to herself—*I shouldn't have let my guard down just because it was a private room, why was I so forward, not that I was forward in* that *sense*—which only deepened her embarrassment.

While the air of the spacious lobby cooled her hot face, she did her best to disguise her murmurs with the quick, sharp clicking of her footsteps.

"Still…that was really nice." An innocent smile crept onto her face as she turned Bell's words over in her mind. He must have been wanting to say that to her ever since he'd returned from the deep levels. Just as Eina the adviser had been able to speak what had been on her mind, Bell the adventurer had found the words to convey what was in his heart.

When she noticed her expression beginning to soften, she hastily composed her face as she entered the offices next to the lobby that adjoined the Guild's service windows. She then sat at her desk, determined not to let her colleagues notice what had just happened.

"Aah, Tulle?" a fellow receptionist called out to her.

"Miss Rose? What's the problem?"

Rose was a beautiful werewolf woman with long red hair, and even among the receptionists, she was known as a capable coordinator—but she seemed to be trying to quiet her normally strong voice.

"It's about that money…"

“Money? I haven’t borrowed or lent anything, have I?”

“No, no, not that…” As Eina cocked her head curiously, Rose rummaged around under her desk, finally producing a large bottle.

Packed inside it was a respectable amount of money in valis.

Eina instinctively flinched away.

“Remember? All the receptionist girls placed bets…”

Eina suddenly remembered.

That’s right—it had been half a year earlier that she’d so unbecomingly (for a Guild employee) participated in gambling.

“The next longest bet was for six months…and pretty soon, it’ll be that long since *Little Rookie*—I mean, *Rabbit Foot*—became an adventurer…”

“Which means you’re the only one left, Eina…” said a normally expressionless elf girl who was one of the senior receptionist women. She was nicknamed the “Ice Fairy” and was the second most popular receptionist behind Eina herself, but at the moment, her face betrayed a certain impatience.

Eina could see more receptionists behind her, all watching expectantly.

“Um…Just how much money is in there?”

“Uh, about five times our salary, maybe?”

Eina fell silent. Simultaneously, the puzzle was solved.

Essentially, this little game that everybody had entered thinking it was a sure bet, or a joke, or a meaningless little match, had somehow ended up with Eina as the sole winner—which had caused quite the stir.

If their boss discovered that the pride of the Guild, its receptionists, had been gambling like this, they’d be severely scolded, so many of them probably wanted to just pretend this had never happened.

Even Misha, who hadn’t participated, made a little murmur of surprise when she heard the grand total.

Evidently mistaking Eina’s continued silence for ambivalence, Rose the werewolf receptionist smiled in relief. “Well, I suppose a Goody Two-shoes like

you isn’t going to want to actually keep the money, so—”

“No, I’ll take it.” Eina lightly snatched up the bottle containing the pot.

Immediately, the receptionists all went wide-eyed.

Eina smiled a smile that did not reach her eyes.

Then, she spoke with such decisive force that no one would be able to claim they hadn’t heard her.

“Please don’t worry! With this money, I vow to take one Bell Cranell to dinner.”

“““Whaaaaaaaat?”””

The room exploded after Eina’s bold declaration.

Many of the receptionists cried out in dismay or slid off their chairs—the response was particularly pronounced in the males present.

“Hwhaaa?!” Misha was among the upset. “Y-you mustn’t, Eina! It would be an abuse of your authority! You cannot do anything that would dishonor the elven blood that flows through your—”

“That’s right! For you to have the young nestling adventurer for yourself simply because he’s become famous, it’s—”

“Having engaged in conduct unbecoming of an elf, my punishment shall be treating Sir Cranell to dinner! My redemption as an elf requires nothing less! He should be the one to benefit from this enormous sum!”

In the face of Eina’s sound argument, a silence fell. As she turned to leave with the bottle in her arms, she heard more restrained cries from the receptionists, but she ignored them.

—When she thought back to the moment this wager started, it had made her a little angry.

It was better this way.

Anything that functioned as an apology would suffice, and dinner was simply an expedient way to do it.

She certainly could also use the money to get some equipment or items for

him, which he would just as certainly refuse to accept, or at least try to—so she'd use dinner as a pretext.

That settled it. This certainly wasn't about her personal desires. She'd just ask him out.

Explaining it all would be a pain, but she was going to have the dinner with him that she always wanted. It was decided!

So long as her adventurer came back, Eina would do anything to help them and anything to stand by them.

That instinct of hers hadn't weakened one bit.

Just as she was about to walk out the door of the office, Eina turned around and addressed the clamoring workers one last time.

"I'm his adviser, after all!"

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CHAPTER 4
GUILD ALONE

CHAPTER 4

GUILD ALONE

A suit jacket and trousers in black. A ribbon tied in a bow at the neck.

The uniform had been made to order, and the briefest touch confirmed that the cloth was of very high quality. Her first impression upon putting it on was that it was surprisingly easy to move in. And why not? The battle gear adventurers wore was of similarly excellent construction, after all.

That said, the uniform's feel wasn't so very fine that she forgot it had been issued to her at no charge.

Eina looked at her faint reflection in the window and felt rather timid, in spite of herself.

"I'll take you to meet the rest of the staff now. As was explained yesterday, you all have been posted to the clerical office. You'll likely be handling routine work and receptionist duties, so bear that in mind…Tulle, are you listening?"

"Er…My apologies!" Eina tore her gaze away from the window when the middle-aged chienthrope leading the new recruits called her out.

In the long hall, there were several demi-humans also wearing the uniform. As they passed by Eina, each one of their expressions tightened unpleasantly. Next to Eina was Misha Frott, her friend from school, whose cherry blossom–colored hair swayed as she moved; she was even more nervous than Eina was.

Some of the bystanders smiled at them, perhaps charmed by how green they seemed. Eina felt a flush creeping up her cheeks and pointlessly adjusted her glasses, then lent her attention to the explanation coming from the person who would be serving as her boss. She followed behind him like a meek little fawn as the spring sunlight fell across her through the window.

Soon, they reached the room that was their destination.

At its end, the passage opened up into a large marble hall crowded with adventurers, whose gaze immediately fell upon the new employees.

Supporting these men and women, who ventured again and again into a den of monsters in search of fame and fortune, was now Eina's job.

Eina Tulle. Fourteen years old.

She had joined the organization responsible for managing the great labyrinth of Orario—the Guild.

The reason Eina had chosen the Guild as her workplace came down to a simple factor: money.

The Labyrinth City was often called the center of the world, and the Guild was its nerve center, so the pay was good. Depending on the circumstances, Guild employees could make more than lower-tier adventurers, to say nothing of ordinary laborers.

But Eina didn't want money for its own sake. The reason she wanted it was so that she could send it home.

Eina was a half-elf; her mother was a high elf who had escaped her forest home along with a certain queen, but the outside world's air seemed not to have agreed with her, for she was frequently sick and bedridden. Eina's human father loved her mother and worked constantly to support Eina and her younger sister. She had fond, vivid memories of her mother smiling gently as she coughed in bed and of her father holding her close in a warm, kind embrace despite being exhausted from his day's work.

And even in such an environment, Eina's parents sent her to the School District, for which she was very grateful. At the same time, she made up her mind to pay them back by acquiring as much knowledge and experience as she could.

Having little martial (which was to say, athletic) aptitude, Eina chose the academic path, and—especially as someone who had never found studying particularly difficult—her apparent potential quickly opened the possibility of

joining the Guild.

Eina's good grades won her one of the School District's limited recommendations, which led to employment at the Guild's headquarters.

In the single dormitory room provided to each of the Guild's staff, Eina wrote in Koine on a sheet of parchment: *As I wrote before, I'm now formally employed as a member of the Guild…*

In her letter to her family, Eina recounted recent events, then (mixing in some jokes) wrote of her worries about the future. Her new environment was often confusing, and it would have been a lie to say she didn't feel forlorn at times. Sometimes she just wanted to hear the voices of her father and mother, or even of her younger sister, who was so much younger than Eina that she wouldn't remember her older sibling's face.

And yet, at the same time, there were things she looked forward to.

Eina hadn't joined the Guild just for the sake of her family. She was excited at the prospect of broadening her horizons by working as a Guild member here in the "center of the world," Orario. There were so many people; so many adventurers; so many great deeds.

There were things in this city that Eina only knew from her reading, and doubtless other discoveries and thrills that were not recorded in any book. Her excitement and interest would surely be justified.

She knew that this was the right place for her.

The long brown fall of her hair down her back shook minutely as her quill scratched letters into the parchment on her desk. Her graceful features still had a touch of childishness about them as a faint smile began to play about the half-elf girl's lips.

"…Right, I've got to keep at it." Eina finished the letter with words of affection to her parents, then sealed it.

She narrowed her eyes at the sunlight filtering in through the window and collected her focus once more.

“My name is Eina Tulle. As of today, I will be serving as your adviser. I’m very pleased to be working with you!”

Eina’s first job—in addition to the clerical duties she had as a matter of course—was to act as a research adviser to adventurers, which she assumed would only happen after receiving appropriate training. After all, the receptionists were the Guild’s pride and joy.

As one of the people who had daily contact with actual adventurers, knowledge of what they faced day in and day out as they ventured into the Dungeon was absolutely essential. In addition to generally supporting their progress in the labyrinth, she was also an important element in greener adventurers’ educations.

Having been thoroughly instructed by her boss, Eina finally introduced herself to her first adventurer in the confines of a real consultation box.

“A half-elf, huh?”

The adventurer across from her was named Maris Hackard. She was a human girl, her blue hair was cropped short, and she wore a somehow imperious expression on her face. She was fifteen years old, and at a slender 160 celch, she was slightly taller than Eina.

She, like Eina, was new to the Guild—a novice adventurer who’d just completed her registration.

Eina forced a smile despite her nervousness as Maris intently studied her before dramatically heaving a great sigh.

“I gotta say, I recall asking for, like, a real tough-looking old dwarf…not a half-blood barely outta diapers.”

“Wha—?”

Eina wondered if this is what she should expect from all aspiring adventurers.

The nasty way Maris vented her frustration made Eina guess she had a bad upbringing. She regarded the half-elf who hadn’t even gotten used to her uniform with open resentment and continued her rant. “Man, you’re slow. Can’t believe I’m getting a total rookie. My luck’s not worth a damn, that’s for

sure.”

Eina was speechless for a moment, her shoulders trembling at the contempt she was being shown—and then exploded. “Y-you’re a rookie adventurer yourself! And your familia’s just getting started, too! You’ve got some nerve complaining about me!”

“What the hell? Just so you know, I’m gonna be a first-tier adventurer, got it? You really think you can talk to me like that?!”

“I’ll thank you not to talk about being a first-tier adventurer when you barely know left from right! You’re about a hundred years too early for that!”

“You wanna say that again?!”

All she’d managed to start was a vicious argument.

An excellent academic record, a sharp mind, and the highest standard of conduct—Eina had all three, but she was, admittedly, young.

In the well-soundproofed consultation box, the heated exchange continued with no signs of slowing down. Both girls were on their feet as their argument grew fiercer, having entirely forgotten themselves. Eina, in particular, had completely forgotten that the girl across from her was an adventurer. The smooth start she’d had in mind for her career as an adviser was a distant memory.

However, the fact remained that, terrible first impression and all, Maris was the first adventurer Eina would be taking responsibility for.

“Don’t get all high and mighty just ’cause you’ve got decent tits, halfie.”

“Why are you looking at my chest?! Anyway, mine are normal; you’re just *flat*!”

“*Rrrrrrrragh!* That’s *it*!”

The two red-faced girls continued to butt heads. At their feet was a neglected crate, which contained a shortsword and armor that glowed expectantly. They were part of a supply package intended to be given to new adventurers but went entirely ignored.

“I cannot believe her!”

That evening, at a tavern in the Guild-endorsed, high-class residential neighborhood where she lived, Eina vented her frustration about the encounter with Maris.

“She started complaining about her luck as soon as she saw my face! If that’s what some of them are like, no wonder people get the wrong idea about adventurers!”

Eina wasn’t particularly drunk, but her voice was getting louder. Misha Frott, the human sitting across from her and an old school friend of Eina’s, made a wide-eyed expression. “Aaah…It’s been a while since I’ve gotten to see you get this mad.” They were sitting at a two-person table in the corner of the tavern. Misha sipped her juice, and her soft-pink hair rustled as she cocked her head. “And since they’re an adventurer you’re responsible for, it bugs you that much more, right?”

“That, and she was just so rude! Saying prejudiced things like ‘halfie,’ I mean, really…” Eina grumbled, her lip twisting into a scowl—as though compelled to by the elven blood that ran through her veins.

Meanwhile, Misha couldn’t help but break into a grin at seeing her normally mature, composed friend finally act her young age.

“What about you, Misha? You met your first adventurer client today, too, right?”

“Yeah, he was an older animal person, tall…” She giggled. “He was kinda hot,” said Misha in answer to Eina’s question, her cheeks coloring a bit. She continued relating her evaluation, which included details like “He had a handsome nose,” “His fluffy ears were so cute,” and “But he was really gentlemanly.”

“Uh…Misha, you know that mixing personal and professional relationships isn’t—”

“I—I know! I know, okay?!” Misha waved her hands frantically as soon as Eina drove a stake through the heart of the sweetness that had begun to creep into her narration.

The two friends continued to chat about what had happened over the day,

sharing their little joys and sadnesses.

Being a Guild-endorsed tavern, there wasn't an adventurer in sight, but it also wasn't an overly formal establishment, and the happily raucous voices of the Guild-affiliated magic-stone masons who were clearly enjoying their ale spoke of a prospering pub.

Once Eina had finished venting, the chatterbox Misha moved on to other subjects as was her habit. "You met Lord Ouranos? He's super intense, right? I was so nervous when I introduced myself, and then he goes 'I see,' all deep and solemnlike. Oh, but the people in the office are really nice, thank goodness!"

Eina flashed a chagrined smile at her ever-voluble friend, while admitting to herself that it was understandable—their environment was dizzyingly different from what they were used to.

"But there's so much that receptionists have to do besides adviser duties…I hope I'm up to it," said Misha.

"You definitely are, Misha."

"I don't know, I'm not clever like you, Eina…I'm sure the Guild only let me in as your sidekick anyway."

"That's not true!"

Ever since their school days, Eina and Misha had tended to be grouped together as a set. Misha herself was only too aware of this fact, which led to her self-deprecations, likening herself to an extra bauble that went wherever Eina did.

Sure, if you took your eyes off Misha for an instant, she'd tend to slack off a bit; she was the type who didn't start studying until right before the test, which had gotten Eina burned many times. The human girl exemplified the words "I can do it if I really try!"

Receptionists were chosen in part for their appearance, Eina knew, but there was no question that Misha had gotten into the Guild thanks to her own blood, sweat, and tears. Her reason for joining had been a carefree "If Eina's doing it, then I'm doing it, too," but Eina herself took great solace in that.

“You’ll be fine, Misha. We’re both gonna hang in there, got it?”

A smile bloomed on Misha’s uncertain face. “…Yeah! If you say it’s gonna be okay, I get the feeling it will!”

Eina returned the smile.

Eina’s days of getting used to Orario continued.

Thanks to her coworkers’ generosity in explaining things and teaching her, day by day Eina gradually learned the ins and outs of her new job. Occasionally she would take over the management of a high-tier adventurer from one of the senior advisers, and then learned from her interactions with those adventurers, too.

Taking a single step out of Guild Headquarters meant she was immediately faced with the sights and sounds of the various incidents and feuds that were constantly breaking out in the city.

When Eina had first joined the Guild, the situation in the city had gotten bad enough that people had taken to calling it the Time of Unrest, and while it was beginning to be brought under control, with the ever-present carousing of the various over-merry gods and the feuding between goddesses, the streets never wanted for turmoil.

Between the hustle and bustle of seeing her first Monsterphilia put on by *Ishtar Familia* and the Guild, the fighting and war games that came along with it, and the return of multiple goddesses to the heavens, it was more than enough to teach Eina that Orario would never be boring.

Both *Freya Familia* and *Loki Familia* steadily racked up achievements during their Dungeon expeditions that were truly awe-inspiring.

Loki Familia had an individual whom Eina knew very well—a high elf to whom she’d owed a tremendous debt of gratitude since childhood—but she made no attempt to come forward and reintroduce herself. She had to consider the absolute neutrality that the Guild needed to maintain, to say nothing of the diffidence she felt toward one of the absolute best adventurers living in the city.

Before long, her second spring in Orario arrived.

Eina had begun to take on receptionist duties now, and the number of adventurers she advised had risen to four.

One of them was Maris, whose progress was a sight to behold.

“Eina! I reached the tenth floor!”

It was evening in Guild Headquarters. Maris called out to Eina, who had stepped away from the front desk.

She approached with a full coin purse, and Eina wondered if she’d come to change some money. Her well-used leather armor and the Guild-issued steel shortsword she’d outgrown were testament to her accomplishments as a warrior.

As Maris waved a carefree greeting, Eina sputtered, half in outrage and half in shock as she digested the girl’s words. “Wha—? You’ve already pushed past… Wait, you haven’t been listening to a thing I’ve said! The fog comes out starting at the tenth floor, and if you don’t take care when exploring—”

Maris was part of an adventuring party, but reaching the tenth floor in the span of a year was still impressive progress for what was essentially a brand-new familia. Eina was still an inexperienced Guild employee, but she was well aware of just how significant Maris’s achievements were.

“Ugh, enough, enough! Enough scolding, already. Let’s go drink!”

“Adventurers and Guild employees shouldn’t socialize too often! People will get the wrong idea. I make it a policy never to mix business and—”

“It’s my treat, so quit arguing and come on!”

Eina found herself bodily dragged to a drinking session by the high-spirited Maris. After she’d changed out of her Guild uniform to avoid obvious misunderstandings, they proceeded to a tavern Maris frequented in the busy shopping district in the city’s southern quarter called The Flaming Wasp.

“Eina, you know you’ve got quite a reputation among adventurers, right? Everyone talks about the adorable School District–educated receptionist at the Guild. I swear, elves sure have it made,” teased Maris over the constant din of

carousing adventurers. She took a swig of the tavern's specialty, a ruby-red mead.

"M-Maris!"

Eina and Maris had, over the past year, managed to become rather good friends. Owing to the fundamental nature of their relationship as adventurer and adviser, there had been countless times when they'd butted heads, but by now even those arguments were interspersed with enjoyable banter. The only thing that hadn't changed was how Maris still constantly harangued Eina.

Maris was well into her cups, and her face was as red as her mead. Eina, drinking only water, sighed.

"But, hell…I mean…you're a good one, Eina."

"…Where'd that come from?"

Maris had been rowdily cheerful thanks to her progress in the Dungeon, but her tone suddenly shifted. The flush didn't leave her face, but a happy smile lingered on her lips. "I mean, you're as lecture-y as ever, and your big brain gives you a big head, but…I was lucky. To get you as my adviser, I mean."

"…"

"I'm an unwashed idiot, but you'll explain things as many times as it takes for me to get it. Even today, the stuff you taught me about orcs and imps came in real handy. I'm…I'm sorry, y'know, for calling you a rookie and being a real jerk to you the first time we met."

"Maris…"

It was true—Maris the typical, reckless adventurer and Eina, the serious, studious adviser, meshed well, each bringing something to the table that the other lacked.

There were many situations in the Dungeon where brute force alone was not enough. Maris continued where she left off, borrowing courage from her mead in order to finish her thanks.

"I'm real glad I met you."

As Eina listened to Maris's murmured words, almost inaudible under the

clamor of the tavern, she felt something bloom within her that she hadn't experienced since starting at the Guild.

Or perhaps it was better to say that the force of Maris's gaze impressed the feeling onto her.

As she struggled with the weight of an emotion she couldn't easily define, Eina blurted out a question to hide behind. "S-so, Maris, why did you become an adventurer?"

There were more than a few people who came to Orario to take up adventuring because of a personal problem of some kind. It was generally understood that it was poor manners to pry into their circumstances more than was necessary.

Eina had never asked a personal question like this before, and Maris was silent for a moment before replying. "I wanna show 'em all. My parents, for throwing me away. Everyone who ever made fun of me. I wanna become somebody amazing, like a first-tier adventurer. That'd show 'em." Then, after revealing her past as a street urchin, she broke into a smile. "And…yeah, maybe I wanna do it for my god, too, for picking me up outta the dirt."

Behind her glasses, Eina's emerald eyes fondly watched Maris's suddenly bashful, awkward demeanor.

The general impression of adventurers was that they were violent, reckless people. That wasn't incorrect, but it wasn't entirely accurate, either.

Maris's reasons for becoming an adventurer weren't very different from why Eina decided to join the Guild to support her family. Knowing this inspired both a deep empathy and simple happiness in Eina.

The young half-elf felt her resolve deepen. She would continue to support and encourage her adventurers.

It was like she'd suddenly and clearly seen the point of it all.

"Tulle."

"Chief Rehmer."

It had been a month since that day when Eina had gotten closer to Maris. Eina was walking down a hallway in Guild Headquarters when her boss, a chienthrope, called out to her.

He had been Eina and Misha's teacher and mentor when they'd first entered the Guild, and Eina still learned things from him to this day.

"So, it's been a year since you and Frott started here. Have you gotten used to the work yet?"

"Yes, sir—thanks to you," said Eina as her slim-faced superior fell into step alongside her. "Recently I've started becoming closer to my adventurers…It's good to finally feel like I'm truly helping them," she said, describing her current state of mind. As she thought back to her conversation with Maris a few days earlier, she explained that she hoped to be able to keep assisting with her charges.

Her chienthrope superior silently watched a happy expression rise to her face. "Ah, you and Frott still haven't…"

Still hadn't what? Eina was about to ask, when Rehmer continued.

"Tulle…this is the view of someone who's been working at the Guild quite a bit longer than you have," he began solemnly. "It's better if you don't empathize with your adventurers."

"What?" Eina froze in mid-step as her superior kept walking.

"It will only lead to suffering. This is just my personal opinion, but…"

"Chief…?"

"…I expect that most of the staff would agree with me." He left Eina behind with her thoughts as he continued to walk down the hall.

Eina would not understand the full meaning of his words until several days later.

That day, Eina was heading to Babel to conduct an inspection.

It was twilight, and a deep-red light suffused the air.

A steady stream of adventurers was emerging from the stairs that led underground into the Dungeon. In the broad atrium of the tower's first floor, Eina and her fellow inspectors were finishing their reports and preparing to return to Guild Headquarters.

"…?"

There was a swell of commotion. Eina turned in the direction of the noise, which was coming from the adventurers, just in time to see several bodies being carried up from underground.

Evidently an adventuring party had been wiped out. The sound of the adventurers' voices carried all the way to a dazed Eina's ears. She gathered that the bodies had been discovered by some top-tier adventurers who had taken the trouble to retrieve them out of a sense of professional respect.

The more experienced of Eina's coworkers at the Guild wore cold, blank expressions, or else pressed their lips together tightly, pushing some nameless emotion down, as the bodies were lined up in the spacious atrium.

And there among them was one that Eina recognized.

"Wha—?"

Battered leather armor, a bent sword still clutched in a stiff hand, and that familiar blue hair. The bloodied human girl was very clearly Maris Hackard.

There was no mistaking it.

It was impossible to not recognize her.

Maris's corpse stared vacantly up through half-opened eyes.

The body was missing an arm.

Most of the other bodies, too, had been torn apart, telling a gruesome tale.

The next moment, Eina collapsed to her knees.

"Those wounds…an infant dragon, you think?"

"Yeah, that's what I figure. Looks like they didn't even put up much of a fight. Just awful."

"Dunno whether they just had the bad luck to run into one, or whether they

set an ambush without knowing their own limits…Either way, this stuff happens all the time."

The adventurers' callous chatter passed right over Eina. Her mind was frozen as she knelt there helplessly on the floor. The sight at the end of her gaze—that cooling corpse—wouldn't let her avert her eyes from harsh reality.

It had been one year since she'd become an adviser.

Of all the adventurers she'd been responsible for, Maris was the first casualty.

"Tulle! Hey, Tulle! Ah, dammit!!"

The voices of her coworkers calling her name felt distant.

Her vision turned dark, as though to escape. Her consciousness dimmed. But Maris's face, that blood-streaked visage, was burned into her retinas and would not go away.

She knew. She knew that this was Orario, the Labyrinth City. She knew that every day adventurers entered the Dungeon, and that many of them would never return.

Of course she was aware of this. It was impossible not to be.

But Eina had never imagined that it would apply to *her*—to Maris.

It had always felt like something that only happened to other people, elsewhere.

It seemed impossible that this adventurer she'd been laughing and chattering with just the previous day, her irreplaceable friend, was gone.

For the first time, Eina experienced the death of someone close to her.

As though Maris's loss was some kind of turning point, all the adventurers Eina was responsible for died.

Even the top-tier adventurer whose responsibility she inherited to replace Maris ventured to the middle levels and failed to return.

—"It's better if you don't empathize with your adventurers."

Eina now understood the true meaning of her superior's advice.

The unending sense of loss needed no explanation.

In all likelihood, most members of the Guild, including her superior, had experienced many moments just like this, if not worse.

I…I just…

It was more regret than sadness that consumed Eina. She was a Dungeon expedition adviser. Wasn't there something she could have offered to her adventurers? Wasn't there something more she should've done for them—for *her*?

—I let her die.

The thought burrowed its way into Eina's chest.

"That's arrogance, Tulle," said a werewolf woman, one of the most experienced receptionists, as though she'd seen right through Eina. "There are safer jobs. But they chose to be adventurers. For money, for fame, or just searching for some idiotic sense of excitement in chasing 'the unknown' or something…there's no way we can save people that stupid."

"M-Miss Rose…"

"It was their choice to go on an adventure. No matter how much we might try to talk them out of it, there'd be no point," said the werewolf receptionist grumpily as she played with her red hair.

Eina slowly looked up from where she sat at her desk, motionless as a doll, accomplishing absolutely no work.

Even Eina's listless gaze was able to gather that, in addition to Rose's irritation, there was also a hint of grief coming from her.

More days passed.

"This job is hard…" Misha let slip one evening when it was just her and Eina left in the office.

Two cups of black tea were now quite cool where they sat on a table.

One of Misha's adventurers had died, too.

“Nobody comes back, do they? No matter how strong, or how stylish, or how kind…they just…”

“Misha…”

Misha had been visibly enamored by the adventurer in question—or possibly even developed distinctly romantic feelings—but now she just sat and shook, looking down, as several teardrops fell on her thighs.

Eina had never seen her normally cheerful friend look so miserable.

“Hey, Eina…can I sit with you?”

“…Sure, of course.”

Misha moved over to the couch next to Eina and began to cry. She buried her face in Eina’s shoulder and tried to muffle her sobs.

That day as she held her friend close, Eina, too, wept.

Thanks to Misha, she let herself cry and finally began to mourn Maris’s death.

After that, many more died, and as the days of loss and grief passed, Eina began to understand something.

It was an adventurer’s “adventure” that led them to death.

A moment’s carelessness or pride, or even the courage to accomplish great deeds—these all became scythes that mercilessly harvested their lives.

Eina began to associate the word *adventure* with recklessness.

More times than she could count, Eina failed to dissuade adventurers from throwing their lives away on these “adventures.”

It’s hard. It’s so, so hard, you know? But…

Eina did try to be like the other receptionists and workers and distance herself from the adventurers. But she stopped short of fully embracing that lifestyle.

She saw Maris in each of the adventurers she advised, and instead of running from that sadness, she faced it—and them—head-on.

If I abandon them, it would only be worse.

The excitement and curiosity she'd felt when she first joined the Guild had become something different: a sense of duty.

While she wore a smile as a mask among her coworkers and even Misha, who all distanced themselves from the adventurers, Eina chose to be even more deeply involved with their efforts.

"Now, then, Ruvis, let's study up through here, shall we?"

"Uhh…Miss Eina, could we please take a break soon…?"

Eina held classes to thoroughly beat knowledge of the Dungeon into all the attendees. She showed no mercy, whether they were novices just starting out or higher-tier adventurers she'd inherited from another adviser.

She would not let them have their "adventures."

Determined to follow through, Eina did absolutely everything she could on behalf of her adventurers.

Even if they were on the verge of leveling up, she carefully outlined a wide variety of preparations and countermeasures a party could use, and just as carefully provided for their actual deployment. Occasionally she would even assign quests to adventurers she particularly trusted and descend into the Dungeon with them, with all the risk that entailed.

She needed to experience the danger that awaited adventurers in that deadly place.

"Dormul, you got these all wrong! Do them over!"

"Mercy, please, Eina my sweet!"

At first, her fellow Guild workers scowled, but eventually they found there was nothing to say in the face of Eina's unyielding persistence.

And Misha started to change, too.

"Hey, Eina, I've just taken charge of a rookie animal person…What weapon do you think I should recommend for them?"

"Misha…All right! Let's figure this out, shall we?"

At the very least Misha seemed to no longer be limited by her job description and had started thinking in terms of what exactly she could do for her adventurers, which naturally led her to ask Eina for advice. And her bottomless well of good cheer had returned.

Eina could not have been happier.

Time passed.

Before she knew it, Eina had grown taller than Maris.

She had cut her long hair, too.

The physique that Maris had once derided as “decent” grew more mature as Eina approached adulthood.

And then, in the fifth spring of her employment at the Guild—

“—I—I want to be an adventurer!”

—Eina met a boy with hopes of becoming an adventurer.

“J-just to confirm, is your adventurer registration here correct?”

“Yes!”

He was a human with the white hair and rubellite eyes of a rabbit.

As she handled his registration at her window, Eina smiled nervously at his enthusiastic nodding. Once she’d had him fill out the necessary particulars on a sheet of Guild parchment, she ran her eyes over the form as he’d completed it.

His name was Bell Cranell. He was a human, like Maris had been. And he was even younger than she had been.

Eina’s expression darkened for an instant. She had seen so many aspiring adventurers like him, still barely out of childhood. But she soon reaffixed her professional smile and finished processing his registration.

After telling the boy to come again tomorrow, she returned briefly to the back office.

“That one isn’t gonna last long. No way.”

“R-Rose!”

“C’mon, Tulle, even you know when someone’s got no chance. How many years have you been working here?” said the werewolf half-jokingly, having apparently watched the entire exchange.

After enough years at the Guild, its employees got a sense for whether a new adventurer knocking at their doors was going to make it.

By Eina’s estimation, the boy wasn’t a particularly great candidate, either. At the very least, her instinct told her that he didn’t have much talent, which meant that she had no ready response when her senior receptionist hit the bull’s-eye like that.

“What kind of adviser did he request?”

“Er…a woman and, if possible, an elf.”

“You hear that? Kid wants an elf! Sophie, you wanna take him?”

Sophie was a beautiful elven woman who had entered the Guild at the same time Rose had and was always among the top two most popular employees. She refused the offer with extreme bluntness. “That’s quite all right. It’s a waste to put time and effort into adventurers who aren’t going to last.”

“Rose! Sophie! It’s awful to just write him off like that!” Eina protested indignantly.

The werewolf receptionist grinned. “In that case,” she said, “want to bet on how long that kid has?”

The other receptionists who were on break immediately pounced on the opportunity to bet on the boy’s future.

“I’m in at six months.”

“In that case, I’ll take two.”

“Two weeks, I figure.”

“If you’re in, come see me with some coin!” said Rose.

When it became clear that her coworkers were actually going to place bets with Rose, Eina had to protest. “Y-you guys, this is wrong!”

She understood that the flippant wager was their way of coping. It was a joke to divert their minds from the tragedy of yet another adventurer’s impending death. Eina knew that, but she still couldn’t accept it.

The sound of Eina’s raised voice made Misha turn around and look over her shoulder from where she sat at the reception window as the other receptionists continued to tease Eina. “You say that, Eina, but it’s not like you think that boy’s going to make it as an adventurer, either, right?”

In other words, she was afraid to bet real money that he’d make it longer than six months.

“—!”

If Eina had conceded the point, the joke would probably have ended there. But Eina, who prayed for the safety of adventurers more than anyone else, refused to budge.

“Fine! I’ll be his adviser, then!” she shouted defiantly. She would keep him alive. They’d all see.

“W-wait a second, Tulle!”

“Management’s already given you other responsibilities. You don’t have room for another adventurer, do you?”

“It’s just one more, so I’ll be fine! And yeah, maybe I’m only half, but I’m still an elf!” she insisted, daring the other receptionists to find fault. Now that it had come to this, nobody could stop Eina. “If I win, all betting stops *permanently*, is that clear?” she said, and then left the office. She had to go and apply to be his adviser.

Eina swore to herself that she would *not* let that boy die.

Then.

After all that talk yesterday…

The next day, Eina was walking down a hallway in Guild Headquarters with a much cooler head. She was feeling a bit regretful about her outburst the previous day, but she had no intention of going back on her word.

She would keep that young adventurer alive.

She would continue to support adventurers and cheer them on.

Her thoughts turned to Maris and the others. Their deaths. The promises she had made to each of them.

She took a deep breath as she reached the front of the consultation box. Then, holding three thick volumes of study materials, she knocked on the door.

“—Ah!”

Eina smiled at the wide-eyed boy who was waiting for her inside. “As of today I’ll be acting as your adviser. My name is Eina Tulle. I look forward to working with you!”

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INTERLUDE

THAT NEVER-COOLING IRON

Welf Crozzo

Level 2

Strength: H118 -> 177 Defense: H123 -> 191 Dexterity: H143 -> G 233 Agility: I71 -> H138 Magic: I72 -> 98 Blacksmith: I

Magic

Will-o-Wisp

- Anti-magic fire
- Chant: “Blasphemous burn!”

Skills

Blood of Crozzo

- Ability to produce magic swords
- Can increase potency of magic swords during creation

Veritas Burn

- Grants resistance to flame
- Amplifies power of fire-element attacks

The same day Lilly leveled up, Welf received a Status update.

In addition to the growth of his abilities, he developed a new skill. Having only recently reached Level 2, there was no way he was going to hit Level 3 yet—he wasn’t Bell, after all—but the combat experience he had gained during the expedition had still borne fruit.

Possibly as a by-product of being “tempered” in such extreme conditions, he had developed a skill that enhanced his proficiency with the element of fire,

which meant that any of his magic swords of the same element would become even more potent. Unsurprisingly, Hestia, being inexperienced in battle, was very pleased with these easily understood results.

For Welf, though, these were trivial issues. He had a far higher priority to be happy about.

“My latest magic sword. Please, have a look at it.”

In the third-floor office of the northwest main street branch of *Hephaistos Familia*, Welf was unable to conceal his pride as he presented the weapon to the goddess before him.

It was Shikou-Kazuki, and it had been forged in the Dungeon.

“……”

The goddess who was inspecting it, Hephaistos, narrowed her left eye (her right being covered by an eye patch) and ran her gaze carefully over the length of the blade.

There was no more nerve-racking moment for a smith than this one. It was harrowing. A literal deity of the forge was evaluating his work from a position of utter mastery.

As a matter of course, any artisan would hang on every word of a goddess like Hephaistos, or a god like Goibniu. It was enough that some who were dangled out over the cliff like this never wanted to pick up a hammer again. To smiths, the evaluations these deities gave were the literal word of god.

However, this one time, such anxiety was far from Welf’s mind.

This wasn’t because he expected a favorable response, though. It was because he felt a deep satisfaction in what he had created. Even if it were judged badly, it simply meant that he would have to be prepared to redouble his efforts to reach new heights.

Welf felt only an intense commitment to surpassing himself, having poured his whole being into the magic blade in front of him.

“Goddess, as you now know, Welf forged this magic sword while he was in the Dungeon. The idiot created it in a place of death where he lacked the proper tools and preparation. I ask that you take these trying circumstances into account when you hand down the judgment of your unclouded eye.”

In addition to Hephaistos and Welf, there was a half-dwarf woman in the room as well, her generous bosom wrapped in a strip of white cloth. Resting her chin on her hands while sitting at what was normally Hephaistos’s desk, Tsubaki teased the supplicant even as she spoke up for him with a smile on her lips.

Welf would have been far more comfortable if Tsubaki wasn’t here for this, but she had absolutely insisted on being present. As Welf stared daggers at her after she’d mentioned details he would’ve preferred not to be shared at this very moment, Hephaistos finally spoke, breaking her silence.

“Indeed, this is no Crozzo Magic Sword. It’s yours—a Welf Magic Sword.” She ran her fingertip along the blade, which already bore the marks of considerable wear after seeing use in the Dungeon. She had undoubtedly noticed already that it had been forged of adamantite.

Hephaistos’s eyes were faintly reflected in the vivid red of the blade, as though to illustrate the essence of Welf’s skill, and most of all, the fire and spirit he’d put into the piece.

The magic weapon was strikingly beautiful.

“So, Goddess—your verdict?” Tsubaki asked, as though to speed the proceedings along.

There was a short pause. Then the master of the forge spoke. “…It’s adequate.”

Something surged within Welf so strongly that he tightly clenched his fist.

That short utterance was all Hephaistos had to say. But it was enough to send Welf’s spirits soaring. His body burned like a furnace. That was how highly he valued the Goddess of the Forge’s words.

Tsubaki’s expression was smug as she watched the two of them, every bit the senior apprentice pleased with the evident progress of her junior.

“…The pinnacle you both strive for is still distant. You must continue to walk the path.” Hephaistos had been nearly expressionless the entire time, but here she finally smiled. She held Shikou-Kazuki out in both hands, and Welf received it with both hands, as though accepting a blessing from his liege lord.

In place of a sheath, he rewrapped the blade in white cloth as he imprinted the heft of the weapon into the palms of his hands, carefully, as though savoring it. Hephaistos looked on fondly, like a guardian deity watching from the heavens.

Then—

“…Ahem,” Hephaistos coughed in a deliberate manner. As though to wipe away the serenely divine expression she’d worn up until that point, her cheeks reddened, and she closed her eyes.

From Welf’s perspective as he stood opposite her, she looked askance, and her mouth worked as though she were trying to force something out.

When she did speak, it was in a rambling manner, her words halting in a most un-Hephaistos-like way. “Well, it’s got its rough and unrefined spots, but you did put your soul into its creation, so…and I suppose that even I, a goddess, would not have imagined that you would come so far in such a short time, so… what I’m saying is…and…just a bit, mind you, really just a bit…I suppose I wouldn’t be remiss to acknowledge your skill…”

As she spoke, the red tint in her cheeks deepened. Tsubaki looked on, grinning.

Welf being Welf, whatever it was Hephaistos was trying to say, he understood the true meaning behind her words.

He clenched his fist in triumph again.

The scarlet-haired, scarlet-eyed goddess opened her eyes and looked back at Welf, returning his smile.

Then, the moment Hephaistos summoned her resolve, he, too, raised his voice to make a statement.

“As promised, I will go out with y—” she began, but—

“Thank you, Goddess!! I will build on this progress, and I swear to craft a blade you will fully approve of!”

Welf spoke so emphatically that it *completely* drowned out what the goddess had been about to say.

Hephaistos froze.

Tsubaki did the same.

And Welf smiled triumphantly. He was absolutely confident that he had understood what it was she *wanted* to say. She would not allow him to stagnate after showing her a piece like this. He ought not to indulge in complacency but rather set his eyes on the next peak to scale. To reach the pinnacle, and to keep the grand promise he held in his heart, he had to continue striving forward.

“If you’ll excuse me!” Welf barked, then turned on his heel. With no regrets whatsoever, he opened the door and left.

All he wanted to do now was head straight to his smithy and begin crafting new weapons.

Behind him, he left Hephaistos and Tsubaki both quite dumbfounded.

After Welf left, the shocked Hephaistos finally raised her voice in a girlish cry. “…Unbelievable!”

Her cheeks were even redder than they had been, her face a tapestry of anger, wounded pride, and frustration. She stared furiously at the doors through which the boy had left and stamped her foot once, adorably.

If a certain younger goddess and dear friend of hers had been there, she would have been shocked.

Beside her, Tsubaki rubbed her forehead and heaved a sigh at the uncharacteristic outburst.

“He’s so thick-headed…He managed to attain such skill, and now weapons are his only love interest,” grumbled the master smith, conveniently ignoring how ironic it was for that line to come from her mouth. “That forge-addicted idiot…”

“Yessss!”

Welf ran through the streets of Orario, his white-fabric-wrapped magic sword slung over his back.

He wore a huge smile across his face as he sped through the alleys, taking great leaping strides, yelling loudly enough to startle the demi-humans he passed. The joy he’d hid and hid and hid from Hephaistos and Tsubaki was finally allowed to escape.

He was like a little boy.

This was a side no one ever saw from Welf, as he was usually very careful to act in a manner that he thought was most befitting for a senior member of *Hestia Familia*. If anyone was supposed to act like this, it would be Bell.

If asked whether he was as happy as he seemed, Welf would’ve replied—

Damn right I’m happy!

After all, Hephaistos—the greatest smith he knew—had called his work “adequate”!

Any smith, Welf included, knew perfectly well how difficult that appraisal was to get.

To have a piece deemed “adequate” by the Goddess of the Forge, one who stood atop the very pinnacle of the craft, was an unparalleled honor.

He had been acknowledged, even if it was just a crumb of recognition. Although their first meeting had been a coincidence, the Master of Fire had instantly drawn him in, and now he’d finally scored a point.

“Yes!” he cried out again. As he ran, he gave into the impulse and pushed off the ground with his right leg, leaping into the air. Reason would’ve told him to pull back and restrain himself, but the feeling that wanted to burst from his chest could not be denied.

—He had loathed magic swords. Probably from the very first day he was able to forge them, he had hated them.

But now, finally, if only a tiny bit, he was able to love them.

“I feel like I can finally accept you guys a little.”

He continued to run with no particular destination in mind, and suddenly found himself in Central Park.

Welf slowed his pace, the warm sun bathing him in its light.

As adventurers passed around him, he looked up.

“Phobos…are you watching?” he murmured, gazing up into the expanse of the wide blue sky, thinking of all the moments that had made him who he was. “I’m doing it. I’m really doing it.”

Eventually, the corners of his mouth curled into a mischievous smile.

In the spaces between the clouds, he thought he saw a certain goddess’s face, smiling the same way.

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CHAPTER 5

BLUE FLAME

“Hey, Crozzo, you good-for-nothing runt!”

Welf turned around reluctantly. This was exactly why he hated fancy balls and dinner parties.

The walls and pillars had all been festooned at great expense with so many sparkling embellishments that they hurt the eyes. A swirl of elaborately dressed nobles flowed gracefully across the dance floor to lilting string music. Overhead hung a vast number of magic-stone lights sourced from the Labyrinth City arrayed in a huge chandelier.

It was a lavishly decorated hall, and it was just one part of the huge castle that also boasted sweeping balconies, gardens, and fountains.

This was a royal ball.

“A runt from a disgraced family like yours dares to show his face here? It’s pathetic to see your ilk clinging to past glories. Or were you just hoping to snag some scraps from the banquet?”

A group of young scions from powerful noble families grinned at him unpleasantly. Welf had been forcibly pulled along by two of the duller-looking bullies on the orders of a third boy who looked about ten, which was close to Welf’s age as well. His slim frame was clothed in well-tailored clothes, and he looked down with a sneering, superior gaze.

Welf hated everything about the atmosphere of this ball. Amid a swirl of sparkling dresses and beautiful music, the nobility and royal vassals in attendance sniffed one another’s rumps as they jockeyed for advantage. Behind their flowery language, each and every one of them was licking their chops. Welf was undoubtedly still a child, but this was what his eyes saw.

It was a world of performance and superficiality, without a single trace of

anything sincere or genuine.

The attendees were all sweetness and flattery, and they would all gladly kick over anyone else here in their desperation for personal gain. And any who retired from the vicious political infighting was treated with the scorn and cold mockery that Welf was now receiving.

He had been dragged here by his family, who were eager to curry favor with more powerful nobility, but if it was going to be like this every time, Welf would much rather have preferred to be shut away in a dirty workshop polishing hammers.

The thought occurred to him vividly as he faced the group of boys who'd come to sneer at the only son of the once great, now fallen Crozzo family.

Just as Welf was making a distinctly unnoble grimace, another boy suddenly approached them.

"A son of Hron, ganging up with others just to humiliate one person. Not very seemly."

"L-Lord Marius…?!"

The appearance of Marius, the first son of the nation's king, surprised both Welf and his tormentors alike.

His honey-blond hair and knightly posture told of the fine-featured man he would become. The term *lordling* suited him perfectly.

In addition to the gift of his appearance and his Status, his handling of the unreasonable demands placed upon him by the king and his patron deity alike had begun to distinguish him even at the tender age of twelve. Welf had heard that there was no end to the stream of nobility attempting to flatter their way into his good graces.

It seemed like he had come to stop the bullying, but Welf suspected it was only on a whim.

That said, when he looked at the stoic crown prince who regarded everything surrounding him with annoyance, he had a strange sense that the prince hated this ball as much as he did.

The noble boys had been so startled that they forgot to pay their proper respects, tripping over themselves until they eventually smiled unpleasantly as they seized upon a gambit.

“N-no, Your Highness, this isn’t…Yes, in fact, it’s *his* fault! This runt from an irrelevant smithing family forgot his place. He ought to content himself with playing around at his forge instead of—”

The words were cut off by a fist. Welf had lost his temper and thrown a punch. “I dare you to say another word, bastard!” Welf roared, grabbing the boy by his lapels.

“Nnagh!” yelped the boy, cheek red and nose bleeding from the punch.

As the ladies around them shrieked in alarm, Marius looked on in surprise, but he made no move to stop Welf. He was too busy clamping his mouth shut in an attempt to stifle a laugh.

The other boys immediately jumped into the developing scuffle, but the red-haired boy’s fury could not be quelled. He fought tooth and nail until all three of his attackers cried for mercy.

This was the Kingdom of Rakia, a nation-sized familia ruled by Ares, the God of War.

The royal ball held that night in the capital city of Barva shortly turned into an uproar.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

A deity’s vulgar laughter rang out under the cloudy skies.

Welf, surly and bruised, turned a sour face toward the goddess, who held her sides as she rolled about guffawing.

They were in the rear garden of the shabby Crozzo manor. It was the day after the row at the ball.

“Slugging the son of a nobleman! Turning a ball into a brawl! That’s a first! Heeee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Aw, come off it…What was I supposed to do? They started it!”

From within the house came Welf’s mother’s piecing voice. “Welf! Welf! Where are you?!”

Welf had fled to the garden in an effort to escape the hysterical lecturing he hated so much, and the goddess in front of him snickered in anticipation, as though she’d read his mind.

When she’d asked him what he’d gotten up to this time and he’d reluctantly explained, this had happened.

“Anyway, Phobos—if we make noise, Mom’s gonna find me. Stop, c’mon.”

“Aw, sorry, sorry. Still, you’re a real funny guy, Welf. Not like the rest of the Crozzos.”

Her lustrous black hair fell down to her waist. It went without saying that Welf had to look up in order to meet her gaze, but disregarding the fact that he was still a child, the slender goddess was fairly tall for a woman—nearly 170 celch. She was clad in odd robes the same black color as her hair.

While it wasn’t clear what her actual age was, the goddess appeared as a beautiful young woman—although her looks clashed terribly with the vulgar speech and laughter that seemed to be typical of certain deities.

“If there were more like you, getting fallen-nobility duty foisted off on me wouldn’t be so boring!”

Her name was Phobos.

She was a respected goddess, as well as the patron goddess responsible for the Crozzo house. She was also an uninhibited, freewheeling figurehead who’d been assimilated by the Kingdom of Rakia.

To make a long story short, she’d fought a defensive war against Rakia’s military—which was to say, *Ares Familia*—and lost. And as losers of a War Game had to accede to the wishes of the winner, she’d had to become a vassal-god of Ares, God of War.

Within the vast population of the Kingdom of Rakia, it was the possession of a Falna that separated civilians from combatants. The former accounted for the

large majority of the population, but the soldiers and knights who constituted the latter still easily numbered near a hundred thousand. It was quite impossible for Ares to handle all the Falna conferments and Status updates himself.

That was where vassal-gods like Phobos came in. They were his hands and feet, the ones who brought people at the fringe into the familia.

While the position of the fallen Crozzo clan as part of Rakia had in some sense not changed, they now all bore Phobos's blessing as members of *Phobos Familia*. It was a system often found in national-level familias.

"…If you're that bored, go stage a coup or something. Gods love that kind of thing, right?"

"Yeah, I wish somebody would. It's great watching stuff like that from the sidelines. But getting a bunch of children worked up and keeping them in order while making sure Ares doesn't notice would be a real hassle."

Even if they'd lost a war and had been subjugated, there was no telling what a capricious deity might do.

Therefore, in order to prevent rebellion, all of Rakia's military might—its Level 2 and Level 3 knights and officers, and the entirety of the royal household guard—was under Ares's direct control. While he might rely on the help of other deities, the notoriously stubborn (and, some would say, muscle-headed) Ares was personally attended by well over ten thousand of these troops. Meanwhile, his vassal-gods were only ever responsible for the lowest-Status holders and weakest fighters.

Moreover, whenever he heard that any of his vassal-gods' charges had become especially strong or clever, he immediately had them convert into *Ares Familia*.

In other words, rising to any sort of power in Rakia also entailed receiving the blood of its founding father—Ares, God of War. And the Crozzo clan itself had aspirations of returning to prominence by riding Ares's coattails.

"Still, you're a strange one, talking about coups and whatnot so casually. Hee-hee."

The Crozzo clan had once provided magic swords of vast power to the ruling family, but with the royals now a shadow of their former selves, and with the Crozzos cursed besides, they could no longer produce the fabled weapons. Just as the boys from the previous night's ball had said, they passed their days clinging to the tatters of their former glory.

Welf found his family's obsession with status to be unseemly, and he was uninterested.

He had his own goal.

"I'm going to be a smith. It doesn't matter if the gods or kings or whatever above me change. Hey!…Stop! Stop messing up my hair!"

Phobos had wrapped her arms around Welf, who hadn't had his growth spurt yet, and was affectionately tousling his hair. Her immature demeanor felt somehow incongruous given her seductively narrow, bewitching eyes. Welf was unlike the rest of the Crozzo family, and she couldn't help but fuss over and tease him.

To Welf, meanwhile, she was not so much as a goddess to be worshipped as she was some combination of a mischievous friend, a bad influence, and an irritating older sibling.

"Oh, by the way, Welf, Garon was talking about doing some tempering today," said Phobos after toying with him for a while, as though she'd just remembered.

She wasn't voluptuous *per se*, but Welf was still turning red at the sensation of her soft chest pressing against him through the black material of her robes. The moment he heard her absentminded words, though, his eyes widened. "Wha…? Why didn't you say so sooner?!" he shouted.

He squirmed free of her and sprinted from the garden.

"Good luck, Welf!"

"Didn't ask you, stupid goddess!" said Welf, but there was a smile on his face. He waved at her with both hands as he ran, acting every bit a boy his age, which was quite removed from the noble he had been raised to be.

The goddess grinned as she watched him disappear around the corner of the mansion.

Welf made straight for an old, weathered building distinctly detached from the main residence.

The Crozzo workshop was just as shabby as their dilapidated old mansion, but Welf didn't mind the smithy's cramped spaces. The sharp smell of iron, the soot-smeared walls—all of it was familiar and comforting. The furnace was old, but it still produced a hot flame. Here he could forget the chains of nobility.

He took off his fine, well-tailored noble's clothes and changed into his work clothes, then stepped into the workshop's interior.

"Gramps! Pop!"

There were only two other people in the workshop, both wearing the same work clothes he was: his grandfather, Garon Crozzo, and his father, Vil Crozzo. Garon had white hair and a beard, while Vil had long brown hair that he tied back. Hearing Welf's greeting, both turned to look.

"Welf, how many times have I told you not to address us so? When are you going to start acting like a proper noble? And I heard that while I was away, you were apparently involved in some scuffle at the ball?"

"That was because they called our work 'playing around at the forge'—"

"Silence! I will not tolerate such childish displays in the presence of the king! We are fortunate that Lord Marius saw fit to smooth things over for us…"

Welf's father, Vil, was rigid in his adherence to the rules of the nobility.

As the current head of the family, he had sworn to see it restored, and he insisted on maintaining the appearance of a noble smithing family from his wife on down, under duress if necessary. Welf found it all terribly constricting.

But apparently the king's first son had, owing to some whimsy, interceded on Welf's behalf and absolved him of blame for the incident at the ball.

"Enough, Vil. Welf is here. It's time to start."

Vil glared at the boy's downcast, chagrined face, but reluctantly acceded to Garon. "…Very well."

Welf's grandfather, who'd abdicated his position as the head of the family, nonetheless had a build sturdy enough that no one could detect any hint of old age about him. His posture was rigidly straight, as though he had a spine of iron, and his facial expression was always stern.

Garon was no nobleman but a *smith*, Welf thought, which was why he'd just saved him from further scolding.

Welf smiled as he watched from behind as his grandfather approached the furnace. He followed his father to take up his place beside the two men.

"—Hn!"

Clang! Clang!

The tempering began, amid sparks and the sound of striking iron.

The furnace glowed red, illuminating the dim workshop.

Despite the murderous heat scorching his face and the beads of sweat that rolled down his back, Welf was wholly engaged as his father and grandfather's apprentice.

Both his father and grandfather bore Phobos's Blessing, and the sound of their blows was clear and strong. Despite their Ability giving them enough strength to forge weapons on their own without needing to take turns striking hammer blows, the two of them were stubbornly working a single piece of metal together.

With Welf joining Vil and Garon, three generations combined their power to forge a single blade.

With a fearsomely serious face, Vil spoke to Welf as he brought his hammer down. "Listen, Welf. You must listen to the voice of the iron and bend your ear to its tone. Feel the mind of the hammer. If you don't, you'll never forge a blade properly. We must always strive to make weapons worthy of replacing the magic swords of Crozzo."

It was always his father who said such things. Vil had staked his life on

attempting to restore the family by the crafting of weapons that could substitute for the fabled Crozzo's Magic Swords.

While his true wish was still the restoration of the family as nobility, his father's intentions and emotions here were sincere, and Welf nodded after listening intently.

When Welf watched his father as he tended to the tempering, he felt respect and love.

Meanwhile, his taciturn grandfather was somehow able to embody the meaning of smithing even with his broad back turned.

"Welf, the tongs."

"Yes, sir!"

As he single-mindedly worked the iron, Welf was learning all sorts of things from him. The same went for Vil. The family had long since lost the art of creating Crozzo's Magic Swords when Garon had dedicated himself to the craft of smithing in an attempt to create weapons of the finest caliber.

"Listen to the voice of the iron. Bend your ear to its tone. Feel the mind of the hammer."

These words had originally been Garon's, and Vil inherited them from him. Welf had heard them from his grandfather only once, as he'd brought his hammer down like a man possessed.

Welf had known of Garon and Vil and the art of the smith before he'd known what a weapon was. Since before he could remember. He couldn't help but be entranced with the weapons their passion and dedication created—those tempered blades and keen reflections.

When he saw a certain knight wielding one of his grandfather's pieces, Welf's whole body felt hot. Could a wielder and their stance, the union of weapon and person, really be elevated to such a level?

He wanted to become a smith himself.

He wanted to become a smith and create a masterpiece.

He wanted to see that masterpiece wielded by someone of the highest skill.

The compulsion burned within him. A longing, a need, a hope.

Welf had carried those feelings within him even back when he was tiny.

“…Welf, try a strike.”

“Wha…? C-can I really, Gramps?!” Thus far, Welf had only ever been allowed to do the most menial assistant work. This would be the first time he was ever allowed to hold a hammer at the forge.

With a silent look, his stern grandfather told him to proceed.

His sweat-soaked father smiled, too.

Welf grinned brightly, and it almost looked like he was going to cry.

He grasped the hammer, which looked far too heavy for his skinny, childish arms, and approached the anvil where the red-hot metal waited.

Welf brought the hammer down, knowing he would never forget this day.

A sad little clank rang out. It was a far cry from the clear, pealing strikes of his father and grandfather, but he’d put all his strength into the hammer as it fell.

He would be a smith, too. With his father and grandfather, he would make legendary weapons that surpassed even Crozzo’s Magic Swords.

At that moment, Welf still believed in this future.

The fated day arrived on Welf’s tenth birthday.

“Okay, it’s time to receive my Blessing!”

In a room in the Crozzo mansion. Welf was about to receive his Falna from Phobos.

The inscription of a Falna on his tenth birthday was being done at Garon’s direction. He believed that Welf needed to understand hardship as a craftsman before receiving his strength-enhancing Status.

As Welf, Garon, and other members of the family looked on, Welf sat in a chair stripped to the waist while Phobos dripped ichor onto his back and etched the hieroglyphs into his skin.

Welf Crozzo

Level 1

Strength: I0 Defense: I0 Dexterity: I0 Agility: I0 Magic: I0

Magic

( )

Skill

Blood of Crozzo

- Ability to produce magic swords
- Can increase potency of magic swords during creation

As she gazed at the rows of hieroglyphs on the boy's back—including the same skill, Blood of Crozzo, that others in his family had—Phobos slowly and quietly spoke. "…Now, Welf. Go and forge a magic sword."

"Huh? That's impossible. The whole family was cursed by a spirit—"

"Just try, boy."

His father and grandfather had drilled the ways of the smith's craft into him right up until this very day. It had been a year since he'd first held a hammer, and now that he'd received his own Status, he was sure that he could forge a weapon on his own.

Garon and Vil both had wary expressions on their faces, but the black-haired goddess only smiled a faint smile. "…Just do what you can."

Thus ordered by the deity, Welf grimly set himself to the task.

And then everything changed.

"I don't believe it…"

Vil's field of vision was filled by scorched earth from which rose black smoke.

They were in a field outside the capital city of Barva.

In his hand was a crimson-bladed shortsword whose blade had just then broken with a sharp *crack*.

As the fragment of blade hit the ground at his feet, Vil and the rest of the family who'd come with him were dumbstruck.

It was the test of the shortsword—the magic shortsword—that Welf had forged.

Flickers of flame lingered everywhere. The field had been reduced to ash.

The symbol of the family's lost glory, the Crozzo's Magic Sword, had returned. A great, mad cry arose. "Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

A stunned, shocked Welf was there, too, and he looked down at the broken blade fragment on the ground with eyes full of tears.

"Welf, forge a magic sword!!"

After they returned to the mansion, Welf found himself surrounded by family. Relatives he didn't recognize, his mother, and even Vil all chorused the same words.

The young Welf was frozen where he stood.

"This will restore the Crozzo clan! Only your blades can do this!" Vil faced Welf and held him by the shoulders, his eyes wide and wild. Vil seemed not to notice the pained face of the child as he demanded more weapons.

"Wait, please…! Weren't we trying to make dependable weapons worthy of the Crozzo name?!"

"We don't need them anymore! If we have you and your magic swords, the Crozzo family will rise again!"

"Father, no! I…I don't want to make weapons that will abandon their masters…weapons that will always break! Please!"

"I'll have none of your foolish nonsense, boy!"

Struck across his face, Welf fell to the floor, where he stayed, staring vacantly down.

The man who'd poured his heart and soul into the task of creating a substitute for the lost art of Crozzo's Magic Swords was no longer there. What

remained was the descendant of a line of cursed magic smiths, obsessed with his lineage.

“We’ll regain the honor of the Crozzos, Welf! Now, forge tools that will please the king!”

Welf’s balled fists shook terribly at that voice, those words.

Amid the shouting of the gathered family, only Garon was silent. Welf peered up at him beseechingly.

Garon looked into his grandson’s trembling eyes, his expression terrifyingly blank as he spoke. “Welf…forge a magic sword.”

All strength left Welf’s body like an escaped breath.

It was replaced with scarlet flames of rage. He felt despair, betrayal, and a violent indignation.

That day, Welf was broken by his father, his grandfather, and the entire Crozzo family.

Late that night, Welf was in his bedroom, quietly and secretly packing his things, when Phobos appeared.

“Are you running away from home, Welf? From your whole country?”

“What do *you* want?” said Welf, looking over his shoulder, a feral gleam in his eyes. It had been this goddess’s instruction to him that had triggered all of this.

Although the truth would have surely come out no matter how he tried to hide it, the young Welf couldn’t help but resent her.

“I’m sorry I stole your home from you. I really am, Welf.”

“…”

“On the other hand, if you’d stayed ignorant—or, no, if you hadn’t accepted it, you would have eventually regretted it. That’s why I told you what I did.” She giggled. “Forgive me, eh?” Phobos regarded the grief-stricken child, wearing the same grin she always had.

Welf held his tongue for a moment, decided not to bother with a retort, and returned to his packing. “Don’t try to stop me.”

“I’m not gonna. I’m actually here to help you.”

Welf stopped and looked back at her again. “…What?”

“Just what I said. I’m going to get you out of this kingdom.”

“What are you getting at…?”

“It’s my last bit of meddling in my dear little child’s life. Call it atonement. Plus, it’s not like a kid is gonna make it past the outer walls of Barva on his own.”

Phobos walked up to the now-silent Welf with a smile and put her arms around his shoulders a bit too familiarly. “Leave it to me, okay?”

Welf didn’t know what her divine intentions were, but what she said was true.

There was only a slim chance that a child who knew nothing of life save his existence as an impoverished noble and his skill as a smith could find a way past the country’s border guards. His ecstatic family was surely even now telling the whole royal court about the child who could forge Crozzo’s Magic Swords.

If he wanted to leave the country, he had no choice but to accept Phobos’s help.

“Welf. Take a magic sword with you.”

“I don’t need one. I’ll *never*—”

“You don’t know what you’re going to run into, do you? It’s just in case. Could you for once just listen to what your goddess is telling you, please?”

Welf had forged two magic swords—one for testing, and one to present to the royal family.

Phobos’s words made him realize that he loathed the idea of leaving his very first creation behind, to be used by someone else. He grimaced and nodded reluctantly.

“I’ll use my contacts and make it so you can pass through the checkpoint. It’ll

be tomorrow. Got that?”

“All right…” he said, nodding at her explanation of the plan.

Welf didn’t know what was possessing Phobos to do this, but he somehow got the sense that he could trust the words of his mischievous old friend.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” The god Ares’s laughter boomed. He was giving Vil an audience on the castle’s highest floor, in the throne room. “Did you hear, Martinus? Someone who can forge magic swords has appeared in the Crozzo family!”

“But Lord Ares, the Crozzo clan still suffers from a spirit’s curse. Even if these swords hold their form now, there’s every chance they’d snap in an instant the moment they see real battle…They’re surely defective,” offered the aging king.

“Hmm, that’s also true. Well, we’ll keep our expectations low, then!” said Ares with a decisive nod that shook his mane of golden hair.

The two men laughed airily as from the shadows an exhausted, exasperated Prince Marius looked on.

Marius beckoned over one of the spies he employed to serve as his eyes and ears, as though stockpiling himself the worries his father and Ares ought to be taking seriously. “What news of the Crozzos?”

“Highness…it seems that the one with the ability is Vil Crozzo’s son, Welf Crozzo.”

The bright young prince took in the report and remembered the face from the royal ball a year earlier. “Welf Crozzo…ah, so it’s him.”

Though his eyes were a different color, they’d shone with a gleam he recognized from his own. The red-haired boy, like the prince, had doubts about the environment he lived in.

“…Well, we ought to increase security, at least. Send knights to the checkpoint.”

“Damn!”

Rain had started to fall from the dark clouds that covered the night sky.

Clad in traveling robes, Welf ignored the alarm whistle that sounded as he sprinted for the castle town gate.

In all, Barva was surrounded by four sets of walls.

Thanks to Phobos’s maneuvering, he’d gotten past the first two, which separated the royalty and nobility, the military, and the commoners’ residential areas, but at the gate of the third wall, he’d been discovered by soldiers.

He didn’t know when it had changed, but checkpoint inspections had clearly gotten much stricter.

“Dammit, how’d this happen…?!”

He’d managed to break through the checkpoint with the power of his Status, and now he raced through the castle town as the rain came down in sheets.

Welf ran, trying to keep his breathing quiet. The shortsword at his hip clattered raucously, sounding impossibly loud in his ear. As he got closer to the last wall, he saw its iron gate was tightly shut, and—

“Haaalt!”

—Knights!

Welf’s eyes went wide at the sight of three men, fully clad in armor. These Level 2 knights were Rakia’s elite. They were deadly swordsmen, far beyond anything Welf could manage.

They drew their swords menacingly. Welf’s brow furrowed, and he put his hand on the hilt of his shortsword.

He charged headlong at the knights and the gate behind them, drawing the scarlet blade.

And then he swung it—

“Blaze!!”

—and invoked the power of its magic.

“__”

The sight stopped time for both the waiting knights and Welf himself.

What had emanated from the blade could only be described as a torrent of flame.

The resulting inferno engulfed both the knights and the gate with a roar.

A blast.

A deafening sound.

And an explosion.

The roar of an inferno and the cries of people who’d heard the commotion began to fill the castle town, echoing in the rainy night.

At the end of a stunned Welf’s vision was the ruined wall and, beyond it in the black of night, the outside world.

And strewn there among the rubble were the critically injured knights.

“Nnh, ngaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!” Welf howled into the darkness as he dropped the crumbling fragments of what was left of the magic sword. “Is this…is this power?!”

Rain struck Welf’s face and rolled down his cheeks like so many tears.

From the remains of the ruined section of wall rose both smoke and brilliant tongues of flame that refused to go out despite the rain.

Normally, if someone like Welf had taken on those knights, he would’ve been overwhelmed in an instant. But the Crozzo’s Magic Sword had turned the tables—the blasphemous weapon let a powerless child defeat three stalwart knights.

Long ago, such weapons had caused the fall of the family of smiths who’d made them.

Welf shed tears at the sight of the knights’ badly scorched swords. “Is this really what you want from us?! Do we really have to make these things for you?!”

The knights’ backup arrived in confusion, chasing Welf as he leaped past the ruined outer wall. He disappeared into the darkness, screaming and sobbing his

rage at the night sky.

That night, he made an oath on his pride as a smith and his sense of personal responsibility.

—I will never forge a magic sword again.

Having made his escape, Welf arrived at a small copse of trees not too far from the city.

The rain had stopped.

Soaked to the bone, he pulled back his hood, whereupon a certain black-haired goddess appeared from among the trees' shadows.

"Looks like you managed to get away after all, Welf."

"Phobos…"

Phobos slowly approached him, having arrived at their meeting spot first.

The exhausted boy had a scabbard—but no magic sword.

Phobos noticed this and wordlessly narrowed her eyes. "Welf, come. I have a parting gift for you before you set out."

It was his first and last Status update from her. Explaining as much, Phobos circled around behind Welf.

Welf was wrung out both physically and mentally from the drama of the night's escape, so he silently did as instructed.

He sat down on a rock like a limp rag doll, and Phobos rolled up his clothes.

She traced her slender finger over the boy's back, well-muscled from his labor as a smith.

"It's done. And Welf—I've dissolved your pact with me, too."

"…?"

"It means you can convert to another deity whenever you like. From here on out, you can join whichever familia you please." She explained that she hadn't

sealed his Status away but had rather left his improved abilities as they were, while opening up the possibility of entering another contract with a different deity.

To convert.

“However, my ichor will remain. In other words, I was your first,” she said playfully.

Welf had been taciturn thus far, but Phobos’s teasing brought a bit of his old self back to the surface. “…Don’t be weird.”

The goddess giggled, amused. “Sometime today, a caravan will pass by this stand of trees. Get a ride from them. And once you’re clear of Rakia, be free.”

“What’s…gonna happen to you? If you go back to Barva now, they’ll blame you for…”

“Who’s gonna fix the mess you made, if not me? The Crozzo clan and Rakia alike are definitely losing their minds right now.”

“…”

“Don’t worry, I’ll play Vil and the rest of them, tell them I put you up to the whole thing. That it was all a big game for me. Ares is an idiot, so he’ll buy it.”

Welf’s heart was thrown into confusion by Phobos’s words and by the look in her eyes as she gazed at him. “…Why? Why would you go so far for me…?”

“Call it the whim of a god. Other than that…maybe that’s just what I do for my most adorable children?” As she cocked her head, her long black hair fell from the nape of her neck. “It makes me happy, y’know, to have stupid little kids like you around. Plus, I’m sick of slogging around under Ares. I don’t even care anymore if they send me away from the mortal plane.”

Welf wondered if that was truly everything on the capricious goddess’s mind. But one thing was certain—in that place, in that moment, he saw the essence of divinity within her.

“Don’t worry. Even if I get shipped back to the heavens, I’ll always be watching over you.” She giggled.

“…Just mind your own business.”

Then—

“Go, Welf. Live as you like. The Crozzo family, Rakia, they’ll just hold you back.”

Phobos neither embraced him nor stroked his head, but Welf saw on her face a gentle smile he’d never seen before.

“See ya.”

“…Yeah.”

Those were the last words they spoke to each other.

Several days later—

From the direction of Rakia’s capital city of Barva, a huge pillar of light shot into the sky.

—I’m sorry. Thank you.

Atop a small hill well outside Rakia’s borders, the boy looked up at that shaft of light alone as a single tear rolled down his cheek.

“There sure are some lively-looking ones, aren’t there?” came the sound of a beautiful woman’s voice as her eye took in the sight of a smithy with a blazing furnace.

In the smithy, there was a redheaded boy arguing vehemently with several adult opponents over who would get to use the furnace first.

“Aah, Goddess! It’s been so long since you visited, and yet here we are, greeting you with such an unsightly—”

“Well, that’s just how smiths are. I rather like it, personally. So, who is he?”

“He just showed up one day and begged to be allowed to work for room and board. He gave his name, too, but I reckon it’s a fake. He’s not a half-bad smith, either, so he’s been impossible to wrangle.”

They were in Zolingam, city of sword smiths.

A certain goddess had come here to work on a contract and was visiting the smithy of a colleague. Her fine features were partially obscured by an eye patch over her right eye; her left eye narrowed as she watched the boy closely, studying him as he concentrated on the furnace (the one he'd won the right to use).

"Hey, Chief—that boy, would you let me have him?"

"Huh? I mean, I've got no qualms about it, but…do you really want him?"

"Sure, why not?" The goddess grinned and waited for the boy to finish working with the furnace.

After he'd completed a still-rough blade, she approached him. "You there, boy. What's your name?"

The sweaty-faced boy looked up. His expression wary at the sudden appearance of a deity, he answered. "…Welf."

"Just Welf? What's your family name?"

"I…don't want to say."

"Ah. Well, then, Welf, would you like to join my familia?"

"Huh…?" The boy looked at the smiling goddess blankly. "…Shouldn't you introduce yourself before making an invitation like that?"

"Goodness, I'm sorry. I forgot." The goddess cheerfully apologized to the still-dubious boy.

And then—

"My name is—"

The boy met a red-haired, red-eyed goddess, and he'd been led to her by none other than his mischievous old friend.

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INTERLUDE

ELVEN UNREST

“““Cheers!”””

White foam splashes extravagantly as a dozen or more of our cups, each generously filled with wine or ale or juice, collide in a toast, and then we all gulp—or sip—our drinks.

We’re in The Benevolent Mistress.

It’s evening; the sun has just gone down, and the tavern that stands along the western main street is as prosperous as ever. The interior is lively and full of patrons, all suffused in the warm glow of its magic-stone lamps. Now that I’ve made it back from the expedition, the clamor raised by the drunken dwarves and prums is strangely comforting.

We are holding a banquet. A drinking party, really.

Hestia Familia, *Miach Familia*, and *Takemikazuchi Familia* are all here, as well as an assortment of other familiar faces.

“Congratulations on getting out of your cast, Mr. Bell!” says Lilly enthusiastically.

I manage a nervous smile. “Ha-ha-ha…Um, thanks?”

This is actually the second party we’ve thrown since returning from the expedition. The first was a homecoming celebration held in our familia’s headquarters. Miach and Takemikazuchi were there to raise their cups with us.

The second—this one—is in celebration of my cast coming off.

To be honest, I did feel a bit strange about using that as a reason for yet another party…but I’ve been craving Mia’s cooking, so I suppose it’s all right. Even Lilly okayed it, and she’s ruthless with managing our finances.

Incidentally, our goddess is, as usual, at her part-time job.

“Don’t worry, we’ll handle cheering up poor, dejected Hestia, so you should all go and enjoy yourselves as familias!” was what Takemikazuchi had said. Apparently, he, along with Miach, Hephaistos, Hermes, and Demeter were all going to have a gods’ night out. He’d said something about there being “a lot to discuss.”

“Wow, this is tasty. It’s a little expensive, but this Benevolent Mistress is a nice tavern,’” says Daphne, licking her lips after sampling a bite of the food.

“You’d never been? It’s pretty famous among adventurers,” says Welf.

“It is, but…for some reason, Apollo had some kind of a problem with it. My old familia never came here.”

Everyone’s enjoying themselves. Lilly and Nahza are trading jokes as they quibble over potion shopping—although their eyes aren’t smiling much. Mikoto, Chigusa, and Haruhime are having a grand old time reminiscing about the past, with the members of *Takemikazuchi Familia* joining in. No doubt they’re trying to steal back some time with Haruhime now that she’s officially joined our familia.

I look on as Ouka watches them quietly and fondly like an older brother, not interrupting. A flush rises to my cheeks.

…I suppose Loki Familia *won’t come…*

I look around our table, and then my gaze scans across the rest of the tavern. I find myself hunting for the strongest familia in the city.

And a certain golden-haired girl.

Ever since the Xenos incident, and having survived so many adventures, I can’t help but want to see Aiz again.

I wouldn’t say that I want her to see me now that I’ve grown so much, exactly, but…I want to know where I stand. I want to confirm certain things—by seeing her, the person I look up to so much.

I do have a promise from her to teach me combat techniques again, but the truth is I’m not sure how to approach her about it.

“Hmm? What’s the matter, Bell? Whatcha looking around for?” asks Welf.

“Oh, uh…I was just wondering if there’ll be enough room in the tavern if *Loki Familia* shows up to the party. Don’t Aiz and the rest of them come here pretty often?” I say, instinctively glossing over my real thoughts.

Sitting next to me, Welf just gives an easy smile. “Ah. It’ll probably be all right, yeah? Elegia’s pretty soon, after all.”

“‘Elegia’…?” I repeat the unfamiliar word.

“It’s the Guild folks who do the preparation for it. I figure they’ve told *Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia* and the like to behave themselves for a while,” says Welf, then orders another round of ale for himself.

I cock my head, and I’m about to ask more about Elegia, when Cassandra—who hadn’t been participating in our conversation thus far—suddenly cuts in like she finally summoned the courage to do so. “Bell! Er…H-how is your left arm feeling?”

“Oh! Miss Amid said that it was coming along nicely. There’s no pain or stiffness now, at least.”

“I-is that so…? I’m glad…” Hearing my answer, Cassandra smiles. She’s sitting diagonally across from me, and she stares down—is she nervous about something?—into the cup clasped in both her hands.

I open and close my left hand repeatedly, satisfying the urge to make sure that what I just said is true.

Amid did ask me to continue to refrain from combat for a while, but at this rate, perhaps the day when I can reenter the Dungeon isn’t far off.

I realize this is a good opportunity to give my appreciation to both Welf and Cassandra. “Oh, right—Welf, Cassandra, thank you for earlier.”

I’m talking about the Goliath Scarf that they fashioned for me during the expedition.

All joking aside, without that particular piece of equipment, I wouldn’t have been able to fight the Juggernaut, and I probably wouldn’t be sitting here at this table.

Welf smirks at my words of honest gratitude and waves them off, while

Cassandra's eyes widen, and she brightens. "Of course!" she says.

I could swear that there are tears in the corners of her eyes, and her beautiful smile gives me a pang in my chest, which I keep to myself. I chide myself for what feels like infidelity and can't help but smile wryly.

"Still, Ms. Daphe and Ms. Cassandra—to think that you both leveled up! Congratulations!" says Lilly.

"Ah, th-thank you very much!" says Cassandra with a sincere bow.

"With this, our familia will have two people at Level Three. I'll look forward to your achievements, which will be more than worth the tax we'll have to pay for that, Daphne, Cassandra…" says Nahza with a giggle and a fishy smile.

Daphne isn't having any of it. "Please refrain from such tiresome blackmail, Captain."

That's right—both Daphne and Cassandra leveled up during this latest expedition.

While I'd been wandering in the deep levels, Lilly and the others had tirelessly continued their adventuring. Defeating the floor boss of the lower levels with such a small party was already a tremendous achievement.

Of course I owed them a debt for having caused such trouble while I was off on my own, but what they accomplished is incredible to me separate from that. I might be feeling a bit forlorn over it—over not getting to adventure with everybody else.

In any case, this party is also to celebrate all the people who recently leveled up.

"You say that, Lilliluka, but you leveled up, too, didn't you? Congratulations!" says Daphne with a smile.

"Oh, no, that was only possible due to your guidance, Ms. Daphne. Thank you," says Lilly, bowing her head like someone from the Far East. She's also sitting on her knees, perhaps owing to Mikoto and Haruhime's influence. Ouka and his familia see this and smile awkwardly.

The members of that adventuring party had leveled up one after another—

which only shows just how brutal the expedition had been. There probably weren't many expeditions that could compare.

"Hee-hee, don't leave out everything *we* did, meow!"

Ahnya and Chloe abandoned their work entirely and assumed poses that seemed suspiciously rehearsed as they cut into the conversation.

"That's right, meow! Who could forget the moving scene when I appeared so gorgeously in front of the wounded boy hero, and he pledged an oath to me, 'Oh, my darling Chloe, my butt is yours forever!' What passion!"

I frown at Chloe's retelling of an event I have no memory of, when a human carrying a stack of used plates appears with an exasperated expression on her face. "By the time we arrived, everything was pretty much over. I don't know what you two dumb cats have to brag about."

""What'd you say?!"" the catgirls hiss in chorus.

Ahnya and Chloe are about to continue their indignant rant when Mia's voice rings out from behind the tavern's counter. "Stop lazing around, all of you!"

Evidently all three of them had been enduring Mia's terrible scoldings ever since they'd skipped out on their shifts at the tavern to come to our aid.

The strength of Mia's baleful gaze makes all three girls' shoulders flinch, and they hurry back to work, half-crying """"Sorry!""""

Since it was *our* rescue they'd come to, I can't help but feel a little bad for them…

"Please don't worry about it too much, Bell. Ahnya and the others knew what they were getting into," says Syr, as though reading my mind while she brings more food to our table.

"Syr…"

"I'm just happy that everybody made it back safely." She leans down and whispers conspiratorially into my ear. "You know, I went to see some adventurers I know and begged them to save you, too," she says with a giggle. "But it wasn't necessary."

"I'm…sorry you went to so much trouble!" I say guiltily. I really did make a lot

of people worry about me.

I scratch my head and smile abashedly, when Syr asks me another question.

“Did something happen with Lyu?”

Snap.

It’s the sound of everything around me freezing solid. And everything around Lilly, too.

…Lyu’s been avoiding me.

Maybe. Probably. Most likely. Definitely.

Even after I ended up with a cast on my arm, I’ve visited The Benevolent Mistress many times, but every time Lyu avoids making eye contact with me, and somehow naturally seems to end up walking right by me and then stays hidden in the kitchen.

It’s like she’s trying to put distance between us, and I haven’t been able to follow her.

“Ever since she came back to the tavern, she started acting odd whenever you come up in conversation, Bell,” says Syr with a smile, her gaze boring a hole into me. I’m starting to sweat, for some reason.

I plaster an awkward smile onto my face, and after what must have seemed like a suspiciously long pause, I nervously manage a reply. “Odd, you say…?”

“Quite odd, yes.”

“Odd, like how?”

“Like that.” Still holding a stack of wooden bowls, Syr indicates a direction.

There’s Lyu.

Just like Ahnya and the others, she’s briskly moving between tables as she performs her duties as a waitress. There’s nothing particularly strange about anything she’s doing…except she takes great pains to avoid looking at our table.

Or rather, she refuses to look at *me*.

As she busily takes orders, she’ll face our direction when she needs to, and

even get close to the table…but the one time I seem to enter her field of vision, she spins quickly around to face the other direction. It's sudden enough that she draws looks of surprise from some other customers.

If she'd been just looking the other way, or averting her eyes, it would've stood out less. But the agility with which she'd turned herself bodily away made the awkwardness that much worse.

If anything, it seemed like the kind of defensive move you'd make if you were alone in the Dungeon.

The whirlwind motion makes her skirt flare out each time she does it, briefly revealing her black tights.

Under Syr's close observation, a fresh wave of sweat breaks out on my face.

"Lyu! Go take these to the kid's table!" Mia leaves several plates on the counter and gives Lyu a direct order.

"…"

Lyu is silent for a moment, and then without so much as the slightest change in her expression, loads herself up easily with the plates. She then heads directly for our table.

"L-Lyu, listen…"

"Here is your steak."

"Do—do you have a second?"

"Do you have an order?"

"Eh…?"

"Ale?"

"U-um…"

"Ale it is, then."

"I—I just want to talk…"

"Thank you for your order."

This…can't be called a conversation.

Lyu leaves me flustered in her wake as she strides away.

Unsurprisingly, the others seem to have noticed what's going on, and Welf, Mikoto, and Haruhime, as well as Nahza and Ouka and their respective familias, all look at me.

Lilly leans in close to me. "…Mr. Bell, did something happen between you and Ms. Lyu?" she asks.

I flinch away, answering honestly. "W-well, I'm not sure…so much has happened that I sorta haven't been able to get it out of her…"

The first thing that comes to mind was when I embraced her n-naked…but that was an emergency.

Plus, she'd talked to me normally after I'd come back from the Dungeon. We'd even laughed together, atop that high, high place where the sky had been so beautiful.

Had I done something to Lyu to make her so angry?

We'd joined forces to escape from the deep levels. We'd made such a connection then.

Was I the only one who felt that way?

"…"

"…Syr?"

I notice Syr studying me again. Her pale eyes are gazing at me with an almost audible intensity, and then—

Bonk.

She lightly hits my head with the wooden tray she's carrying in both hands. The noise is somehow cute.

"Huh? Wha—?" I press my hand to my head, confused.

"You deserve it," says Syr, closing her eyes and turning on her heel almost childishly. But she also seems unusually mad.

Syr leaves me behind without explaining anything and returns to her work, just as Lyu did.

Lilly watches us with half-lidded eyes, Welf and Daphne pretend not to notice and continue to drink, Mikoto and Chigusa tilt their heads curiously, while Haruhime and Cassandra simply look confused.

Nahza's the only one who says anything. "Ah, youth," she comments, closing her eyes and smiling.

"What do you mean?" asks Ouka, completely straight-faced.

I don't have time to worry about their reactions, though. All I can do is watch Lyu go as she disappears into the kitchen.

"I'm taking out the garbage," Lyu said.

She was answered by the hectic sounds of the kitchen as the chefs busily worked: the roar of the flames that seared the meat, the *clop-clop* of knives chopping vegetables. She picked up a bucket full of slop and headed for the back door.

She emerged into a narrow alleyway that had gotten quite dark and made for the trash heap.

That was as far as she got.

As though reaching the limit of her endurance, after maintaining her impassive facial expression for so long, her mask collapsed.

"…That was strange."

Now that she was alone, her deep feelings of shame finally came to the surface. Her cheeks were faintly flushed.

She unconsciously brought her hand to her mouth, as though to hide the heat that rose to her face.

Lyu looked back on her actions with reproach. "That…that was strange of me. I'm being rude to Bell. I'm hurting him…I should apologize."

The kind boy had been completely taken off guard by Lyu's sudden change in demeanor, and he was probably afraid she hated him. She ought to go to him right that instant and apologize with a proper bow.

Please don't worry about it. It's nothing. That was all she had to say.

"But…"

Her heart pounded.

She was often nervous.

She had been acting strangely.

Things that she'd had no trouble doing before, she now couldn't do at all.

She couldn't stand to look at his face.

"…What is *wrong* with me?" she murmured, eyes downcast, arms hanging slack at her side.

Her chest hammered. Her ears burned.

Whenever she caught sight of the boy, her shoulders jumped as she started like a surprised cat.

It was like she really was sick.

…When did this start?

When did she start calling him by his name, "Bell"?

As she made the realization and started to think back over her memories, someone called *her* name—from right behind her.

"Lyu…"

Lyu's sky-blue eyes shot wide open.

How she hadn't noticed him, or why he was there—such questions were trifling matters.

It was Bell.

She knew without turning around.

There was no mistaking his voice.

But Lyu hurtled into a state of utter panic. The fact that she was alone with him was not acceptable.

She spun around and swung the edge of her palm down in a strike. "Who goes

there?!”

“Aaaaah!! It’s me!!” cried Bell as he parried the left-handed attack.

Half a year earlier, when he’d been Level 1, he would have been completely unable to deal with a strike from Lyu. And yet now he did so perfectly, intercepting it with his right arm while protecting his still-healing left.

It was a beautiful movement, momentarily shocking even Lyu despite her being the attacker.

It was obvious growth on his part that proved beyond any doubt his attainment of Level 4.

He’d grasped Lyu’s delicate wrist with just enough force so as not to hurt her.

But—

In that precise moment, far from calming her down, it had the exact opposite effect on her.

A fever seemed to engulf her body, spreading from the place where Bell was touching her wrist.

Her cheeks grew hot and her eyebrows rose on her flushed forehead and she captured Bell’s arm with a speed worthy of the name Gale Wind.

Then she threw him.

“Bwaaah?!” There in the alleyway echoed the sound of a body hitting the ground along with a boy’s alarmed cry.

His Status was undoubtedly higher than hers overall. But when it came to ad hoc tactics, Lyu was a cut—or two or three—above Bell. He hadn’t been prepared for the throw, so it was only logical he’d go down magnificently.

But that wasn’t the real issue.

“…I’m always going too far!” Lyu whined through her cold sweat.

Bell had landed on the cobblestones, of all places.

He was Level 4, but the force of the throw was also that of a Level 4. The cobblestones had clearly cracked from the impact, and Bell was completely stunned.

In some distant corner of her mind, Lyu could hear Kaguya's and Lyra's voices saying, ""You good-for-nothing elf!""

"Lyuuu, just how long does it take to throw away the garbage?" asked an angry voice, which only compounded her problems.

"?!"

Evidently Ahnya and the other waitstaff had grown tired of waiting for Lyu to return. As Ahnya approached, Lyu's facial expression transformed.

She couldn't allow herself to be seen like this. She wasn't sure why, but—she couldn't let it happen.

Lyu quickly gathered Bell up into a classic princess carry.

And then she ran—still tightly holding on to him.

Since coming to Orario, Bell had carried many people like this, but he had never once found himself on the other end. If he'd been awake for it, he probably would've fainted from the shock. But Lyu had no way of knowing that as she sped away with every bit of the prodigious speed that the Gale Wind had been known for.

She abandoned her shift at the tavern and careened through the streets, searching for someplace without any prying eyes.

And then—

"Hah, hah…" she panted. She'd stopped in a narrow street where no one would see them. There were no stalls or little shops here, just stone buildings with short staircases leading into them, and the occasional wooden bench.

Lyu first lay the unconscious Bell down on a bench, then clasped her head at the realization of what she'd just done. "Assault…kidnapping…just how much further am I going to sink…?" she said to Bell's form as waves of self-recrimination crashed over her.

In any case, she had to heal him.

He'd lost consciousness but fortunately wasn't injured. Nevertheless, Lyu used her recovery magic. Trembling nervously, she applied as much healing as she could muster, far more than was necessary. She was, to put it bluntly,

panicking. She did every single thing she could do.

This resulted, ultimately, in Bell's head resting in Lyu's lap.

Why—?!

The good-for-nothing elf had done it again.

It had seemed like the reasonable thing to do. She'd decided to atone by making sure his head wasn't sore when he woke up, using her thigh as a pillow. Just that. That was all she could let herself think.

But then—a pair of jovial-looking animal people walked down the little street, arms over each other's shoulders. They seemed to be quite drunk.

They looked at Lyu and Bell, the scent of alcohol wafting off of them.

"Whoooooo! Young love!"

"Hey, baby! Thanks for the free sh—"

The jeering pair was cut off mid-sentence. The piercing look in the elf's eyes as she stared at them was terrifying.

"Stop howling."

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

"Forget what you saw."

"Wh-wha…?"

"Leave."

""Y-yes, ma'aaaaam!!"" The two scampered away, still arm-over-shoulder.

With the two drunks gone and solitude restored, Lyu's expression became sorrowful again. "…It's so strange. What's been wrong with me lately?"

Above the street hung a slice of the dark-blue night sky. In it were scattered the same stars as her forest home. The tranquility of the space enveloped her as the boy's head rested on her thigh.

"I'm still so difficult all the time…just a troublesome, irritating elf…" Self-loathing swirled within her.

She remembered how she had been when she'd first arrived in Orario.

I'm no different from when I met Astrea and Alize…

That had been another time Lyu's unapproachability had ended up hurting her. Her narrow preconceptions had led her to disgraceful actions, and then, as now, she'd ended up trapped.

"…Bell," she said, desperate not to repeat past mistakes. She reached down to the white hair that fell over his eyes with a gentle touch. Even that was enough to send her heart racing. "I do not hate you, truly…"

There was hardly any point in explaining herself, given the circumstances. But she felt like in that moment, she finally could.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed as she addressed the boy who slept on her lap.

She realized she was glad his hair covered his eyes. If she'd been able to see his closed eyelids, his eyebrows, she was certain she'd become too flustered to explain herself.

She brushed her own hair back behind her long, tapered elven ears and brought her face near to his. Close enough to feel his breath, she whispered, "I could never hate you. In fact…"

That was as far as she got.

Lyu stopped. She said nothing more.

An unnatural silence fell.

At length, she narrowed her pale-blue eyes. "Bell…you're awake, aren't you?"

The boy's face twitched.

Lyu pulled back and fixed a freezing-cold glare on the boy's shameless attempt not to move.

Reluctantly, Bell opened his eyes in resignation.

"…Yes."

Lyu's graceful eyebrows rose in anger. "I believe I told you never, ever to do something like that again…didn't I?" She pinched the cheek of the boy who'd been pretending to be asleep.

“Owwww! I-I’m shorry!!”

It was just like the time they’d wandered the deep levels. After the boy had caused the collapse of the Colosseum, he’d played dead, perfectly hearing every pathetic, girlish noise Lyu had made. Recalling the vivid memory, a fresh wave of shame hit her. Her cheeks were scalding as she looked down reproachfully and put her strength into her pinching fingers.

Bell’s cries rose an octave. “I-I’m sorry…! When I came to, I was like this, and I was confused, and I didn’t know what to say…” He rose out of her lap, rubbing his cheek.

Her thigh seemed to miss the warmth that had rested on it a moment earlier, but that was surely her imagination. “…By the way, when did you actually wake up?”

“Um, just a moment ago, honest…Right when you said ‘In fact…’”

In that case, she was safe. He hadn’t heard her truly fatal slip of the tongue.

Lyu sighed in relief. She put her hand to her chest, not really understanding what that relief might entail.

“So, er, wh-why did you have me on your lap…?”

“…My actions caused you harm, so I felt it was the least I could do…” Lyu explained the details of what had happened as Bell sat next to her, occasionally tilting his head in confusion.

“I see…I think?”

She stared at the alley wall, assiduously avoiding looking at Bell.

“…Er, so, did I really do something to make you so angry, Miss Lyu?”

“Huh?” She finally met his gaze as though compelled to and saw Bell’s nervously smiling face.

“I mean, you haven’t even looked at me ever since…”

He looked somehow sad.

Her chest tightened, and she answered immediately. “No!”

“Huh?”

“Not at all! You haven’t done anything! None of this is…your…” Lyu trailed off, tearing her gaze from Bell’s wide eyes and staring at her feet. After calming the pounding in her chest and carefully working out exactly what she wanted to say, she continued. “I…don’t hate you at all. The problem isn’t anything you did.”

“It…it isn’t…?”

“It’s just that I can’t stand to look at your face.”

“But why?!”

Lyu didn’t realize that her phrasing would provoke misunderstanding or that Bell, who was at a delicate, sensitive age, had been subtly hurt. As she tried to explain, she indeed made no move to meet his gaze.

But neither did she try to move away from where she sat next to him.

“…I’m sorry, Bell.”

“Huh?”

“For all the trouble I’ve caused, including this. I’ve only given you more things to worry over. I’m very, very sorry.”

“N-no, it’s fine! Honestly, I’m just relieved that you don’t hate me! Or more like, I’m happy, or…something…”

“…I see.”

“I mean it!”

“…”

“…”

“…Don’t you need to be getting back to the party?”

“Um…Welf told me to ‘go figure this mess out once and for all,’ so I think I’m okay for a while. What about you, Miss Lyu—will you be all right?”

“If…if you’re talking about Mama Mia, she’s definitely not going to let me off the hook for this, so it’s not like going back right away will make much of a difference.” In other words, it would be all right if they didn’t return until a bit later. Given that, Lyu decided to stay here with Bell a little longer. “Ahnya,

Chloe, Runoa, and even Syr have skipped work before…so if it isn't for too long…"

"Ha-ha-ha…" Bell laughed nervously.

Lyu, too, was finally able to manage a smile.

The two then talked about recent events, recounting to each other what had happened to them since returning from the deep levels.

How was Bell's left arm? What about Lyu's right leg?

Bell talked about Hestia welcoming him home. Lyu talked about eating Mia's cooking.

He was resting up. She was back at work.

Their conversation was perfectly mundane. And that normal, everyday chatter delighted Lyu. It tickled her heart.

Her tense tone of voice gave way to a peaceful one.

"Hey, um, Miss Lyu?"

"?"

"If you wouldn't mind…would you tell me about Alize and the others?"

"Alize?"

"Yes. When we were in the Dungeon, I didn't get to ask about them…and I was thinking I'd like to know more about your old familia."

When she thought back to when she'd parted from them, pain swirled in her chest. But more than that, it made her happy that Bell would ask about them.

"…All right, that I can do. Now, where to begin…?" She peered up ever so slightly, taking in the night sky and considering the twinkling stars as she prefaced her story by saying that it was an embarrassing one.

Then she began to tell the tale of how she had come to this city and the people she had met when she first arrived.

The boy listened quietly. Sometimes he smiled, which brought a smile out of Lyu, too.

There in the alley under the stars, they allowed themselves just a bit more time in each other’s company.

CHAPTER 6
MEETINGS AND OATHS

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CHAPTER 6

MEETINGS AND OATHS

Lyu Leon was once a girl who lived in an elven village.

To say that she was “just” a girl, though, would be misleading. She was a member of the clan that had protected the village’s holy tree for generations, and almost from the moment she was born she had been trained in the ways of the elven warriors. If outsiders should ever invade, she would defend the village alongside the adults. Despite lacking any deity’s blessing, their skill with bow and blade meant they were entirely capable of dealing with any of the monsters that inhabited the surface of the mortal plane.

That day, Lyu and the other warriors had driven off a foreign caravan that had gotten too close.

“Those filthy animal-people merchants!”

“Did you see their disgusting faces? It’s like the ugliness just oozes out of their souls. They’re nothing like us.”

Lyu’s face was hidden under her cloak, which obscured the rest of her small form beneath its swaying drape. As they returned to the village, she overheard the adult elves speak of their scorn for the beings they’d just repelled.

The elven settlement was covered by the thick canopy of the foliage overhead. Even in the current era—the so-called time of the gods, when deities walked the land and human and demi-human exchange flourished—the elves alone shunned the other races out of pride and hid themselves away in the forests.

With the holy tree in its very center, Lyu’s home was one such place—Lumirua Forest.

“…”

“Hideous, inside and out. How vile they are, how unlike our own beautiful selves.”

Lyu silently watched the other members of her clan discuss the other races.

Elves were famous among the mortals for their extraordinary beauty.

They were prideful, fastidious, and eschewed revealing themselves to any they deemed unworthy. But looking at the supposedly attractive members of her own race, Lyu felt that it was the beautiful-seeming elves who were, in fact, the vilest of all.

With scornful smiles on their lovely faces, they flattered one another with flowery rhetoric. As she’d watched them and walked among them, Lyu had come to harbor doubts.

She couldn’t remember when they’d started, but over the eleven years since she’d entered the world, those doubts had grown in her young heart.

And eventually, those doubts had turned into revulsion.

To the elves, who took such pride in their race, such thinking was heresy. But once the seed had been planted, Lyu could not stop them from growing. The arrogance spouted by elven men and women alike only spurred her shame and dejection onward, eating away at her self-respect.

The young Lyu knew nothing. She had never left her village, and her world was too small.

And yet she was certain that what she saw around her was terribly distorted.

Every day, her heart grew more and more distant from her family and the other elves in her village. She was ashamed of them and ashamed, too, of herself.

One day, she separated from the other elves in her party and eventually came to a clear forest stream. As she brought its cool water to her mouth to slake her thirst, she caught sight of her reflection in her cupped hands.

Those pointed ears and sky-blue eyes.

The same long golden hair and fine, delicate features as everyone else in her village.

That day as she looked down into her small hands, Lyu made up her mind.

“…Good-bye.”

Cloaked in the dark of night, Lyu ran away from her home—alone, taking only some seiros ore to use as traveling money.

She bid farewell to her home’s night sky that she’d loved so dearly, and the holy tree that she was duty bound to watch over her since the moment of her birth, setting off for the outside world, her mind full of what its vastness might hold.

She hoped she could be freed from the yoke of the elven name.

And yet—

It was raining.

Gray clouds covered the sky, and the hood that hung low over her face became damp in the drizzle. Lyu trudged along, her every step splashing as she gazed out over the deserted street that had turned almost foggy with mist.

This was Orario, the Labyrinth City.

Lyu had left her home and come all the way here, to the place known as “the center of the world.” Despite struggling with her ignorance of the wider world, the reputation of the Labyrinth City had reached even her isolated village, and with significant effort she had managed to pass through its vast gates.

She had heard that Orario was a place where gods, mortals, and spirits all came together, overcoming the barriers of race.

She hoped that she could find something rare here—something impossible for her to have in her village. She hoped to make friends from other races, and to meet true comrades that she would value for life.

Such were Lyu’s hopes for this city and the Dungeon that lurked beneath it.

But her hopes were quickly dashed.

And they were dashed by her own hand.

—Don’t touch me!

Lyu recoiled from every single person who approached her: Humans inviting her to join their familia. Drunken animal people. Prum merchants with lecherous grins. A dwarf adventurer looking to share a tale of woe. Whether they had good intentions or evil ones was irrelevant—Lyu brushed all of them aside.

It was a common elven disposition to shun the touch of anyone unworthy. The custom that seemed stamped into the hearts of her race compelled her strict behavior. That had been the cost of growing up surrounded by a village full of elves certain of their own superiority; her own personality had never reached the surface.

More than anything else, it was the inquisitive gazes that she couldn’t stand. The looks—of interest, of envy, of curiosity—were unlike anything she had ever experienced in her village, and they embarrassed, confused, and terrified her. And all simply because of her attractive elven features.

The dread she felt had gotten so bad that she couldn’t walk around outside without hiding her face beneath a hood.

The only option left to her was to depend on other elves whose names she didn’t even know.

But Lyu refused. Her youthful pride precluded such a path.

Her shame of and aversion to elves—herself included—blocked her only avenue of retreat.

“…I’ve become quite the laughingstock.” Lyu found herself draping herself in a cloak such that none of her skin was exposed, including wrapping it about her face.

Despite fleeing her village over her disgust for its ways, the outside world so frightened her that she walled herself off from it. Lyu hated this about herself.

She was miserable.

It was comical—a farce.

She paused her walk over the cobbled streets. Looking down at her reflection

in the puddle there, she was seized by the urge to stomp on it.

She was terrified of people she didn't know and helplessly unhappy. And yet she was dominated by the suspicion that she was regarding others with the same prejudicial gaze she so hated. All her loathing for elves had come back full circle.

A voice addressed Lyu in her moment of despair. "Pardon me, but is something the matter?"

She flinched and looked over her shoulder to see a beautiful woman standing there.

Whatever her age, the woman was at the height of her feminine beauty, her face even finer than Lyu's elven features. Her long, walnut-brown hair was tied elegantly back. Her eyes were the indigo blue of the deep sea. In the kirtle—an elegant long skirt—she wore, she seemed every bit a virtuous noblewoman.

The faint aura of divinity that emanated from her made it clear what she was: one of the deusdea.

She seemed to be returning from some shopping, with a veil draped over her head to keep off the rain as she smiled softly at Lyu.

"A goddess…" Lyu murmured, making a face.

Lyu had not come to hold gods and goddesses in particularly high regard.

The deities she'd met thus far in Orario had been frivolous beings, prone to saying inexplicable, maddening things—"It's an elf girl! Yes!" "Damn, if only she were a little younger…!"—which had been quite astonishing to Lyu. She couldn't imagine ever turning to them for help.

It had gotten to the point that she was beginning to wonder if her people had had the right idea after all, spurning both other races and the gods themselves, opting to hide away in the forest. The feelings of disillusionment and despair rose up in her chest, as though they were about to overwhelm her.

To Lyu and her splintering heart, these gods who seemed to live only for their own amusement were deeply irritating beings.

"You'll catch a cold standing there like that, you know." The goddess's voice

was velvet soft, with a gentle quality that seemed to envelop Lyu.

But Lyu had already decided that she had no more good will for this goddess than she had for any other deity. "…It's none of your concern how wet I get. I'd prefer you mind your own business."

"Oh, but it is my concern. It would make me very sad indeed if an innocent girl like yourself were to fall ill. I would ask myself why I'd left her in such a state," said the goddess, her gentle smile never wavering. She continued, "Would that I could be your shelter from the rain—at the moment, you look quite like a lost child."

A lost child.

As she heard the words, something snapped inside Lyu.

—Did this goddess not realize whose fault that was?!

Lyu was unmistakably, completely off the mark; this was a childish tantrum. But in that moment, she knew of no way to stop herself from the rage that overwhelmed her.

"All of this is your fault!!" Lyu cried out, louder than she had ever raised her voice before, speaking just as the raging emotion inside her told her to. "You gods created elves! You made all these races that refuse to accept anyone different from themselves, people who only care about appearances!"

It was the deities in the heavens who created the humans and demi-humans who lived in the material world. In what to their children was the distant past, the gods in their capriciousness gave all the mortal races different characteristics. The mortals believed this to be true as well, unquestioningly.

Lyu squeezed her eyes closed in helpless frustration as she put a final demand to the goddess. "Why did you make us like this?!"

Her grief-stricken voice echoed in the otherwise deserted street.

The goddess fell silent at the elf girl's angry rant.

The rain began to fall harder, as though in reprisal for Lyu's words.

It was a terribly misdirected outburst. In screaming so, Lyu had only hurt herself, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

She was miserable.

It was comical—a farce.

She was such a fool. She couldn't bear anyone to see her this way.

Lyu slumped as it dawned on her what she'd just done, losing herself in a vortex of self-loathing. Her small body shivered like she was trying to hold back her sobs.

Finally, the still unnamed goddess spoke, as though she'd seen right through Lyu. "I think what you need right now is not the voice of any god or goddess but a friend and equal."

Lyu looked up with a sharp intake of breath and saw only that same kindly smile.

"Gods, you see, are surprisingly powerless. Even if we could use our power here in this world…I'm sorry," said the goddess apologetically, but at the same time, her indigo eyes narrowed tenderly. "I shall pray for you to meet someone wonderful, someone who will brighten your wandering with their laughter."

She approached Lyu and briskly handed her a map.

"If you like, come and visit. We may be able to help you," said the goddess, and just like that, walked away.

Lyu stood there, holding the map, along with some bread and fruit wrapped in cloth.

"…"

No one had ever approached the naive girl with pure intentions. And even if they had, Lyu would have rejected them.

Which made this the first bit of kindness Lyu had accepted since coming to Orario.

As the rain began to let up, the girl continued looking in the direction the goddess had gone for some time.

The energy of the city had been somehow lacking for several days. Or at least that was what Lyu thought. While it was certainly still more than active enough for an elf who'd previously only known her own village, it felt as though a shadow had fallen over everything.

It was palpable in the sudden sighs of the residents, the dark looks that passed over their faces, and the series of scuffles that would ensue from a single provocation or cry. When fights broke out, the ordinary residents, by now used to them, would either hide or try to escape somewhere. Not a day went by without seeing Guild employees out on patrol trying to rein in the chaos or the heavy traffic of people who seemed to be adventurers.

Civic order was nonexistent. As she wandered aimlessly around the city, Lyu couldn't help but sense its tense, edgy mood.

Which was why, when it finally happened, some cold part of her mind mused that it had been bound to sooner or later.

"Hey, you're an elf, right? I got you dead to rights."

"And without the protection of any god, so there ain't no need to worry about anybody backin' her up…this'll be easy."

Lyu had been cornered by a group of villainous-looking demi-humans in a back alley that was otherwise devoid of people.

It had been two days since her encounter with the goddess. The funds she'd been so thrifty with were running low, and she could see the quickly approaching end of her stay in the cheap inn she was using, so Lyu was agonizing over whether to go to the place indicated on the map.

Right as she was considering how it was difficult for her as an elf to ignore the possibility of further humiliation, these demi-humans had suddenly herded her into this alley as though they'd been planning it.

From the way they were talking, they'd marked Lyu as an easy target because she was both a beautiful elf and a country bumpkin. It also seemed like they scouted out the area in advance.

"And she's right on the edge between bein' a brat and a real woman. She'll fetch good money in the Pleasure Quarter."

—So they were kidnappers. No, slavers.

Did this sort of thing happen often in Orario? A shudder of revulsion ran through the noble Lyu's body. Typically she saved her worst judgments for herself, but in this moment, she finally felt righteous indignation.

Lyu gave the apparent leader—a middle-aged cat person—the most vicious glare she could muster.

In all likelihood, her opponents were all adventurers carrying some god's Falna. While an elven warrior could easily outmatch any ordinary person, she stood little chance of doing so here. Especially given the numbers.

As the adventurers reached for her, Lyu prepared to draw the shortsword she carried for self-defense, but then—

"Hey, you there! You've got some nerve, trying this in broad daylight!"

A dashing figure appeared.

Taken by surprise, the men all turned to look—and saw a human girl in combat gear.

Her beautiful red hair was tied back and left to sway in what the gods were always calling a "ponytail." At her side she carried a rapier.

Her tapered green eyes glittered with the power of her will as she watched the wrong-footed men closely.

"Alize Lovell…!"

"You again, Jura? If you think you're gonna pull some scheme off, think again!" The cat person and the girl glared at each other, using their names as though they'd met before. "You guys know what they call you around town? Thugs! You heard me—thugs! You came all the way to Orario to seek fortune in the Dungeon and ended up as small-time crooks! Aren't you embarrassed?!"

"Y-you bitch…!" The men started to look murderous, but the instant they started to move—

"Oh, you wanna go?" The girl's eyes sharpened like blades, and she drew her rapier faster than the eye could follow.

The men gulped at the sharpened tip of the blade that was pointed at them.

The leader's face twisted into a sneer, and he spat. "Tch…One of these days we're gonna kill you, I promise you that. Let's get outta here!" he roared.

The ne'er-do-wells scattered, leaving behind a stunned Lyu along with her triumphant savior.

"I swear, they never learn. You okay?"

Lyu looked again at the girl who approached her.

She was beautiful. Even without speaking to her, Lyu could sense her bright spirit and straightforward personality.

The girl seemed to be roughly the same age as Lyu, who was fairly mature for her age by elven standards. Taking the fact that she was human into account, this girl was probably a year or two older.

Lyu watched her closely, at which the girl cocked her head, then smiled as though something had occurred to her. She thrust out her chest and placed her right hand over it. "Oh, I haven't introduced myself yet! I'm Alize Lovell. I'm a beautiful adventurer who plans on being Level Two very soon!"

Lyu's eyes widened at the girl's introduction.

"Wh-what? It's true, I say! I'll have you know that I'm the object of quite a few rookies' envious gazes!" the girl added hastily.

Lyu said nothing in response and turned her back. As she began to walk away, the human girl—Alize—furrowed her brow. "Are you seriously just going to walk away without so much as a word? I'm not saying I want a reward, but it's a little rude to just ignore me."

"…If you only saved me for your sense of self-satisfaction, then you shouldn't need anything from me at all. I didn't ask for you to save me," replied Lyu, giving Alize a glance.

Normally Lyu would never say such a thing, but her heart had been ground down by her continuing suffering in Orario. More than anything else, she feared brushing the girl's hand away and the accusing gaze that would follow.

Instantly, Alize met Lyu's reply with a flatly candid one of her own. "Oh, I see.

You’re just pigheaded.”

In that moment, the blood rushed to Lyu’s head.

At the sensation of being rightfully skewered, humiliation and rage took over her body. Her sky-blue eyes sharpened and glared out from under her hood. “And you’re calling me that because I’m an elf?”

“Huh?” The other girl made a confused face, which only inflamed Lyu’s anger further.

“Well—I wasn’t born an elf because I wanted to be one, okay?!”

It was the second time her emotions had gotten the better of her since coming to the city. She let her normally carefully controlled speaking slip and aired her feelings using words that were far more typical for a girl her age.

She breathed heavily; the sound echoed in the alley.

The two girls glared at each other.

After a brief moment, Alize made a satisfied “Ha!” under Lyu’s accusatory gaze. She sniffed ostentatiously. “What are you talking about? You really are just clueless.”

“Wha—?!”

“Not one word of what I said had anything to do with you being an elf. Not one! Single! Word!” She continued briskly and loudly. “If you’re pigheaded, obstinate, and stubborn as a mule, that’s just your personality, right? So don’t make this about you being an elf!”

The girl closed in on the stunned Lyu. She thrust out her index finger and pointed directly at Lyu’s face, continuing her rant at extremely close range.

“There are dwarves who are refined gentlemen and elves who are revolting hoodlums! Race has nothing to do with it! I’m gonna be honest, you’re being a pretty lousy person right now!”

The words hit Lyu like a backhanded slap. They shook her to her very core.

She couldn’t say anything in response. The blows had just kept raining down on her. Starting when she’d arrived in Orario, and right up through today, it was

as though her every action was being condemned, including her explosion at the goddess.

Lyu listened to the sincerely offered words of the girl, and finally accepted her mistakes.

There was a long silence.

“You’re absolutely right,” she finally murmured. “I’m a coward. I blame anything that doesn’t go well on race. I’m just…just a child.”

At some point Lyu had made everything the fault of her race, lamenting it as unfair, unreasonable. She had found the world beyond her village bewildering, and with her emotions constantly in disarray, she had been simply lashing out.

She knew she had been utterly wrongheaded, and it was so embarrassing she couldn’t stand it.

Her gaze fell to the cobblestone paving at her feet.

“Oh, so you *can* admit when you’re wrong. Most people either turn red and lose their temper or just never accept it. You’re…pigheaded, sure, but at least you can be reasonable. No, not just that…you’re *honest*,” said Alize, her own anger completely disarmed. “But…I like people like that.”

And then she smiled.

Lyu looked up into that carefree smile, and her eyes went wide.

As she thought about what a strange girl she was, her red hair caught the light of the clear blue sky overhead. Lyu had never met anyone like her.

“Anyway, you conceded to my righteousness! Ha-ha! Way to go, me!”

…Evidently she also had a tendency to be a bit excessive.

Lyu began to realize that her own face was in a somewhat delicate state, so she removed her hood and mask.

She met the other girl’s eyes and spoke with all the sincerity she could muster. “Thank you very much for saving me. I owe you my gratitude.”

Alize Lovell grinned. “Your face says you’re still worrying over something. What happened? I’m happy to listen, if you want,” she said with an honest,

candid smile.

It occurred to Lyu, as she was half-forced out of the alleyway and guided into an open square, that Alize would probably have treated anyone this way.

The two sat beside a decorative fountain spraying arcs of water, and before she knew it, Lyu was admitting all the heartache and distress that had resulted from her constant rejection of others.

“Hmm…I’d heard of these elven customs, but I suppose they can be quite serious for some people.”

It was a strange sensation, to open her heart to a girl she’d only just met. Lyu didn’t know exactly how to express the feeling it gave her.

Alize listened attentively, and as soon as Lyu was finished speaking, she leaned suddenly closer. “In that case, you just need to practice! So that when someone takes your hand, you don’t just pull it away!”

“Wh…?” Lyu found herself stunned by how casually Alize had laughed off the anguish that had defined so much of her life.

“Wanna start right now? Here, give me your hand.”

“W-wait a moment! I’m not—”

“I plan on being a third-tier adventurer soon! Don’t worry, no matter how much you hit me, it won’t even sting. Here, see!” Alize tried to take Lyu’s hand as Lyu, though trying her very best not to reject her, still leaned away.

But the self-proclaimed upper-class adventurer easily caught Lyu’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

“__”

Their fingers interlaced.

Their hands remained connected.

Lyu felt the warmth of the other girl’s palm in her own.

“Oh, you’re totally fine. I almost feel let down.”

“No, that’s not—”

Lyu's sky-blue eyes were fixed on their clasped hands. She couldn't comprehend what was happening.

As Alize watched Lyu's flustered expression, she broke into a wide grin. "Hey. You wanna join my familia?" she said, still holding Lyu's hand.

"Wha…?"

"The thing is, I like you. You might be a little too serious, but you're an elf who can admit when she's wrong. And the most important thing is that you hate it when something's just *wrong*, don't you? I'm the same way!"

"B-but, I'm…"

"I won't force you, don't worry! But just come by and have a look, won't you?" Alize stood from the fountain's edge, pulling Lyu to her feet as she did so. Lyu couldn't have freed her hand if she'd wanted to.

She suddenly felt very reluctant to pull away from this rare, unlikely thing she'd found.

"Oh, by the way, I never asked your name! So, what do they call you?"

"…Lyu. Lyu Leon," answered Lyu hesitantly as she was dragged along by Alize.

The red-haired girl looked back over her shoulder and smiled a carefree smile. "Your name's Lyu? It's kinda hard to pronounce, so…I'm gonna call you Leon!"

The girl's sudden familiarity with her name made them feel that much closer, and a strange warmth rose in Lyu's chest at the sensation.

Alize brought her to a house in the southwestern quarter of the city.

"Lady Astrea! We're home!"

Just as the thought suddenly occurred to Lyu that the route had been awfully similar to the one described on a certain map she'd recently received, they passed through the entryway into a parlor, in which sat a certain indigo-eyed goddess serenely attending to her knitting.

"Welcome home, Alize. Oh my, that's…" The goddess—Astrea—giggled, her walnut-brown hair stirring. "I see. Yes, of course." She smiled warmly at Lyu.

Lyu stood there awkwardly, her cheeks flushing. This was, in fact, the second

time she'd met this kindhearted goddess, and she bowed a deep, stiff bow of apology.

"Captain, who might this elf woman be?"

"Jeez, you brought *another* one of your strays in?"

"You oughtta fix that habit of putting on airs when you meet someone for the first time, Kaguya. And Lyra! She's a proper candidate hoping to join our ranks, so show some respect!" said Alize to the two girls who spoke up—presumably other members of the familia—and then led Lyu to the center of the room. On the several other couches lounged other girls of a variety of races.

Alize began her introduction. "Leon! This is the home of *Astrea Familia*. There are ten of us, and our goddess is, of course, Lady Astrea over there," said Alize, adding proudly, "and I'm the captain, by the way!"

Lyu heard this and understood immediately that if this was so, the familia must have been founded fairly recently.

"In addition to our Dungeon activities, we also work to keep the peace in Orario."

"Keep the peace…? I thought that was the Guild's job…"

"No! We operate according to our *own* sense of justice!"

"Justice?" echoed Lyu uncertainly.

Alize gave a decisive nod. "That's right. In the name of Lady Astrea, Goddess of Justice and Order, we right the wrongs of the world! We erase all things unreasonable and unjust! Our justice comes from Lady Astrea and from our own ideals! So long as she is with us, we will never lose sight of what's right!" she exclaimed proudly.

From the perspective of an outsider like Lyu, it all sounded somewhat blind and idealistic. If their goddess were to exploit them—as capricious deities were often known to do—they could all easily become nothing more than so many pitiful puppets.

And yet, some part of Lyu was certain that would never happen.

Even now, Astrea watched Lyu, Alize, and the other members with eyes full of

kindness. She would neither betray their trust nor abandon them. She was a goddess of character, who clearly loved her children more than anything else.

The deep trust Astrea had earned from Alize and the others was, perhaps, something unique to her.

“Of course, sometimes our justice clashes with somebody else’s idea of justice! People have all sorts of ideals, after all!”

There were as many positions to hold as there were people to hold them, but they had the persistence of will to overcome that challenge. Conflict was inherent to the pursuit of justice, the girl explained.

“—But there’s nothing just about the people running around Orario right now!” Alize declared emphatically. “Leon, you’ve seen Orario these days with your own eyes, right? Are the people smiling?”

“…Everyone is terrified. It’s stagnant, like a choked river.”

“Exactly! Orario is in serious trouble right now! In the five years since *Zeus Familia* and *Hera Familia* failed to defeat the Black Dragon, evil is still running rampant!”

The failure of the two top familias to complete the Three Great Quests—the news of this tremendous event had reached even Lyu’s elven village. Alize explained that it had resulted in chaos descending on Orario, beginning with the Evils. “The two strongest familias right now, under Loki and Freya, are doing their best, of course, and lately Ganesha’s crew is coming up. There’s even Hephaistos and her smiths! But it’s still not enough!”

“…”

“We have to rise up and put an end to this era of darkness!” said Alize, flinging her arms wide. She was completely serious when she claimed it was up to them to personally end the reign of chaos in Orario. “They say Orario is the ‘center of the world,’ so if things are bad here, that influence is bound to spread. We don’t need chaos here!”

“Alize…”

“What Orario needs right now is proper order and way more smiles!”

They shone.

Alize's eyes shone with a singular faith and pride. Lyu felt her heart stirred and drawn in by the girl's energy and optimism.

Alize lowered her voice from the rousing volume she'd been using and looked seriously at Lyu. "And for that, we need comrades. Like-minded people with the same ambitions."

Lyu returned her gaze, and as Astrea and the other familia members looked on, she closed her eyes.

She had indeed wanted to find friends and equals. She had wished for comrades she could respect and would be respected by. That was why she had come to Orario—to find something she had been missing in her home village.

But what about now?

What did she feel?

Listening to the thoughts of the first girl from another race who'd ever taken her hand, what did her heart say?

Lyu thought back. Back to when she had been cornered by the slavers. Or rather, back to the righteous indignation she'd felt in that moment.

She remembered the form of the girl who'd saved her.

Her eyes closed, she pictured Alize's bright smile and Astrea's tenderness and care.

"Could I…" Lyu opened her eyes and looked steadily into Alize's. "Could I really aid your justice…?"

Alize's lips split into a grin. "Of course! Welcome, Leon!"

The other members broke into cheers, and Astrea smiled benevolently. "Thank you for joining our familia, Lyu Leon."

"No—I should thank you and Alize. I'd lost my way and had nowhere to turn, but you led me here…"

Astrea and Lyu went to a different room, where Lyu disrobed and sat with her back to the goddess.

Upon having a Status engraved on her skin, she was formally inducted into the goddess's familia, and she received the group's emblem as well—the wings and blade of justice.

There was a brief scuffle as, in spite of herself, Lyu instinctively tried to fling away the many familia members who came close to give her a friendly pat on the shoulder, but soon enough, Alize and the rest formed a circle in the central room.

"All right, now it's time for the welcome ceremony! Everybody gather round!"

Noin, Neze, Lyra, Asta, Lyana, Kaguya, Celty, Iska, Maryu.

All girls, most of whom were about Alize's age.

All of them friends, none of them elves.

As Astrea watched over them with a smile, they all—Lyu included—placed their hands on top of one another in a circle.

"We are *Astrea Familia*. We serve Lady Astrea, Goddess of Justice and Order. We swear to bring peace to Orario! By the wings and blade of justice!"

""By the wings and blade of justice!"" chorused the girls, following Alize's lead.

And then, as her comrades looked on, Lyu smiled and followed. "By the wings and blade of justice."

Until the day of their dissolution five years later, that oath would never be broken.

INTERLUDE
THE STRIVING PRINCESS AND THE WATCHFUL SHINOBI

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INTERLUDE

THE STRIVING PRINCESS AND THE WATCHFUL SHINOBI

Mikoto Yamato

Level 2

Strength: H185 -> G279 Defense: H158 -> G255 Dexterity: G232 -> F334 Agility: G217 -> 298 Magic: I97 -> H149 Resistance: I

Magic

Futsu no Mitama

- Gravity magic
- Increases gravity within a certain area

Skills

Yatano Black Crow

- Searches for enemies within affected area, regardless of concealment
- Limited to monsters. Only effective on creatures the caster has previously encountered.
- Active trigger

Yatano White Crow

- Searches for familia members within affected area, regardless of concealment
- Only effective for members bearing the same Falna
- Active trigger

Haruhime Sanjouno

Level 1

Strength: I18 -> I35 Defense: I43 -> I80 Dexterity: I70 -> 99 Agility: I61 -> 96 Magic: E441 -> D543

Magic

Uchide no Kozuchi

- Level boost
- Limited to an individual target
- Has a cool-down interval after use
- Cannot be used on the caster

Kokonoe

- Enchantment
- Connects with chant
- Charges tail with effect of connected spell
- Up to a maximum of nine tails

Skill

Mikuzume no Hou

- Increases effectiveness of magic
- Improves Mind usage efficiency

These were Mikoto's and Haruhime's updated Statuses.

Their abilities had improved significantly, about as much as Lilly's had. In particular, Haruhime's Magic growth had been amazing—magic was significantly harder to improve than the more basic abilities like strength or agility—and considering that her spells had very long chants in order to activate them and therefore couldn't be used in rapid succession, this latest achievement was more than noteworthy.

And along with that, she had even manifested a skill.

Her new skill was similar to ones cooperatively developed by the elves across their entire race, and there was no question it would be extremely valuable to a sorcerer like Haruhime. Incidentally, among all the magic-related skills, the ones that affected efficiency of Mind usage were among the most prized and powerful, despite their less flashy nature.

Although Mikoto hadn't gained any new magic or skills, Hestia had a peculiar

explanation for why.

“It seemed like you could’ve developed a pretty crazy skill, but it seemed scary, so I held off. Pretty sure it was one of those self-destruction types.”

It was a rare decision coming from a goddess whose curiosity regarding the unknown nearly always won out and who nearly always unlocked skills as soon as they became available. But she cared about Mikoto more than all of that, which showed how the depth of her affection for her children overrode just about everything else.

But even without a new skill, the improvement in her basic abilities put her at the top of the familia, second only to Bell. This was the result of her versatility as an adventurer that had come into play over the entire course of the recent expedition. Her Status put her very close to the middle of Level 2’s.

Both Mikoto and Haruhime were pleased with the results of their Status updates. But they didn’t indulge in celebration, and soon they switched gears.

The girls from the Far East were humble, hardworking, and proactive, and they quickly set their eyes on the next stage.

“H-hyaa!”

A forceful, but somehow vaguely hesitant cry echoed through the Dungeon as a renart—Haruhime—raised a long staff high overhead and charged at a monster. The golden fur on her fluffy tail stirred in the air.

A single goblin awaited her. The pitiful, low-level creature whose name was synonymous with weakness must have found even the fox girl’s amateurish attack to be a threat, for it let out a cry of alarm—and, in fact, a full-force attack from a Level 1 adventurer was more than enough to constitute a killing blow for it. *“Hwah?!”*

There was no way the perfectly timed staff blow could miss, and yet it did, completely.

“Guh?!” Haruhime sent herself tumbling, her body sliding to a halt right next

to the goblin.

For a moment, total silence filled the Dungeon.

After a moment of stunned stillness, the goblin kicked at Haruhime with a scream of indignation at having been surprised. *"…Goblaah!"* The kicks connected with Haruhime's conveniently positioned ribs.

"Nnngh?!"

The belligerent strikes continued, eliciting dull cries from the renart girl. It might have been the lowest-level monster there was, but pain was pain.

Then, attracted by the commotion, more goblins began to gather and join enthusiastically in the beating. "Ow! Ow!" cried Haruhime miserably, holding her head and curling into a fetal position—when a shadowy form arrived with the speed of a shooting arrow.

"Yaaaah!" It was Lilly, backpack and all, coming at the goblins with a full-bodied flying kick.

"Gobruu?!"

Lilly was just a small prum—but kicked with the force of a Level 2.

The goblins had no chance, and with deafening shrieks and alarming force, they were propelled far down the Dungeon passage and out of sight.

"What are you doing, Miss Haruhime?! Those were just goblins!"

"I-I'm sorry, Lady Lilly! Also, that was an amazing attack!"

"Of course! I'm Level Two, after all!—Level Two, you hear?" boasted Lilly with enormous pride after having literally scattered the goblins, repeating the words for good measure.

As Lilly put her hands on her hips and thrust her chest out, the thoroughly battered Haruhime got to her feet with a somewhat forced smile.

Despite her dirtied clothes, her beautiful golden hair and faultless carriage ensured that her graceful elegance was uneffected. However, her beautiful features soon clouded over as her shoulder slumped, and she sighed dejectedly.

In stark contrast to this, the triumphant Lilly softly patted Haruhime's tail and

said, “Lilly’s here now, so there’s nothing to worry about. Now then, Haruhime! You’re going to follow me until we get you in fighting shape!”

Encouraged by the dauntless supporter, and despite her lack of combat experience, the sorceress turned to face the monsters that were appearing at the end of the passageway they were in. “Th-thank you very much! I am happy to have another opportunity!”

Welf and Bell looked on from a short distance away.

“She’s really giving it her all…” said Welf.

“Well, it’s her first time back in the Dungeon since leveling up…I was also really excited when I hit Level Two, so I understand the feeling.” Bell watched Lilly with a nervous smile. During her time as a supporter, these monsters had shown Lilly quite a bit of “kindness,” and she was eager to “return the favor,” as she put it.

“That’s not excitement—she’s just getting carried away.”

Bell’s awkward expression only deepened at Welf’s withering criticism.

They were on the third floor of the Dungeon.

The now D-ranked *Hestia Familia* was on a floor entirely unsuited to their experience level for a single reason: to train Haruhime.

Lower-level members of a familia could accrue excelia even on Dungeon floors that were below the familia’s overall level. The practice was often referred to as “leveling.”

The goal was to support the Level 1 member of *Hestia Familia*, just like how they had been coming here for Lilly right up until her recent promotion to Level 2.

The familia had started the practice just around the time Haruhime joined. They picked areas where they could really go at it but at the same time wouldn’t cause any trouble for other familias venturing into the Dungeon.

Obviously, Haruhime’s safety was guaranteed, as she’d been carefully fitted with armor crafted by Welf that ensured no monster at this level could inflict any serious damage. Even if by some chance an Irregular were to occur and

endanger her, higher-level escorts like Bell would come along to watch over her.

This time, Lilly had insisted on being Haruhime's guard…but she was currently having far too much fun beating up on monsters that she'd once had no chance against. Bell and the others understood the almost dizzying sensation of full-body excitement that came with a dramatic increase in Status, though.

Bell's arm, incidentally, had nearly completely healed. It seemed likely that they would be able to move ahead with an expedition to the middle levels in the near future. He'd decided to come along to the upper levels today while keeping an eye on how his arm performed.

"Anyway, how should I put this?" said Welf, his arms crossed. "She's not getting any better at fighting."

Bell felt somehow obligated to make excuses for her. "W-well, Haruhime's personality isn't really suited for combat, but, I mean…"

"Yeah, you say that, but the way she was swinging that staff, I almost fell over just watching her."

The familia would go out leveling whenever there was time to spare, but in Haruhime's specific case, the focus was very much on improving how she carried herself in combat. She wasn't ready to practice tactics or strategy, though, so for her, this amounted to basic self-defense.

What Haruhime wanted most of all was to learn enough that she wouldn't be a hindrance during expeditions to the middle levels and below.

The results so far were not encouraging.

Welf counted options off on his fingers while offering commentary. "If we could find a weapon that suited her, she'd be able to do *something*…but swords were no good; spears, ditto; she can't use a naginata or a bow; and obviously anything heavy like a mace or broadsword is out. The staff trial ended just now with a misfire…so what's left?"

Bell, too, racked his brains trying to think of something.

"I'm just going to put this out there: She doesn't have the strength for it. We

should cut our losses and just have her practice her spells, if you ask me," said Aisha the Amazon, who occasionally came along for their leveling trips when it was convenient to fit into her schedule—although she had been present for nearly all of Haruhime's training sessions.

"The thing is, Haruhime herself really wants to do this, so…"

"I mean, I think sometimes it's a kindness to tell someone when to give up on something. But hey, if that's your goal, I'm not gonna stop you. It's your familia. But over in *Ishtar Familia*, we threw in the towel on this idea long ago."

Welf offered his perspective on Aisha and Bell's conversation. "Well, it's not like we're talking about concurrent casting, but there's definitely an advantage to being more familiar with the general flow of battle when it comes to casting level-boost magic." He sounded pessimistic, but Welf was all for having her learning how to fight, which Bell—who wanted everybody to fight together—was very happy to hear.

"Just so you all know, anyone with a level-boost cast on them earns less than half the excelia they normally would," said Aisha.

""Huh?!"" said Bell and Welf simultaneously.

"Obviously. Otherwise it'd be everyone's favorite little cheat. Even if you take down a higher-level opponent with it, you're not gonna get that much out of it," explained Aisha of Haruhime's sorcery.

Haruhime had used Uchide no Kozuchi countless times while she'd been in *Ishtar Familia*, and Aisha had furthermore been the target of the level-boosting spell many times herself, so she was very well-acquainted with its effects and drawbacks.

The constraints of magic meant that Haruhime's own development hadn't been hindered by level boosting, but both Bell and Welf had constantly relied on it in tight spots—much to their sudden dismay. "I had no idea," said Bell.

Aisha's eyes narrowed mischievously like a cat's. "So, am I right in guessing that your clumsy little fox girl could've leveled up?"

"Oh yes. Our goddess said she could've hit Level Two."

It was true—Haruhime could've also leveled up.

She'd been present for the desperate battle against the twenty-fifth floor's Amphisbaena. She had continued to cast right up to her limit, taking desperate, decisive action even while surrounded in flames, and it was undoubtedly a great deed.

"But your threats—or your advice, I guess—made an impact, and we decided to hold back on her promotion to Level Two."

"That's how it should be. It's too soon for her." Haruhime had stayed where she was, at Level 1, because Aisha herself had warned *Hestia Familia* in the past to wait a little longer before letting her advance. It was something along the lines of *"What would be the point of having that klutz at Level Two anyway? You want her beating monsters by tripping over herself?"*

After hearing her out, Bell and Hestia had conceded the point.

"If you're going to let her level up, forget about combat and have her work on her sorcery. Otherwise, it'll be like giving a cannon to a baby. It's too dangerous to even think about," said Aisha.

She'd continued to watch Haruhime's development, so taking that into account, Haruhime's Status had been put on hold for the time being. Hestia would be able to level her up whenever she wanted to.

Haruhime herself, meanwhile, had not been told about the possibility.

Nor had Lilly.

"I don't want to put too much pressure on Haruhime, and our supporter's having the time of her life having just leveled up herself, and I don't want to throw cold water on that, so we'll keep this quiet for the time being" had been Hestia's determination. "This expedition ended with level-ups for three of ours—well, two. Miach got two. If the other gods heard about this they'd think there was a closeout sale on leveling up!"

But to return to the subject at hand—

"As far as spell casting goes, I see your point, but…well, it won't matter either way if she can't learn to move without me or Li'l E telling her what to do. We've

gotta drill some nerve into her," said Welf.

Welf watched as Haruhime faced off against monsters while listening to Lilly's directions. She had the appalling habit of squeezing her eyes shut when she attacked, so she wasn't leaving so much as a scratch on her opponents. Caught between Lilly's angry shouting and the monsters' counterattacks, she was dizzyingly out of her depth.

Aisha watched the scene play out and shrugged, chuckling. "Well, who knows when *that's* gonna happen."

—It would happen sooner than they thought, mused Mikoto, having overheard the conversation.

Although it's still a bit too early for true direct combat.

But Mikoto was certain that Haruhime would soon master the basics of self-defense. She would. Even as Bell and the others looked on skeptically, Mikoto believed.

"Lady Haruhime…hang in there," she let herself murmur.

Haruhime barely managed to parry a kobold's attack and then sent it tumbling with a sideways swing of her staff. The movement was reminiscent of Mikoto's—no, Takemikazuchi's—martial art.

Aisha's eyes went wide in a rare display of surprise, and Bell and Welf were equally shocked. Once Lilly recovered from being stunned still, she started clapping.

The fox girl, normally so reluctant to express strong emotions, grinned and flashed the two-fingered salute she'd learned from Hestia.

Mikoto smiled. Haruhime was no longer a mere princess. That weak little girl she'd once known was gone.

Mikoto alone knew this. She saw how much the girl she'd been reunited with in Orario had changed, and how far—as far as Bell, at the very least, and perhaps even further—she had come.

CHAPTER 7
TALES OF TIMES PAST: THE BLACK BIRD AND THE GOLDEN FOX

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CHAPTER 7

TALES OF TIMES PAST: THE BLACK BIRD AND THE GOLDEN FOX

"I—I am called Haruhime…I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance!"

The words *sheltered princess* must have been invented to describe her, or so the young Mikoto thought as she studied the girl before her.

This was ten years before Mikoto and Haruhime would arrive in the Labyrinth City.

They were in the Far East.

The renart girl had arrived incognito at a shrine dedicated to Takemikazuchi and various other deities that took in children with no other relatives to depend on.

Her snow-pale skin seemed so fine it was as though it had never encountered dirt before, and her long golden hair looked woven from sunlight. Her green eyes glittered like a pair of emeralds. The beauty she possessed made her seem somehow divinely blessed and held the promise that she would grow into a woman of truly rare beauty. And to top that off, her pointed fox ears and furry tail were unbearably charming.

This was not the first time Mikoto had laid eyes on Haruhime the renart girl.

She had seen the lonely-looking girl in a mansion at the foot of the mountains and had even occasionally sneaked her out to play.

But seeing here again, here, now, she was struck anew by how different the worlds they lived in truly were.

It was Takemikazuchi who answered her brightly. "Ah, welcome, Haruhime! We made it through a tough winter thanks to you, so I'll gladly thank you for that."

Haruhime had been brought that day to meet Takemikazuchi and the others

who lived at the shrine.

Haruhime was of noble birth and lived a life of ease, and when she had learned of the difficult circumstances of the shrine, had pleaded with her powerful father to spare them funds for food. This was an opportunity for Mikoto and the others to get to know the kind girl, but the main reason for her visit was so they could properly thank her.

Once the young Haruhime had introduced herself, the shrine's gods each took the chance to welcome her, but the reaction from the children there was muted.

This was not out of coldness. In fact, all of them were completely taken with the renart girl—such was Haruhime's beauty. It was true that she was of high birth, but she also exuded a natural elegance and concern for others. In the shabby self-contained world of the shrine, Haruhime was a single beautiful blossom.

The girls weren't immune, but the enchanted reactions of the boys were especially noticeable.

Haruhime's cheeks reddened; she seemed unused to attention from children her own age.

This awkwardness only made her more charming, and there was a murmur of "*Hot damn…!*" from among the assembled deities—although that reaction earned the speaker an elbow to the ribs from a goddess whose smiling face otherwise betrayed no trace of irritation.

"H-Haruhime is so cute…!" murmured Mikoto.

"She is. She's like a character out of a picture scroll come to life," said Chigusa.

Chigusa was also dazzled, even though she herself was helplessly enamored with Ouka, at whom she stole an uneasy glance.

Ouka, meanwhile, behaved exactly the same as usual. "Haruhime, what's wrong? Your face is red. Are you sick?" Even back then, he was as ignorant as Takemikazuchi when it came to understanding how girls felt.

“Haruhime, thanks for the food!”

“Wanna play?”

“M-me too!”

Haruhime was quickly surrounded by children, boys and girls alike pulling her along.

Mikoto didn’t immediately join in, though, instead watching Haruhime’s face intently. She tilted her head in concern, then went to find a certain goddess.

“Lady Tsukuyomi, Lady Tsukuyomi!” She patted at the side of a goddess she trusted.

“Hmm? What is it, Mikoto?” asked the goddess, whose blue hair was carefully put up.

“Why is it that Miss Haruhime seems so down? Her tail is all droopy, too.”

It was true—Haruhime’s tail hung with noticeable dejection.

That would have been fine by itself, but she was also seemingly finding it hard to meet any of the other children’s gazes.

“Well, she may be feeling a pang of conscience for being so fortunate and blessed.”

“A pang of consh…?”

“Have you noticed how shabby and poor our little shrine is? Our clothes, too. Of course that’s not Haruhime’s fault at all, but she may be feeling rather awkward at being the only one with such fine belongings.”

Mikoto’s clothes had been patched and mended many times, and Tsukuyomi’s robes, too, were hardly befitting a goddess.

Haruhime’s clothing, meanwhile, was entirely worthy of being called “finery.” And the expression on her face did indeed reveal the unease of someone who wasn’t sure if they belonged.

Mikoto’s face fell in shock. “Does that mean…that Miss Haruhime finds it troublesome to visit us? That she’s come here because she thinks it’s the right thing to do, even though it distresses her?” asked Mikoto, worried.

The goddess reached out her hand to gently caress the jet-black hair on Mikoto's head. "That's her way of showing kindness. But it's also a kind of weakness. So you and all the other children should stay close to her and protect her, all right?"

Mikoto did not understand what Tsukuyomi meant.

The goddess grinned. "That means playing with her so much she forgets all about anybody owing anything." Her face looked very much like Takemikazuchi's in that moment. Specifically, it resembled his vicious grin when he'd given the order—"Get that girl out of there!"—that had freed Haruhime from her mansion once and for all.

Mikoto's face brightened.

"For now, your job is to protect her from any man who looks like he's up to no good, okay?"

"Understood!" Mikoto vanished like a ninja as she sprinted toward the group of children.

She promptly began to visit her unpolished martial arts upon the boys clamoring for Haruhime's attention.

"*Hey! What're you doing! Knock it off! Mikoto, again?!*" came the cries.

Having lost the chance to stop her, Ouka and Chigusa shared a wry smile.

And Haruhime herself, who'd looked so apologetic up until that very moment, blinked rapidly as she delightedly took in the scene of children being thrown left and right.

"Do not worry, Miss Haruhime! This shrine is not the sort of place you're worried it is!" said Mikoto, whirling around and taking Haruhime's hand. "We're poor. That much is true, but we've got lots and *lots* of things your mansion doesn't have! So please make yourself at home!"

Hearing Mikoto, Takemikazuchi and the other gods' eyes went wide, and a moment later, they burst out laughing: *Ah, of course!*

Mikoto turned her head left and right, confused at why her words had had the effect they did—then she, too, giggled.

The girl in front of her smiled like a flower. “Thank you, Mikoto.”

Upon seeing her smile, Mikoto beamed.

At the time, seeing Haruhime’s smile that day was the happiest moment in Mikoto’s life—because she had received Takemikazuchi’s Falna to bring happiness to the face of the girl in the mansion who’d looked up at the sky with such lonely eyes.

After that day, thanks to Mikoto and the others in her familia, Haruhime had been able to visit the shrine frequently. She’d been able to play with the other children to her heart’s content; to help with the shrine chores; and to well up with tears every time she failed, which was nearly always.

She was a naive, pure, and terribly kindhearted person.

That was Mikoto’s impression of the girl.

She adored Haruhime and would always look out for her. The more time they spent together, the more strongly Mikoto felt this sense of purpose as though she were a warrior and Haruhime her liege. Mikoto made up her mind.

She would stay by Haruhime’s side and would always, always protect her.

“I, H-Haruhime…will be a maid!”

Mikoto’s eyes shot open.

The noble girl she had resolved to protect ten years ago was now donning the dress of a maid.

In the days following the end of hostilities with *Ishtar Familia*, Haruhime joined *Hestia Familia* as its newest member. Mikoto was only just beginning to celebrate her chance to make up for all the years they had spent apart when Haruhime made her shocking declaration.

“L-Lady Haruhime, please don’t force yourself…If we all divide household tasks equally, then…”

“No, Lady Mikoto. Whether it was when I lived in my family’s mansion or

during my time with Lady Ishtar, I was always looked after by other people."

Mikoto wanted to protest that at least in the latter case she had still been terribly mistreated, but Haruhime's emerald eyes announced her unyielding resolve.

After the successful War Game, *Hestia Familia*'s home had become far larger, a development that had pushed Lilly and the others to debate on whether to hire a maid to manage the household—only for Haruhime to interrupt with a raised hand.

"I must use this opportunity to finally stand on my own two feet. I very much wish to be of use to Master Bell, Lady Mikoto, and the *Hestia Familia* that rescued me!"

Once Haruhime bared her feelings so openly, Mikoto could do nothing to stop her.

She was undeniably sincere about her intentions. As the daughter of a wealthy and powerful family, Haruhime had wanted for nothing, nor had she ever been allowed to make a single choice for herself. This time, she was determined to tackle a challenge herself.

She had come to Orario ahead of *Takemikazuchi Familia* and had been forced to work at a brothel. She had suffered hardship beyond Mikoto's imagining. But she had overcome her past and was trying to become more than the person she was born as.

No—she had *decided* to become more.

After a certain boy had saved her.

"…Very well. In that case, Lady Haruhime, I support your decision!" said Mikoto.

Haruhime smiled happily.

In the Far East, Haruhime had been taught the arts of noble court ladies, such as dance and flower arrangement, and was very deft with her hands. Perhaps she would make a surprisingly good maid, Mikoto thought at first.

"—Ah?!"

“Wha—?! Miss Haruhime, did you break *another* plate?!”

However, that notion was immediately shattered into pieces.

The sounds of Haruhime’s constant blunders were never scarce in *Hestia Familia*’s home.

Even to Mikoto’s eye, she was making no progress at all.

The problem was her nerves. While carrying plates, pouring tea, or tidying up, her overwhelming desire to be useful would cause her to drop the plate, spill the tea, or topple the basket.

Mikoto could no longer count on both hands the number of times she’d looked awkwardly away as Haruhime tearfully rubbed her ample backside and fluffy tail after being not figuratively but literally kicked out of the kitchen by Lilly.

It was as though she’d switched careers from “sheltered princess” to “absentminded maid.” It was, frankly, a change for the worse, but the hands of time could not be turned back.

“You’re honestly more useless than even I expected,” said the always-candid Welf one day, after more failures than there’s time to enumerate.

“I am very sorry, Master Crozzo!”

“Didn’t I tell you it’s fine to just call me Welf instead of using my family name?…Seriously, though, do you have *any* skills that you could use around the house?”

“W-well, I suppose…I do have the skills I was taught at my former place of employment…so i-if you wish it, Master Welf, I could attend to you at nighttime…” said Haruhime.

““Bwuh?!”” Welf and a red-faced Mikoto exploded simultaneously, but neither could stop Haruhime’s rampage.

“H-however, if you would permit me a bit of selfishness, might I be permitted to spend a night with Master Bell first? Please, I only beg this one favor of you…”

“You are disgusting, Mr. Welf!! To suggest Miss Haruhime do such a filthy

thing! I'll remember this!" said Lilly.

"The hell I did!! I got eyes for nobody but Lady Hephaistos!!"

"What're you all doing in my sweet, innocent little familia?!" demanded Hestia as the damage from the disaster began to spread.

Mikoto was fairly certain she had never heard Welf bellow quite so loudly before.

Haruhime also still mistakenly believed she was no longer a virgin, but Mikoto had been too embarrassed to tell her otherwise. Or rather, Mikoto had wanted Bell to tell her. But Bell hadn't found the courage to have that conversation yet.

One thing led to another until Haruhime's very presence was considered potentially obscene.

"I forbid it! Haruhime, you are forbidden from even getting *close* to Bell!!"

"What?! B-but why?"

""Ask yourself and figure it out!!"" thundered Lilly and Hestia. Bell was nowhere nearby.

It was around this time that Hestia found herself unable to take her eyes off Haruhime without becoming very uneasy.

Mikoto had grown quite accustomed to fixing situations behind the scenes—like prostrating herself before Lilly in a desperate effort to keep the prum girl from making good on her threat to nickname Haruhime "That Far East Sex Maid"—and as such, Welf had commiserated with her on several occasions, having performed a similar role in the familia himself many times before. Ouka's reluctant companion Welf had ended up being her closest friend in *Hestia Familia*.

Mikoto was apprehensive that the latest series of mishaps would break Haruhime's heart enough to put her off the maid idea entirely, but surprisingly, Haruhime refused to give up.

She certainly lamented her failures, but she also ran herself ragged, and little by little, she began to overcome her clumsiness with a maid's work of maintaining the household.

And as Mikoto watched, she noticed a strength in Haruhime she'd never seen before.

Perhaps she'd developed that strength while she'd been forced into prostitution, or perhaps the boy who'd saved her had been the trigger. In either case, Mikoto couldn't take her eyes off her.

Time and time again, when Haruhime was in trouble, Mikoto found herself tempted to intervene and help. But each time, she resisted.

Modesty aside, Mikoto was confident in her own domestic skills. Back at the shrine, with all the chores and housekeeping she had done with Chigusa, she'd gotten good not just at cooking, but cleaning, laundry, and anything else that needed doing around a home. When it was Mikoto's turn to cook, Hestia and the rest were only too happy to let her work.

But she decided quite earnestly that it wouldn't be at all in Haruhime's interests for Mikoto to talk down to her, or to steal the work out from under her.

But how can *I help Miss Haruhime…? Oh!*

Then it came to her.

To execute the idea, she decided to call in reinforcements.

"Sir Bell, would you be willing to instruct Lady Haruhime in what it means to be a maid?" Mikoto asked Bell, with Haruhime present.

"Wha—?!" Haruhime cried in dismay.

"I mean, I'm not sure, Mikoto…" said Bell to her entreaty. "I don't know all that much about being a maid…"

But in the end, Bell agreed to the request. Indeed, even without Mikoto's asking, he would have wanted to help Haruhime. This wasn't just because he was the familia's captain, either. The boy was a genuinely good-natured person. If his experience of growing up in the countryside with his grandfather might help Haruhime with anything, then he was more than willing to share.

Haruhime, despite her embarrassment, was shyly happy to accept Bell's help with her work—although Lilly and Hestia did occasionally intrude.

Mikoto was unsophisticated in matters of romance, but even to her eye, Haruhime's heart was clearly fixed on Bell.

Having someone work alongside their love interest could have surprising effects. Concern about not seeming weird could drive all their focus to instead only showing their appealing or beautiful sides. This had been Mikoto's experience with Takemikazuchi.

Becoming *too* nervous and self-conscious was another way to fail, though.

"…And it's not as though *I* am Lady Haruhime's hero anymore," said Mikoto.

During the operation to liberate her from *Ishtar Familia*, Haruhime had seen Bell fight for her. He had rescued her.

He was what *hero* meant to Haruhime, now. It was his presence that supported her.

As Mikoto lived with *Hestia Familia*, these thoughts became stronger—and of course, she felt some sadness when she had this realization.

When they'd been children, Haruhime's heroes had been Ouka and the others, and Mikoto.

She didn't think Bell had stolen Haruhime away or anything of the sort. But she did sometimes wonder whether she could regain her place as Haruhime's hero if she became strong enough.

Mikoto had the premonition that in a year, when she was scheduled to return to *Takemikazuchi Familia*, Haruhime would stay with Bell and *Hestia Familia*.

And yet—

"Mikoto, wanna help?" Haruhime flashed her friend a smile, forgetting her usual formality and addressing Mikoto the way she had when they were children.

"…Certainly, Lady Haruhime!"

To Haruhime, Mikoto was an irreplaceable friend as well as one of the heroes who'd come to rescue her. As Mikoto gradually came to understand this, she felt both self-conscious and terribly happy. The kindhearted girl who'd been kept caged in the Pleasure Quarter was still the same kindhearted girl she had

always been.

And this made Mikoto very, very happy.

Another month passed.

Haruhime had changed even more.

For one thing, she had gained a powerful maternal aura. Even Hestia, goddess of warm affection, had occasionally covered her eyes with her arm while muttering, “Whoa…she’s so powerful…”

She had also improved considerably as a maid. She still made mistakes, and often agonized over them, but she also never failed to pick herself up and keep at it.

She still occasionally looked wistfully up at the sky, but now there was a smile on her face instead of tears in her eyes.

This was all after meeting Wiene.

After parting ways with the dragon girl and the other Xenos, she seemed to apply herself to every task with newfound energy.

Most notable were her preparations to join ventures into the Dungeon. First, she started having detailed meetings with Lilly, the party’s other supporter. They went over the management of magic stones and how to read maps, as well as item classification and memorization beginning with identifying various potions and antidotes. Mikoto frequently saw Haruhime heading into Lilly’s room carrying bottles filled with red or blue liquid to compare.

“Now listen, Miss Haruhime. Fundamentally, the job of a supporter is to manipulate the battlefield for your adventurers. That means creating an environment that makes it easy for them to fight. It’s not just about picking up the magic stones and drop items that fall.”

“Understood!”

“Some adventurers—not many, but a few—even call supporters ‘the final rear guard.’ We give and take equipment, ration out items…and must always be

thinking of ways to ease the stress our party experiences while exploring the Dungeon.”

Lilly was sharing her own knowledge and experience with Haruhime—a clear sign that she, too, had accepted her into their familia.

Before *Hestia Familia*’s first expedition, when Lilly had to dedicate time and resources to studying command and control, she proved her trust in Haruhime by unhesitatingly delegating critical tasks to her. And given how much Lilly dragged Haruhime around with her even after the expedition ended, it seemed likely that she was thinking of having the fox girl take over her own duties if something were to happen to her.

The sight of Haruhime traipsing happily behind the petite Lilly here and there inescapably summoned the image of a squirrel and a fox that were somehow friends. Mikoto couldn’t help but smile.

In addition to that, Mikoto knew that Haruhime had also practiced her sorcery with Aisha in preparation for the expedition. Flashes of golden light would sometimes filter through the drawn curtains of the library, and occasionally the explosive sound of an Ignis Fatuus would ring out. It would be loud enough to make even Hestia jump, from which Mikoto could guess at the extreme difficulty of mastering the use and control of new magic. She lost count of how many times she’d become frantic at the sight of a coughing Haruhime emerging from the library, her clothing scorched, trailing behind a sighing Aisha.

“Do you want to learn martial arts?”

“I do.”

Even as she threw herself into her magical training, Haruhime asked for instruction in how to physically handle her body in combat, carefully timing her request to Takemikazuchi—who was visiting Hearthstone Manor regularly in order to give Mikoto, Chigusa, and Ouka special training—so that it wouldn’t interfere with his other duties.

It would just be during the short amount of time that remained before the start of the expedition.

“Miss Aisha told me not to expect to improve much, but…I’ve thought it over

quite a lot, and I don't think deciding on my own that I can't do it is the right path."

"…"

"I, too…wish to be strong," said Haruhime to Takemikazuchi there in the corridor facing the moonlit garden.

"…Very well. I will teach you," agreed the god of combat, smiling at the girl's wish.

Beginning the next day, after an exhausted Haruhime was mentally depleted from her sorcery training, she would go and practice with Takemikazuchi while Mikoto and the others were resting from their own lessons.

"First, you must understand that your foundation is completely different compared to Mikoto's and the others'."

"Yes, Lord Takemikazuchi."

"Superficial understanding will do you no good. You will drill only self-defense techniques."

"'Self-defense techniques'?"

"Correct. I've heard that you have quite sturdy armor. You must learn how to use it, mastering it to the point where you can handle enemy attacks not by actively reacting but with your reflexes."

What Takemikazuchi drilled into her in the short time available was, in a word, tactics.

"The martial arts are not only about flashy moves. You must also train your wits. Quick thinking can prevent a fatal strike from landing."

"I understand!"

And, in fact, that lesson saved her life.

In defiance of Aisha's argument that she would be better off focusing solely on magic, Haruhime's actions saved her own life and, moreover, spared the party great suffering during the perilous battle with the floor boss.

She was always ready to struggle for her goals. To carefully consider her

options and decisively take action. And on top of that, she constantly sought out instruction.

It was a simple thing but unspeakably important. Like Bell ahead of her, that alone would lead to a step of self-improvement, and then ten steps. She made it possible to achieve something that wasn't attainable by simply doing as she had been told and only practicing what she had been taught.

And even now, Haruhime was in this state of constant self-improvement.

This naive, pure, and terribly kindhearted person.

This princess raised in a gilded cage had opened the door and, of her own will, stepped out into the world to become a traveler.

"Lady Haruhime…is something the matter?" Mikoto asked, sensing that something was indeed amiss. She looked at Haruhime from the side as the renart gazed up into the clear blue sky contemplatively.

"We…made a promise," said Haruhime, raising her little finger. "To see each other again…to live together again…That is part of why I'm working so hard."

She held the finger she'd made that promise with to her chest as though it were very dear. Her smiling face was unspeakably beautiful—just as it had been the first time they'd met, but now she was so much stronger.

Mikoto smiled, feeling as though she'd just witnessed something dazzling and precious.

She'd changed. The weak little girl and the once despairing prostitute both. Through each experience, she grew.

Haruhime didn't need her protection anymore, Mikoto suddenly realized.

Which was why—

So that Haruhime could one day save another, Mikoto would continue to support her, always…

It was the middle of the night, and everyone was asleep.

Bell woke up with a start. "—!!"

He heard a faint creaking coming from the wall. Throwing off his blanket, he reached down to his waist to draw a knife that wasn't there.

Pale-blue light streamed in through the window. There was nothing threatening there.

After confirming that there was indeed no threat, he shakily exhaled the breath he'd been holding. His body was terribly sweaty.

He let his arms go slack, then, sitting back down on the bed, covered his mouth with his hand.

Deep sleep eluded him.

It was far preferable to his harrowing time in the deep levels, where he'd never slept more than five minutes at a time, but the stress was clearly still weighing on him. He was a Level 4 upper-class adventurer, and there was nothing happening in his daily life that ought to be affecting his sleep. Nobody suspected it, but he was constantly fatigued, waking every morning with the foul aftertaste of a nightmare lingering in his head.

And no doubt they were indeed nightmares.

The sound of the Juggernaut's massacre; the screams of the adventurers; the terrifying howls of the monsters on the thirty-seventh floor. They all echoed in the depths of his sleep, tormenting him.

Bell felt an unaccountable terror that the Dungeon's darkness in his dreams would drag him in and down, and he would never wake up again.

"…I'm fine. I'm fine. It'll be fine."

This was temporary. If he could endure it, he'd soon get re-accustomed to the air aboveground, and it would pass.

Bell was confident of this, so he told no one of his trouble sleeping nor asked for anything. He was sure there was no medicine for it but time itself, which was all the more reason not to worry anyone.

He was suddenly envious of his younger self, who despite wanting so badly to become a great fighter would go crying to his grandfather whenever he had a nightmare. Bell heaved a heavy sigh.

There was a hesitant *knock, knock* at the door.

"…?"

Bell, slightly surprised, was about to stand up, but before he could, the door opened and a pair of bright-green eyes peered into the room.

Dim blue light reflected off of beautiful golden hair.

"Haruhime…?"

"Yes, it's me." The renart girl stepped quietly into the room and stood in front of Bell with a gentle and reassuring smile.

Before Bell could speak again, Haruhime lifted something up and held it to her chest. "Master Bell, would you like to hear a story from a book? It's a story of some very kind heroes."

She held a single volume that sported a binding that seemed very old.

Bell blinked. "Hear? Not…read?"

"That's right. I am very much in the mood to read a story aloud right now, as it happens," said Haruhime, gently supporting Bell's weight as she laid him down in his bed—like a kindly prostitute would, or an older sister.

It was then that Bell realized Haruhime's real aim. She must have figured out that he hadn't been sleeping well and was here to soothe him with a bedtime story.

Bell smiled faintly.

"…It's like *The Thousand and One Nights*."

Haruhime giggled. "That's quite right. Perhaps just once, I wanted to be the princess of a ruined nation, yearning for the king."

Bell lay on his back, looking up. He saw the girl smile, illuminated from behind by the moonlight coming through the window.

"Now then, Master, would you indulge my selfishness and listen to a tale?"

Bell's eyes narrowed in a smile. "With pleasure," he murmured.

"Thank you very much," she whispered.

The slender fingers of her hand as she held his were very warm.

As her beautiful, ringing voice began to spin a tale, his eyes grew heavier and heavier.

Tonight he would be able to sleep. He would have no frightening dreams.

"…"

Emanating from within the room was the faint sound of someone telling a story.

With her back leaning against the door, Mikoto listened to the gentle lullaby and smiled.

When Haruhime had quietly awoken and left the room they shared and headed toward where Bell slept, Mikoto, deducing her kind intentions, had stealthily followed her.

Hestia appeared with a yawn. "Hmm? Is that you, Mikoto?"

"Ah, is something the matter, Lady Hestia?"

"I got the feeling Bell was scared of something, so, y'know…I figured I'd check in on him, maybe go to sleep with him…"

"Sir Bell's room is over there. Come, let us go together, shall we?"

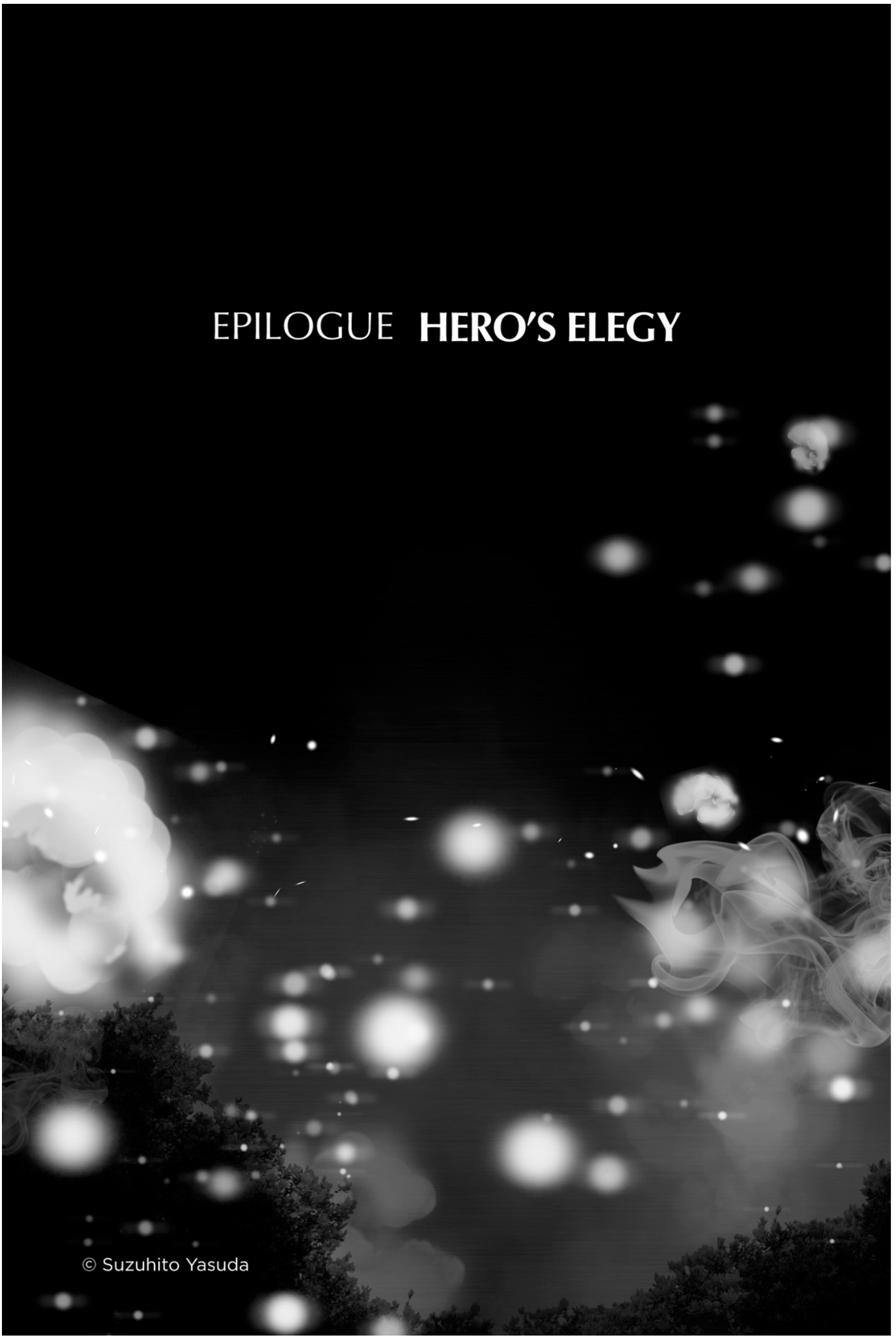
"Hwha?" Hestia yawned again. "Is that where it is?"

Mikoto led Hestia, who rubbed her sleepy eyes and held her pillow under her arm, back into her own room. The pajama-clad goddess smacked her lips sleepily and went obediently along.

Nudging Hestia from behind, Mikoto stuck her tongue out in the darkness and silently apologized. She was ever the faithful retainer, and like a ninja, she struck from the shadows.

As she escorted the goddess away, Mikoto mused that so long as she could continue to support Haruhime like this, that was plenty.

EPILOGUE HERO'S ELEGY



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EPILOGUE

HERO'S ELEGY

"Please…you've got to kill it."

As I stand there frozen, a human adventurer I don't recognize speaks to me in a quivering voice. In his wounded arms, he holds a female animal person.

I can tell at a glance she's been fatally hurt; she's soaked in blood. Her eyes will never open again.

"That monster, please, kill it…"

We're on the twentieth floor of the Dungeon; the air is cold in the gloom.

Along with the rest of his badly injured party, the adventurer stares transfixed into the darkness—and glowing in that darkness are menacing eyes staring right back at us as they steadily come closer.

What happened here is obvious. It's an all-too-common story in the Dungeon.

A giant monster attacked a group of upper-class adventurers during their expedition. A single Irregular native to a deeper floor overwhelmed them, and they were given no option but to flee.

That's where we'd come across them, and even as we tried to help them escape, there was no time to heal them.

The grievously injured female animal person breathes her last in front of her comrades' eyes, without so much as a single final word.

"I know I have no right to say this. I know that. This is the life we chose. But… but please…!"

All adventurers accept the danger of this life as a given. There are plenty of other, safer ways to make a living. But these people—including the woman who just died—chose the adventuring life, seeking fame or fortune, the fulfillment of their ambitions, or simply the inescapable draw of the unknown.

Whatever their reasons, every adventurer has chosen this path with full awareness of the risks that come with it.

Naturally, it's a mistake to resent the monsters. Though they might grievously injure you, though they might slaughter your friends, hating the creatures in the Dungeon is more than misguided; it's downright laughable.

The adventurer speaking to me knows this, even as tears fall from his eyes onto the already cooling body of his comrade. And yet, even though he knows it's a disgraceful thing to ask, he can't help but beg me through his sobs. "Please, Bell Cranell…avenge her…!"

My left arm fully healed, all of *Hestia Familia* has returned to regular action in the Dungeon—and this is what immediately greets us.

The completely unremarkable death of an adventurer. There is no scandal here—no drama at all. It's just another day in the Dungeon. This cruel reality has always been here, lying in wait. The only question is whether you notice it.

I'd fallen into a stupor the moment my fellow adventurer died, and when I see her comrade's weighty tears, I can feel my head and body flash white.

All distractions and worries disappear, and my body is filled with a single transparent purpose.

To kill the creature whose savage howls even now draw closer.

I hear Welf's and Lilly's voices from beside me.

"Bell…"

"Mr. Bell…"

"Sir Bell…"

"Master Bell…"

From behind me, I can hear the sadness in Mikoto's and Haruhime's voices.

I grip the Hestia Knife and charge the monster with a scream.

From the distant past right up to the present day, Orario has been a city

overflowing with death.

There were times blessed by peace and there were times of unthinkable slaughter. People called “heroes” often met their tragic ends in moments of karmic justice that left no room for sympathy. Only one thing was certain—the majority of these events took place during the unending battle against monsters.

This land was piled high with death; the people who have died number as many as there are stars in the sky. Such is the place called Orario.

Ironically, this has earned it such a reputation for glory that it has come to be called “the center of the world.” Even as its form changes with the age, its people and its monsters will continue to slaughter one another.

It is a place that generates death.

It is the last stronghold of the mortal world, and its true nature has never changed. It is the ancient fortress that stands between the labyrinth and the outer world. A symbol of the desires of every being to ever take up a sword.

Orario is the place of beginnings.

However.

Coming at it from another angle, the monsters could well be considered the victims. Regardless of the era, monsters are still constantly butchered in service of the greed of the surface dwellers who take magic stones or parts of the monsters’ bodies themselves and exchange them for money. Their slaughter is the price of glory. It is undeniable.

The inhabitants of the mortal world would reject the notion, but the deusdea are quite capable of entertaining this perspective.

But the perspective itself is undoubtedly a pointless one.

The question was decided eons before, when the monsters overflowed from the great pit and rampaged across the surface. There were those who took the right to exist, and those from whom that right was taken—followed by those who reclaimed that right, and those from whom it was reclaimed. The hostility between surface dwellers and monsters made the current state an inevitable

one. They were destined to hate and kill one another.

However—if we decide to trace all that back to the monsters' invasion of the surface, then surely the surface dwellers' hatred should be directed as much at the great pit of the Dungeon as it was the monsters that emerged from it.

Aiz Wallenstein, for one, felt this way.

—Avenge me.

—Protect the child.

—Fulfill the hopes of the surface.

In the gloom of the Dungeon, it was Aiz alone who heard the echoes of these bitter voices, the many desires gnawing at her ear in voices she both did and did not recognize. Countless arms reaching out from the darkness, begging pitifully *—please, please.*

They were the voices of those who had passed. They, too, were entreaties of those yet to be.

The young Aiz looked down into the palm of her small hand and nodded slowly. Then, as so many had done before her, she reached out to the hilt of the sword before her and pulled, accepting the weapon. In doing so, she signaled her readiness.

The dream ended there.

"…Nnh."

She slowly opened her eyes. Her still-blurry vision took in the sight of a familiar ceiling, the Spartan interior greeting her. She knew that she was in her own room.

She must have fallen asleep in her bed after completing the afternoon maintenance of her weapons. She sat up, confirming that her blade and its cleaning cloth were still at her side. Then she mused over her foggy memory.

It was dim in the room.

She checked the time and saw that it was evening.

The window had been left open, and the sun was gone, allowing darkness to

descend over the eastern sky.

"…"

The dream from which she had just awoken lingered in Aiz's mind.

In her dream, a version of her had accepted things as they were.

It was as though she had known nothing else—she had not been coerced, nor pressured, nor driven by any sense of purpose.

Aiz wordlessly fit her sword back into its scabbard, then stood and went to close the window, since the curtain was fluttering in the breeze.

"…?"

As she approached the windowsill, she noticed something different about the view of the city. Although it was night, the usual expanse of light from the city's countless magic-stone lamps was not there.

The entire city was dim.

And more than that, its normal raucous clamor had fallen silent.

Aiz took in the scene from her window for a few moments, then murmured, "Oh. Today is Elegia."

Perhaps that was why she'd had that dream, she thought as she gazed at the weakly flickering candlelight that dotted the city streets.

An ear-splitting noise thunders through the land, sounding as though it originated from the bowels of the earth.

As wind blows across the great pit, sometimes the sound will resonate deep into the labyrinth, rattling the ears of the adventurers within. At times it resembled the howl of some impossibly huge beast.

An impossibly huge beast known as the Dungeon.

I look down into the gaping maw of the labyrinth, the breeze rustling my hair as I ascend the long, magic-stone-lamp-lit ramp. The great staircase spirals up out of the Dungeon, continuing into the alabaster tower of Babel.

We have returned to the surface, burying the vicious monsters with their howls and claws beneath us.

It does not feel as though we have gotten vengeance. There is no sense that there would have been worse consequences if the monster had gotten loose in the world, or that there would have been more victims. I feel no purpose in what we've done.

I saw the tears of a man who'd lost his friend…and I wanted to stop any more sadness, any more suffering. That's all.

"Bell Cranell…thank you," the adventurer had said after we'd killed the monster, his face still streaked by the passage of tears.

I didn't answer.

"It's nighttime already…"

With the basement that connects directly to the Dungeon behind me, I emerge onto the ground floor of Babel and look out the great gates, flung open as they always are.

Evening has descended onto Central Park, which surrounds the tower.

Lilly, Welf, Mikoto, Haruhime, and I have been moving with the injured party we encountered, escorting the cold body of their dead comrade out of the Dungeon to the surface and protecting her from any monsters that attacked along the way.

The party is from *Dellingr Familia*. The adventurer who thanked me for avenging her is named Edgar. The dead animal-person adventurer's name was Celia.

After Edgar and his party lay Celia on the floor, we don't move for a while.

The hall is nearly deserted, and the few fellow adventurers who are there watch from a careful distance, as though used to the sight. Their gazes are mixed—some derisive, others pitying, and still others merely cold.

As I stand silently beside Edgar, Lilly and Welf nudge me from behind, as though to tell me there's nothing more we can do. Haruhime, looking rather unwell, and Mikoto, supporting her, both quietly nod their agreement.

Urged on by the four of them, I pick my feet up, and walk out of Babel.

As soon as we pass through the gates, we notice that the park looks very different tonight.

“Central Park, it’s…” I murmur.

The entire giant central district of the city is festooned with decorations. Wooden posts dot the area, draped with flowers. But the mostly white and blue posts seem, strangely, anything but festive.

Most noticeable of all is that the magic-stone lamps that light the streets are dark. In their place is the warm glow of candlelight.

Looking past Central Park, I can see that the magic-stone lamps throughout the city are all extinguished. I can’t hide my confusion.

“Oh, that’s right, today’s Elegia,” says Welf, beside me.

“We were staying in Rivira in the middle levels, so I completely forgot,” adds Lilly.

“Elegia…?” I parrot, blankly. I remember hearing Welf use the word back at The Benevolent Mistress.

Lilly looks over to me. “Do you not know about it?…Oh, of course. You might be a top-class adventurer, but you still haven’t lived in Orario for a full year.” She gives me a smile, but there’s something lonely about it.

Welf quietly explains. “Elegia is…well, basically it’s a festival to mourn dead heroes.”

“To mourn…heroes?”

“Correct, Sir Bell. To show our respect for the ancient heroes of Orario who sacrificed themselves to stem the tide of monsters that swarmed out of the pit,” says Mikoto.

“It’s also a thanksgiving festival to show appreciation for their great deeds,” adds Haruhime.

Just as they’ve explained, after a while, ordinary citizens of Orario begin to gather in the park.

It’s a huge crowd, but there is nothing overwhelming about it.

To a one, the crowd is soundless; they wear their silence like a cloak of shadow.

Haruhime sees boys and girls carrying flowers, and a forlorn look dwells in their eyes.

Young and old, male and female, human and demi-human alike, most of the assembled people wear robes of white and carry candleholders.

“You probably know this, but…there are monuments to the heroes all over the city, starting with the courtyard in front of the Guild and the First Graveyard. At the appointed time, people will start from Central Park and visit each one in turn,” says Lilly.

“Then they come back here and sing. To offer their respect and thanks,” Welf tells me.

They go on to explain that Elegia, the festival of heroes, will last until the sun comes up. Until then, not a single magic-stone lamp will shine in Orario and candles will be the only source of light. As though to relive the nights those ancient heroes themselves lived, the shopping district, Pleasure Quarter, the crafters district, as well as every tavern and every home, will pass the night with only candlelight.

The Guild is responsible for organizing the festival, and sure enough, I see their uniformed employees here and there. Among them I spot Miss Eina and Miss Misha.

Under the expanse of the night sky, the city is filled with tiny, flickering flames. The atmosphere in the streets is so solemn and quiet that it makes their usual liveliness seem like a distant memory. Even the ever-foolish, ever-teasing voices of the gods have, just today, gone quiet.

The people of Orario today have only awe toward the ancient heroes.

“It’s also a festival for adventurers in the present day…to mourn those lost to the Dungeon,” murmurs Lilly, and I feel a faint stirring in my chest.

The adventurers of the present.

The heroes of the ancient past.

A festival held in Orario once each year to honor both—to mourn the fallen adventurers, and to honor the ancient heroes.

As we walk across the square, I stop and look back. I think of Edgar and the rest of his party, still in the tower with Celia's body.

Are the candles that fill the city tonight an offering for her? Will their mournful light lay their grief to rest?

Right now, it's the only thing I can think about.

Aiz went outside.

Looking out over the candlelit night scene, she found herself too restless to stay in her room—perhaps owing to the unusual dream she'd just had.

Instead of her normal adventuring outfit, she put on a simple white dress and tied her long, golden hair back.

Drawn by the mournful lights, Aiz ventured into the city alone, telling no one.

There are so many people again, this year…

Elegia had begun.

Setting out from Central Park to visit the city's various monuments, the people formed lines as they walked along the wide avenues. Some made for the Guild courtyard, others for the First Graveyard, and others for the city's outskirts, each paying their respects either to a hero they had never met or to an adventurer lost to the Dungeon.

Most residents of Orario gave flowers to any adventurers they knew for Elegia. Family, lovers, former colleagues—adventurers drawn to the Dungeon often came to know many people. In one spot, a human girl held a bouquet as tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. Elsewhere, a certain elven woman overcame her sadness to join the line.

As Guild employees oversaw the procession carefully to prevent disorder, Aiz kept her gaze low as she walked against traffic to one side of the street.

As she looked at the flickering candlelight, the faces of the many people she'd said good-bye to came and went in her mind. People close to her, people who'd shown her kindness, precious people.

Among them were faces from *Loki Familia*. Aiz had lost mentors and juniors alike to the Dungeon's cruelty.

The moments of their deaths came to her mind, along with their final words, echoing. The sadness of their loss became a pain blooming in the depths of her heart.

If one must lose someone, best not to lose them to the Dungeon, she thought.

Why not simply stop being a prisoner to the unknown and stop playing at adventuring? So an ignorant person might say with their finger pointed at an adventurer.

But Aiz—and every other top-class adventurer—had a reason they couldn't stop fighting. Of course they each individually had their various ambitions and hopes, but Aiz and the others in her familia also had a duty set before them on behalf of the entire world.

Then, as she was deep in thought, her face illuminated by the candles—

"Hey! It's the Sword Princess!" cried a voice from the crowd she was passing. "She's not carrying her sword, but it's really her!"

"Wow, she really is prettier than an elf! She's like a goddess!"

"What's the Sword Princess doing here?!"

From outside of the procession came a group of children frolicking around Aiz, as was expected.

Aiz's eyes glittered with all the sharpness one would expect from a top-class adventurer as she tried to keep her distance from the children.

"No, you have to call her *Miss* Sword Princess! A top-class adventurer is *very* important, you guys!" lectured a half-elf girl from within the clump of children. With a bouquet in her arms, she turned back to address Aiz. "Um, Miss Sword Princess, I heard from my mom that at the edge of the world there's, um, a

really strong, *really* scary dragon!”

Aiz’s hand twitched.

She watched as the half-elf girl stumbled over her words, pressing on despite seeming somehow frightened. “She said that today’s festival is for praying to the great heroes to protect us from that dragon! And also for the adventurers to beat that dragon, since everybody’s so scared of it!”

“…”

“Um, Miss Sword Princess, please beat that scary dragon!” the girl finished as the other children looked on breathlessly.

“…I will.” Aiz nodded to the girl. “I swear I’ll beat it.” She then flashed a fleeting smile filled with resolve.

The children’s faces bloomed into smiles at Aiz’s answer. They looked at one another delightedly, then shouted, “Good luck!” before rejoining the procession as it continued down the avenue.

After she waved and watched them go, Aiz resumed her own walk. People were starting to notice her, so she decided to go somewhere less populated.

The place she chose was a deserted overlook. As she ruminated over her conversation with the children, she gazed up into a star-filled night sky.

—A really strong, really scary dragon at the edge of the world.

It was the last remaining trial of the Three Great Quests.

All the mortals cried out for it—for the defeat of the Black Dragon.

The ancient dragon had flown from Orario. It was said to be the apocalypse incarnate.

And it was Aiz and her familia’s duty to defeat it, for that was the role given to the strongest familia in the city.

Aiz and the rest of *Loki Familia* had to keep fighting. They had to become more powerful. Even if it meant continuing to lay their comrades’ bodies in the ground.

They were the ones with the responsibility to strike down the dragon king,

who had brought such ruin to the city of Orario—to the Labyrinth City, where the strongest adventurers in the world gathered.

Aiz held her hair down as the wind stirred it and looked out at the candlelight in the city. Time passed, and as the moon made its way across the sky, at length she heard singing coming from Central Park.

The elegy that would bring the festival to a close had begun.

The people of the city gathered in its central district, almost overflowing from it, as they joined their voices together in prayer and song. Transcending borders of species and faction, their mingling emotions rose into Orario's night sky. Just as the girl had said, the prayer offered up by Elegia carried grief and gratitude simultaneously.

And Aiz, an adventurer of the highest tier, knew perfectly well what the meaning of that prayer was.

The world wanted a *hero*.

Adventurers scattered throughout the city heard the song.

A prum warrior in a room of the manor. A high elf queen. An old dwarf soldier. A middle-aged werewolf sitting on the roof. A pair of Amazon sisters. A boaz warrior in the top floor of an alabaster tower.

Each of them heard the song calling for a new generation's hero.

"…"

The casualties would continue to increase. Heroes were built on a foundation made of many lives.

Until the world's cry was answered—

Until whatever divine intention the gods were surely hiding finally came to fruition—

Until the last corner of the Dungeon was conquered—

—The lights of mourning that filled her vision would never go out.

"It was hard to look those children in the eye," Aiz murmured. It was hard to listen to the song that drifted in the air.

Aiz had a fervent wish. It was different from the wish of her people.

There was something she had to regain.

When the time for that promised battle came, for Aiz the grudge would be personal.

Just like an adventurer whose compatriot was killed by a monster in the Dungeon—not out of any high-minded heroism but simply as an absurd little puppet, ruled by her passions.

The beautiful song was oppressive.

"I…" All alone, Aiz's voice quivered, as though trying to escape the singing.

She had not taken up a sword by choice. It had simply been the natural conclusion when taking up a sword was all that she had. The continuation of the dream she'd seen and the timbre of the song both churned inside her.

When the words came, she spit them out like something foul.

"…I can't be *anyone's* hero."

"…"

"Sir Bell?"

Bell had stopped and was looking up into the night sky as the song drifted in its air.

"…The gods are singing, too."

He heard a lament for the dead, a hymn of thanks to the heroes, and even a song of prayer for the new heroes. And among those voices, Bell had realized, were the voices of the gods.

The voice of a wine-loving goddess enjoying a nightcap in the moonlight. The voice of a capricious silver-haired goddess. An elephant-faced man crying hot, stuffy tears. A goddess of the forge standing by a window. A sensitive-looking god standing atop the city wall. And a young goddess waiting for a boy to return home.

These gods and more all sang the elegy of their children.

Suddenly, Bell remembered words his grandfather had spoken to him when

he was young.

“Orario has everything. If you play your cards right, wealth and fame can be yours. But all who set foot there will be swept up into the currents of history. That’s the nature of the place. Which is why…you can be a hero there, too.”

The lives and deaths of heroes and adventurers.

The unfolding tales of adventure. And the newly spun heroic epics.

—The Labyrinth City Orario. A place of beginnings, dotted with heroes. And the promised place, where so many lives would be exchanged for just a handful of heroes.

The tale would continue to be passed on—regardless of whether it was what people hoped for.

In that moment, Bell had the feeling that he was finally beginning to understand what his grandfather meant.

“I…want to be a hero…” Bell whispered his secret childhood wish into the night air. Then he spoke the feelings that the ceaseless elegy had stirred up in his heart. “So…why is it all so sad?”

The boy’s quiet whisper: *I’ll leave a flower, so that I don’t forget what happened here.*

The girl’s quiet whisper: *I’ll leave a flower again this year, so I don’t lose myself.*

The boy and the girl heard the same song, looked up into the same sky, and sank into very different thoughts.

The eastern sky is suffused with light.

The songs ring out until the dawn, then fade. Elegia is over.

It is early morning, by the clock.

Bathed in sunlight, I make for the First Graveyard, in the southeastern quarter of the city. I’m going to leave flowers for the fallen adventurer Celia.

Before coming here, I inquired at *Dellingr Familia*, and they told me that Edgar had already buried her. Exhaustion lingered on their faces as they thanked me again.

In a corner of the graveyard stands a stone with nothing yet carved on it; *Dellingr Familia* has bought this small space to use for Celia's grave.

The First Graveyard—also known as the Adventurers Graveyard—is a massive cemetery filled with countless rows of gravestones just like this one. Typical gravestones, including the markers here and even the paving stones at my feet, are made from white stone, which the people of the mortal world have arbitrarily come to associate with the heavens.

"…"

The air is very clear. It's almost chilly.

I've bought flowers from a nice elderly couple's shop that Lilly recommended to me, and I lay them in front of the stone, then close my eyes.

I don't know how to pray for someone's soul to find peace, but I mourn for the death of a fellow adventurer.

Once it's all over, I slowly open my eyes.

I look over my surroundings.

"This is the second time I've come here…" I murmur.

My feet carry me of their own accord to the center of the graveyard, and a huge monument comes into view.

The first time I saw it was my first day in Orario. The second time is now, half a year later.

I stop in front of the heroes' grave, which stands just as I remember it.

…Have I changed at all since then?

There in front of the pitch-black monument, I compare past with present.

I've gained so many experiences. I've gotten strong enough to face monsters. I've had many brushes with death. And yet, no clear answers to my question present themselves.

The monument with the names of its many heroes carved in it offers me no answers.

But now I have the sense that the wistful feeling in my chest is everything.

There are so many flowers left here it could almost be mistaken for a field, as though to stand as proof of the many people who visited here last night during Elegia.

I stand in front of the monument and continue to reflect on how little I knew back then, when—

"—?"

I get the sense that someone else is visiting this otherwise deserted cemetery.

Is it…?

I look behind me.

To my surprise, there's a girl with golden hair and golden eyes walking past the rows of adventurers' graves toward me. "Aiz…"

Noticing me, her eyes betray similar surprise.

White sunlight showers the space between us.

I don't know why, but in that moment, somehow, seeing her illuminated by the morning sun, I get the feeling that she's been crying.

"Bell…" Aiz murmurs with her usual muted expression. She approaches me, as though to banish my hallucination. "Are you visiting someone's grave, too?"

"Y-yes…"

"Hmm."

Aiz comes right up to me, then lays her flowers in front of one of the gravestones. Her gaze doesn't return to me.

The two of us abandon ourselves to the wordless moment until she finally looks up.

"Well, then…" she says tersely as she walks right past me.

I've wanted to see her so much, but I can't bring myself to call out to her.

There's something between us now that can't be named or described.

"…"

As though my consciousness is being pulled, I fully turn around as I watch her leave.

I decide to go to the gravestone where Aiz left her flowers.

It's the grave of the ancient heroes whose exploits filled the *Dungeon Oratoria*, my childhood bible.

This is the resting place of the great men and women who risked their lives to defend Orario from the monsters that emerged from the great pit, saving countless lives in the process.

Was this also for Elegia…? Did Aiz want to leave flowers for the heroes, too…?

There are many, many flowers left in front of this monument—and the stumps of many burned-out candles, too.

Aiz left her flowers in front of the single biggest stone in the monument.

I read the name of the hero carved on the stone. "The Hero, Albert…?"

He was a legendary hero, appearing in not just the *Dungeon Oratoria*, but in many other tales as well.

A breeze stirs the petals of the flowers Aiz left in offering at the base of the black marker, and then, in that moment—

It's not an omen.

Nothing falls from the sky.

But a tremendous, blinding bolt runs through my mind as I consider the name on the marker.

My grandfather's voice and a single line from a certain poem come to me like lightning.

The great hero Albert…in the book he was Albehrt Eusebius, Champion of the Sword…he was called by a bunch of names, actually…wait, no, that's not right, it's—

My brain is trying to remember something. There's something in my memory trying to come out.

That's right.

A line from a book of tales I read.

A noble title recorded in the *Dungeon Oratoria* my grandfather gave me.

Another name for that great hero—

"'Valdstejn, the Mercenary King.'"

My heart skips a beat when I speak the name aloud.

He's the strongest hero in the *Dungeon Oratoria*, appearing in the final chapter.

In ancient times, the expeditionary forces he led were called mercenaries—but they're synonymous with what we now call adventurers.

In other words, his name means "the Adventurer King."

*Valdstejn…Valdstejn…*Wallenstein*?*

I can feel my eyes trembling.

Even now, it's not uncommon for people to borrow the names of heroes for their children. Examples are far from rare. But could this really be just a coincidence?

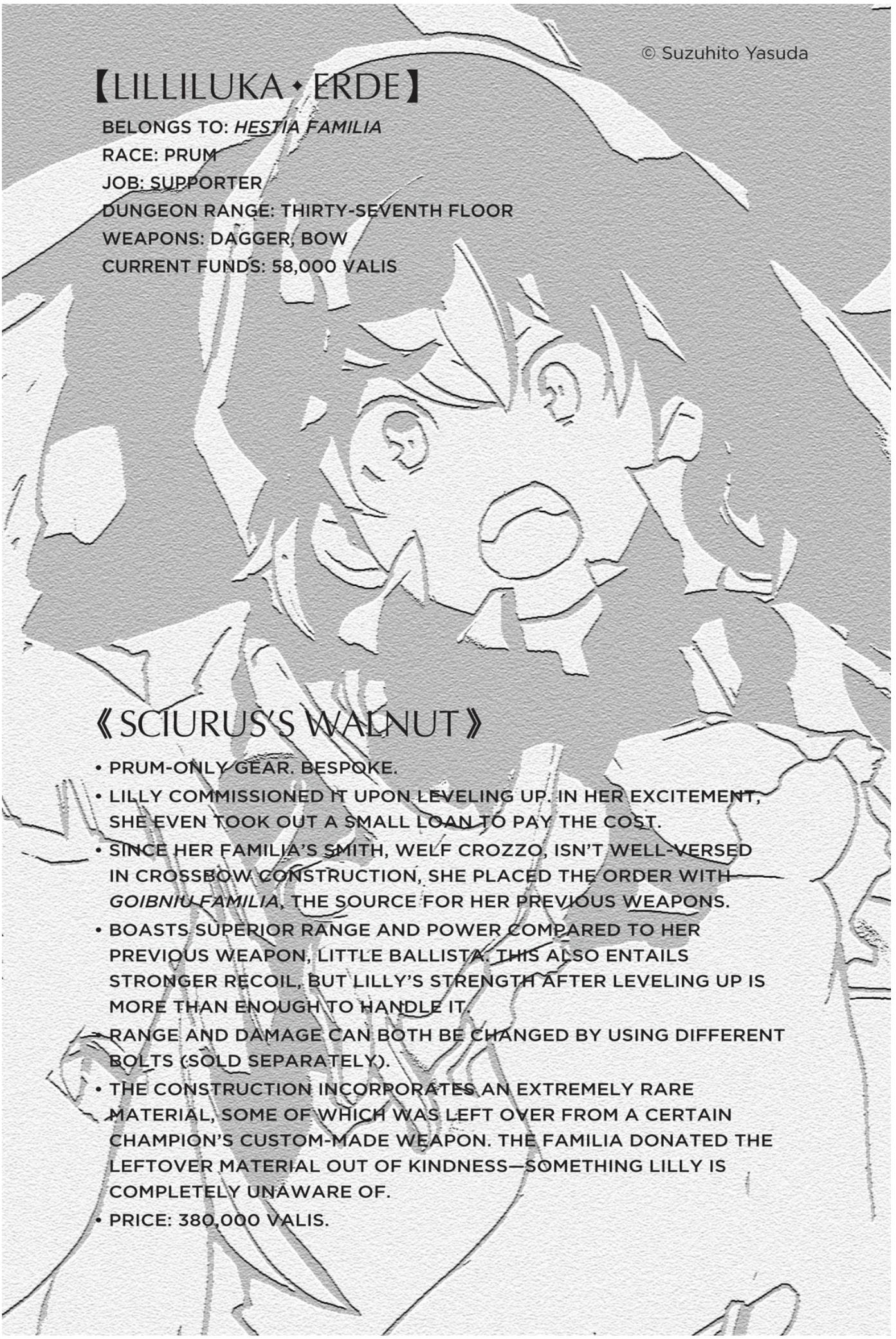
One of the strongest adventurers in modern times, being given the name of the strongest hero in history? Aiz Wallenstein, the Sword Princess, leaving flowers at the grave of the Mercenary King?

"…"

I slowly turn around.

As she recedes at the edge of my vision, I can still see her long golden hair.

I am stunned speechless as the object of all my yearning fades away into the morning sunlight and vanishes completely.



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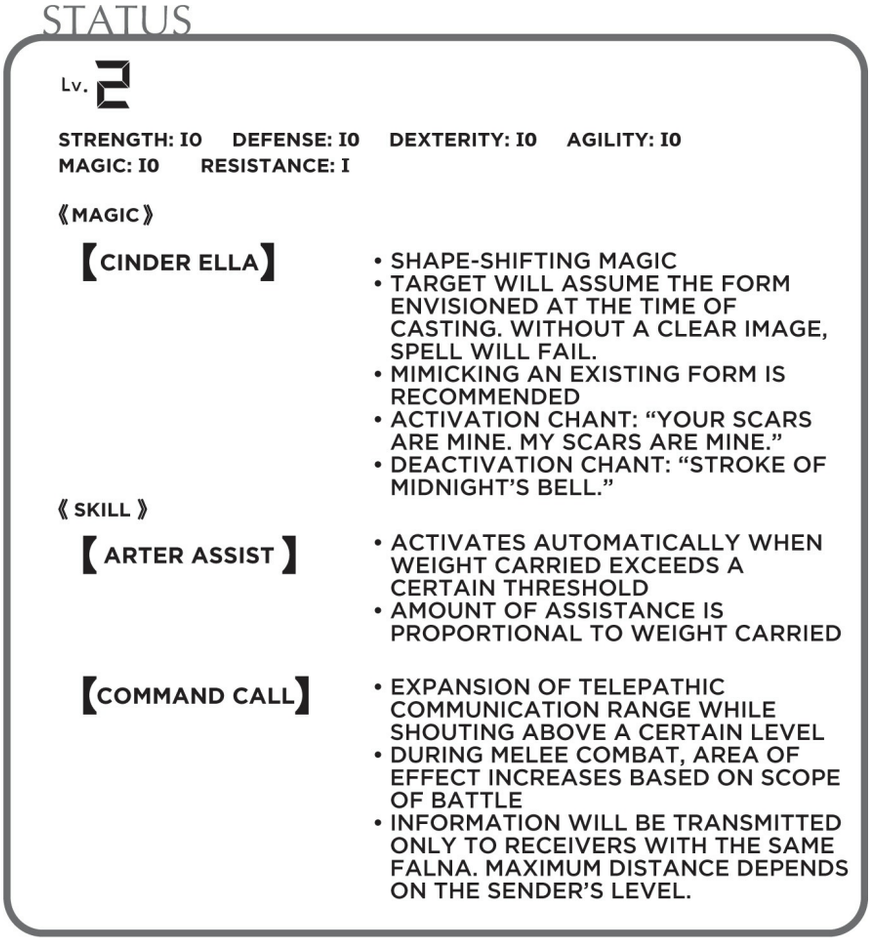
【LILLILUKA・ERDE】

BELONGS TO: *HESTIA FAMILIA*
RACE: PRUM
JOB: SUPPORTER
DUNGEON RANGE: THIRTY-SEVENTH FLOOR
WEAPONS: DAGGER, BOW
CURRENT FUNDS: 58,000 VALIS

《SCIURUS'S WALNUT》

- PRUM-ONLY GEAR. BESPOKE.
- LILLY COMMISSIONED IT UPON LEVELING UP. IN HER EXCITEMENT, SHE EVEN TOOK OUT A SMALL LOAN TO PAY THE COST.
- SINCE HER FAMILIA'S SMITH, WELF CROZZO, ISN'T WELL-VERSED IN CROSSBOW CONSTRUCTION, SHE PLACED THE ORDER WITH *GOIBNIU FAMILIA*, THE SOURCE FOR HER PREVIOUS WEAPONS.
- BOASTS SUPERIOR RANGE AND POWER COMPARED TO HER PREVIOUS WEAPON, LITTLE BALLISTA. THIS ALSO ENTAILS STRONGER RECOIL, BUT LILLY'S STRENGTH AFTER LEVELING UP IS MORE THAN ENOUGH TO HANDLE IT.
- RANGE AND DAMAGE CAN BOTH BE CHANGED BY USING DIFFERENT BOLTS (SOLD SEPARATELY).
- THE CONSTRUCTION INCORPORATES AN EXTREMELY RARE MATERIAL, SOME OF WHICH WAS LEFT OVER FROM A CERTAIN CHAMPION'S CUSTOM-MADE WEAPON. THE FAMILIA DONATED THE LEFTOVER MATERIAL OUT OF KINDNESS—SOMETHING LILLY IS COMPLETELY UNAWARE OF.
- PRICE: 380,000 VALIS.

STATUS



《 BACKPACK: HERMES SPECIAL 》

• BRAND-NEW GEAR TO MATCH HER WEAPONS. STURDILY MADE, WITH IMPROVED CARRYING CAPACITY.

• AS THE NAME SUGGESTS, IT WAS DESIGNED BY *HERMES FAMILIA* AND SOLD DIRECTLY ON THE MARKETPLACE. PER HERMES: “I AM THE PATRON DEITY OF TRAVELERS, AFTER ALL.”

• QUITE EXPENSIVE, AS IT’S SOLD ALONGSIDE PERSEUS’S MAGIC ITEMS. LILLY WAS RATHER ANNOYED AT THIS, BUT DECIDED IT WAS WORTH THE INVESTMENT.

• PRICED AT 49,800 VALIS. INCIDENTALLY, A STANDARD BACKPACK GOES FOR AROUND 2,000 VALIS.

Afterword

Let me just get one thing out of the way: I swear I did not want to write a harem story this time around.

I wanted to write a slice-of-life arc.

But there are a lot of female characters, and as their feelings toward the protagonist naturally got mushier, it was inevitable.

That's just how the fifteenth volume ended up.

First of all—the numbered chapters in this volume are revised versions of the seven exclusive bonus short stories that came with the special edition of the 2015 Blu-ray. With all the characters having just built up a lot of experience and grown a lot, I was allowed to use the moment to collect and record their backstories.

Incidentally, at first—or honestly, up until recently—I'd had no intention of letting my prum supporter level up. I'd planned to have her continue on as the representative of the weak and talentless, or at least the one in the setting with that perspective on things, but a certain editor kept putting a lot of pressure on me, saying, "You gotta let Lilly level up or it's gonna be bad, maaan!" I wasn't convinced, but I reread the story up through Volume 14, and with everything that happened it suddenly felt like it would be weird if she *didn't* level up, and if she didn't get her chance here, what kind of hell for the other characters would it take before she did. (That said, there's a dwarf who went through hell in Volume 7 of the spin-off without leveling up, but for plot reasons it was unavoidable. I'm sorry, Jagen!)

Anyway, congratulations to everyone's favorite supporter!

But maybe that's the real thrill of storytelling—when you start getting scared

of the characters who've totally smashed the plot you so carefully constructed. There's your raw look at the creative process.

If I have to give a name to the theme of this volume, it's the contrast between the inexperience of the past and the maturity of the present.

When I thought about it, I think I wanted to get across what our suddenly much stronger heroes were like when they were just starting out. When I try to explain it seriously it always sounds kind of embarrassing, but I personally really like that kind of "look how far they've come" stuff.

One of the great things I've learned from more experienced light novel authors is that getting to see how much the characters grow over the course of a single volume is just the best. If I've been able to remind people a bit of what the scale of what our heroes have gone through is, who they've met, and how they've suffered, then I'll be very happy.

From that perspective, the epilogue stands out as heretical. I hope you don't mind waiting a bit longer to see the past of our strongest heroine. I really agonized over whether to put "Hero's Elegy" into this volume, but I really wanted to dig into that part of the world here, so in it went. I had to really ask myself things like "What are adventurers? What's the labyrinth? What is a hero?" and it's one of my favorite episodes.

I'm sorry that my afterwords have been getting long lately. Let me get into thanking people.

As always, I'm indebted to my editor, Matsumoto, the editor-in-chief, Kitamura, and everyone at GA Bunko. Thank you so much for hanging out in this particular joint with me. To the illustrator Suzuhito Yasuda, thank you so much again for your wonderful illustrations. I'm sorry for making you draw so many giant chapter title pages. I'm always terrified that there aren't many titles that keep getting illustrations this far in. My deepest thanks to everyone involved with that process.

And to my readers, keeping up through this, the fifteenth volume, requires quite a few books ahead of it, so as always, thank you so much for reading. There's no end in sight for this story, and I'll be delighted if you continue to pick it up.

The fourth arc will be continuing here, and I believe the next volume will concern the lovely ladies of the tavern.

It’s a terribly trepidatious thing having come to this point, and I just hope I can somehow get through it. I just want to avoid it turning into a romantic comedy. Oh—no good, huh? I see. Well, I’ll try to put in plenty of sugar to spit out along with the blood. Nggh.

Thank you for coming with me this far.

I’ll be on my way.

Fujino Omori

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