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

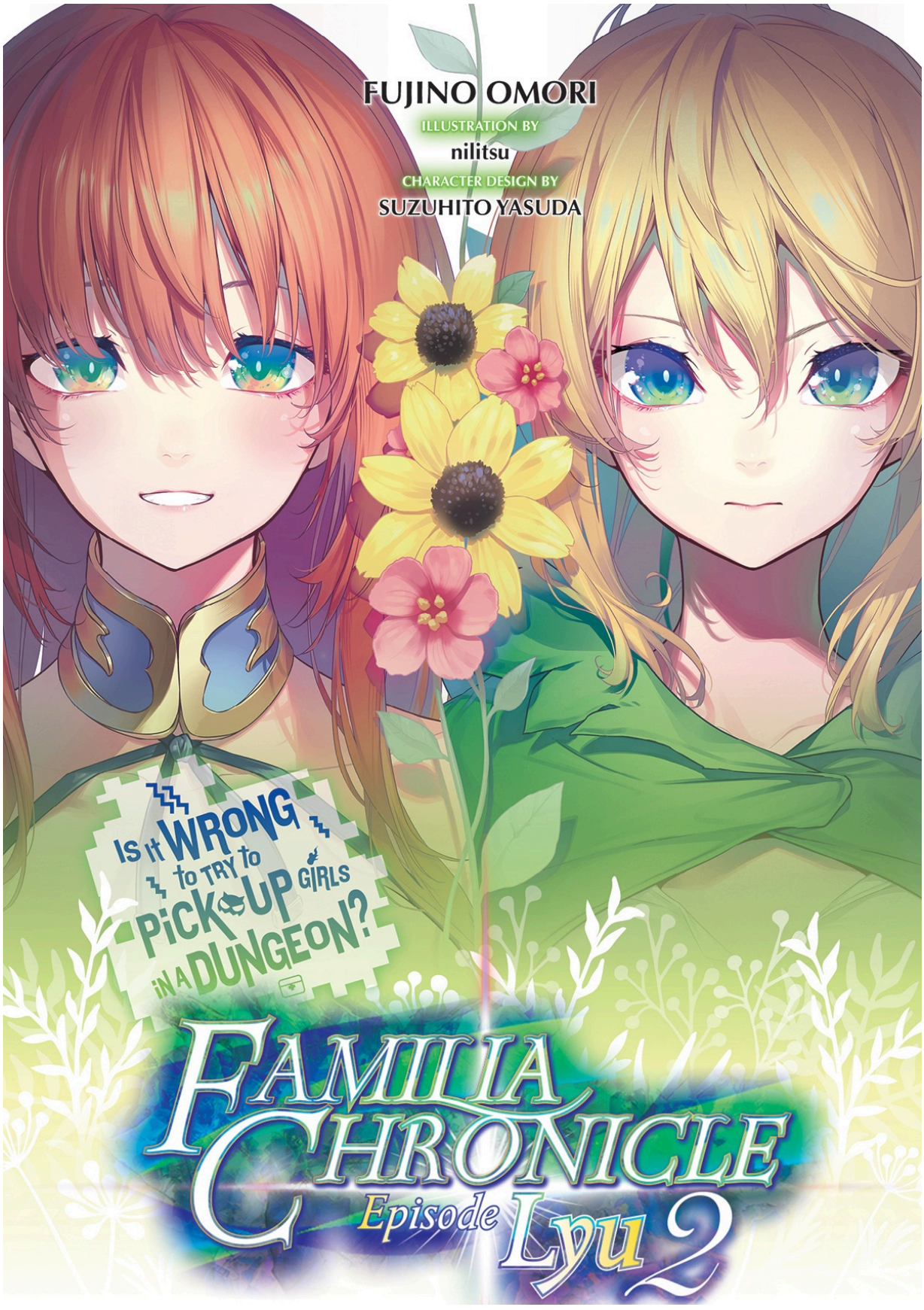
Familia Chronicle Episode Lyu 2

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Is It WRONG to TRY to PICK UP GIRLS in a DUNGEON?
FAMILIA CHRONICLE
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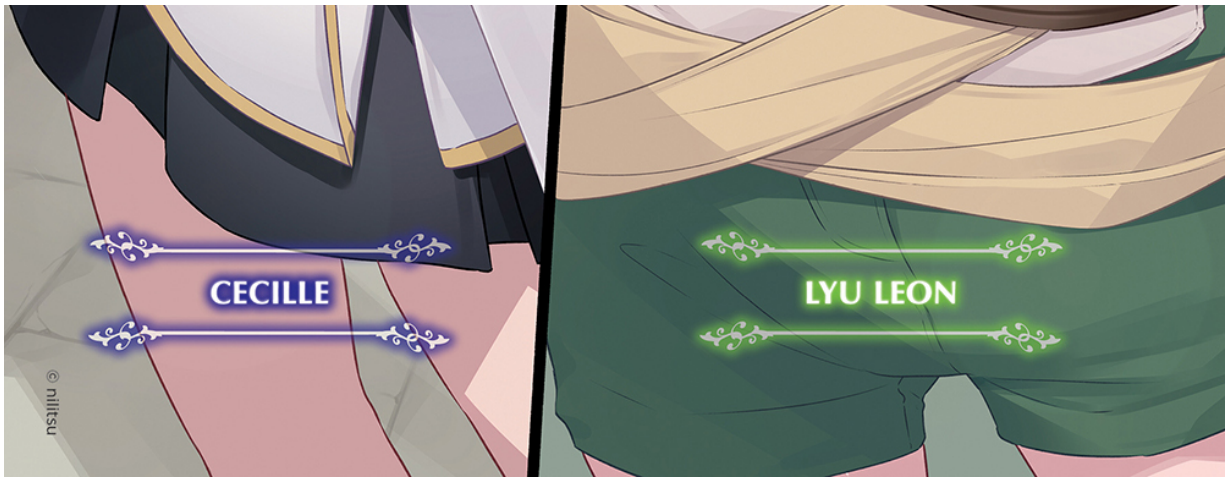
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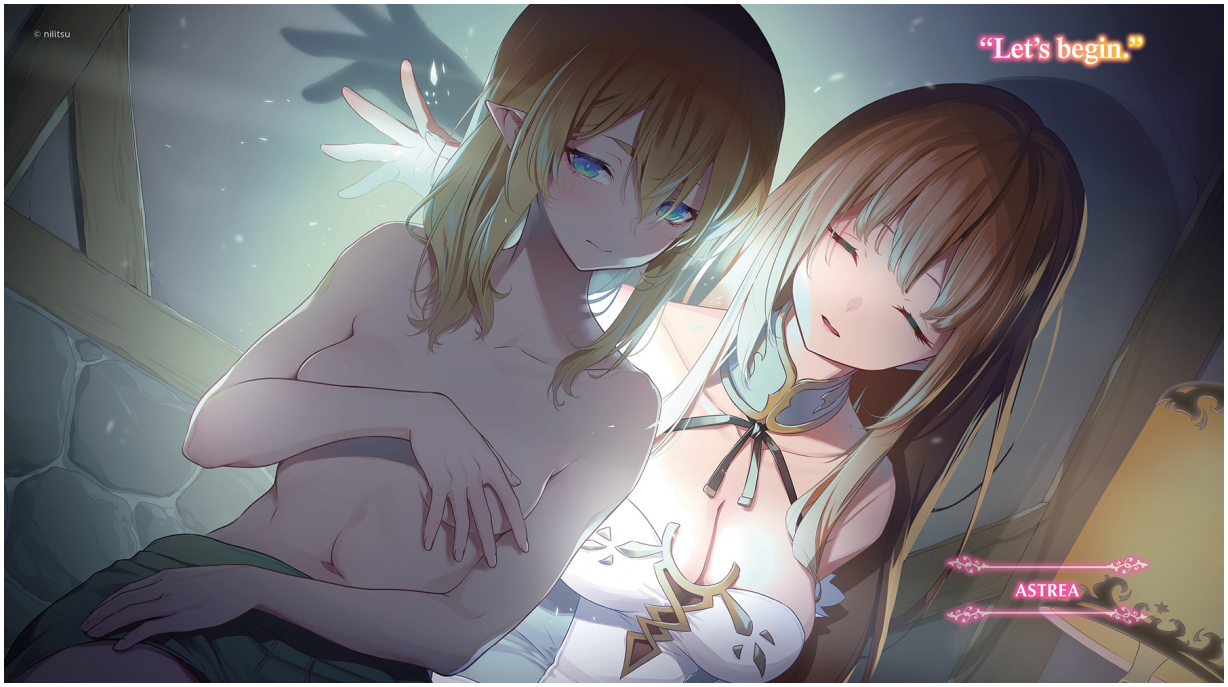
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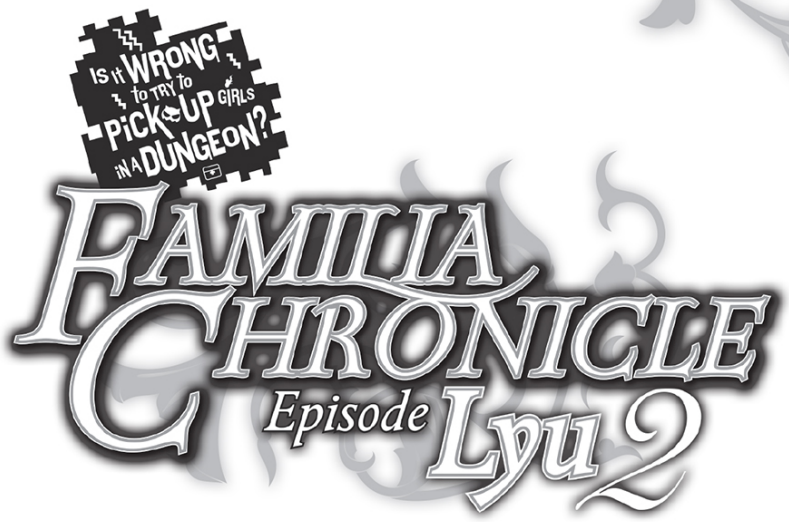
A Simple Moment from
Five Years Ago

FAMILIA CHRONICLE Episode Lyu


"Orario's Gale Wind...!
The traitor who abandoned Lady Astrea!"
"I have come to see Lady Astrea."


CECILLE
LYU LEON
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“Let’s begin.”
ASTREA



FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
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CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA

YEN ON
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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?
FAMILIA CHRONICLE: Episode Lyu 2
FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Dale DeLucia
Cover art by nilitsu

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA
MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA FAMILIA
CHRONICLE episode RYU vol.2
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THE LOCUS OF STARS

Familia Chronicle
Episode LYU



THE LOCUS OF STARS

1

Fall wore on.

Since a certain boy arrived in the Labyrinth City, there had been a spring marked by fateful meetings and a summer distinguished by the strong start of a new adventure.

A tumultuous six months had flown by in the blink of an eye, and winter was just around the corner.

Much had happened.

So, so many things.

One thing that could be said for sure, though, was that it had been a time filled with irreplaceable experiences.

The white-haired boy was immature at first. But he had been growing at a stunning pace.

And the girl with the pearl-gray hair had fallen in love with him. While thinking fondly of him, she began to smile in a way she never had before.

She should have merely been watching over them. She had saved the boy who the girl cared for so much countless times and, in the process, came to respect him, and…

Fall wore on.

Now in late autumn, with all they had experienced and learned about each other, they were attempting to change their relationship. *Disastrously.*

The harvest bore no fruits or smiles. At the harvest festival held in the name of goddesses, a girl confessed her feelings to a boy who did not return them. And so, the goddess attempted to make *everything* hers.

A conquest occurred. A walled garden was created. A sacred flame rebelled. And at last, a great battle was set to begin. To defeat the followers of the tyrant empress, myriad groups formed an alliance. It would be the largest battle in Orario's history.

As she was, she would not be able to support him. She was certain of this. How many times had her slender, twiglike body experienced defeat at the hands of the Goddess of Beauty's followers. No matter how well she utilized her knowledge and tricks, she was as powerless as a gentle breeze trying to move an imposing mountain.

I need power. I must become stronger. To save him. To stop her.

And so, she decided to undergo the purification she had avoided all this time. The conclusion she had always lacked the courage to face. For her own selfish convenience, to protect bonds that she would not and could not give up on, she would face her reunion with justice.

The only ones to see her off were a single friend and the head of the post town in the labyrinth.

After taking a magic item and a splintered piece of wood from them, she looked up.

"Wait for me, Syr."

It was that moment between night and day before the sun had even begun to rise.

Turning her back to the white tower and massive defensive walls, Lyu left the city. And as she did so, she said:

"I am coming to see you…Lady Astrea."

She looked up to the stars glittering in the early-morning sky.

2

Running without a road.

She had raced across the sea of plains that continued out to the horizon in less than half a day. Not wanting to waste any time on detours, she had charged into the foreboding mountains standing in her way a few hours earlier. She left in her wake the steep incline of the mountains, the needle cushions of trees, and precipitous heights.

She cut a straight path from the Labyrinth City, Orario, on the western edge of the continent. Her journey took her east. This was a race against time.

Befitting her second name, she had transformed into a gale wind blowing over mountains and through valleys. Woods that were just a few centuries old stood in her way, but she was an elf. A fairy of the forest. She did not lose herself in emerald mazes, and though mountains were outside her natural skill set, she had no trouble passing through them, thanks to the stamina she had developed as an adventurer.

Lyu ran at a speed that would have staggered any wandering traveler she came across.

She used her impatience to fuel her haste, and unerringly homed in on her destination that she had never seen before.

Even the dangers that travelers and merchants were so cautious of barely merited her attention. She simply ignored the monsters that attempted to attack her on her path.

However…

"Uwaaaaaaaa?!"

…it was a different story if someone *else* was in danger.

The moment she spotted people being attacked by a swarm of monsters at the bottom of a cliff far below, Lyu leaped into the air. Launching herself from the rock wall, she accelerated.

Before claws could swing down on their prey, she slashed.

"Huh…?"

A human cried out in confusion at the sight of a monster's detached arm spinning in the air.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

The now-one-armed bugbear howled as gusts of wind were left in the wake of the ferocious slash.

Lyu constructed a flashing silver barrier with her two short swords, obliterating the swarm of monsters in the blink of an eye.

"Is everyone safe?"

Once the ferocious growling creatures were gone, silence fell.

Her cloak fluttered in the wind and she covered her face as she turned around, finding that the stunned humans were speechless as they stared at her.

A merchant caravan had been attacked. They were taking a route that skirted the mountain cliffs when they fell victim to an unlucky monster ambush. The merchant had hired a familia for protection, but up against the dangerous combination of massive bugbears and flying gun libellulas, they had been struggling and on the verge of being wiped out.

"Whew, you really saved us there!"

"The merchandise is safe, too! All thanks to you!"

The human leader of the bodyguards and the animal person merchant smiled at Lyu as they sat around a campfire.

It was now night, and Lyu was imposing at their campsite. She had intended to continue without sleep or rest until she reached her goal, but given her present pace, she was going to have to stop at least once for a break anyway. And so, she allowed herself to accept their kind offer to stay.

To keep what she was carrying to the bare minimum, she had intended to subsist on fruits and nuts along the way, so the preserved meat and bean soup offered by the merchant was a welcome change.

"You sure are something, though. An adventurer, right?"

"…Strictly speaking, no, but I do live in Orario."

The human leader had guessed she was from Orario after seeing her fight. It was a widely held belief in the mortal realm that Orario meant adventurers, and adventurers meant trouble. And despite being blacklisted, Lyu, ever a fastidious elf, could not tell a lie, instead answering with awkward attempts at misdirection.

"It's at least four days from Orario to here, no matter how fast you go. You must be tired, so please, rest. There are blankets and anything else you might need in the wagon. Feel free to help yourself."

Neither the beaming merchant nor the others probed any further.

They are good people. Especially considering my own behavior.

Lyu was grateful that they shared their supplies so freely with her even though she had not offered her name or even removed her mask. And she also suspected they might fall over if they heard that she had covered a distance equal to four days' travel in the span of a single day. Upper-class adventurers, particularly Level 4s and above, were not bound by the common sense of those who lived outside the city walls.

As Lyu's thoughts wandered, the bodyguards spoke up, as if remembering something.

"Oh yeah, speaking of Orario…apparently there's another War Game starting up."

"Yeah, I heard about that. It's the talk of every town. It's *Freya Familia* this time, too, right?"

War Game. *Freya Familia.*

Those words made Lyu's heart race.

The ache in her chest was not just a phantom pain, but full-on trauma.

"Word is, a bunch of familias are joining together and it'll be a huge battle…I wonder what's goin' on there."

All the rumors they were discussing were true.

They probably never would have dreamed that this War Game had broken out over a single boy.

And that War Game was also Lyu's reason for being away from the Labyrinth City.

The banquet celebrating a plentiful harvest at the Goddess Festival.

That was the moment Goddess Freya set her plan of attack in motion. She charmed all of Orario. For the sake of making one boy hers, she twisted the minds of every other soul residing in the city, constructing a carefully manicured garden.

The walls erected around that garden were torn down by the boy's sheer will power and the sacred flame of his patron goddess, but that was not the end of the incident. The rage of the people—the adventurers whose memories were manipulated, who were turned into puppets—exploded.

And with Freya going to war, a War Game unlike any other in Orario's history was on the horizon.

It was just a few days ago…but it also feels so distant.

Reflecting on the events of the past month, Lyu looked down at her hand.

The great battle between *Freya Familia* and the alliance of familias led by *Hestia Familia*. Lyu of course intended to take part in it herself.

However…

As I am now, I won't be of any use to Bell…

She recalled her pathetic defeat at the hands of the dark elf, the boaz—*Freya Familia*'s members both.

The enemy's ultimate power was its first-tier adventurers.

Their experience, the number of trials they had been through far outweighed hers. Her bag of tricks and tactics paled in comparison as well. But more than anything, Lyu, who was still Level 4, could not begin to match Level 6 and even Level 7 monsters like them.

And so she left the Labyrinth City, to update her status that had been frozen in time for five years.

"Adventurer…no, traveler. If you've come from Orario, then where are you headed?"

It was evident the bodyguards had been wanting to ask her about Orario, but she had no intention of talking about it. Or more accurately, she did not have the composure for it given the way impatience was eating away at her.

As if sensing that, the head of the bodyguards had tried to change the topic.

"My destination…"

Lyu subconsciously touched the pouch at her hip.

There was a single note and a map in it.

It was a message from Hermes, the patron god of her friend Asfi, who had made the arrangements for her to leave town. He was the one who had been delivering Lyu's letters for the past five years. To the goddess whose location Lyu herself had not known.

The note and map provided that goddess's location. The home of the one being in the mortal realm who could make Lyu's time move again.

She recited the name on that note: "Zolingam."



Zolingam. The sword-smithing city.

From Orario in the far west of the continent, it was a long journey across the Alv Mountains and then even farther out east. As the name implied, it was an industrial city, home to blacksmiths forging swords and other weapons and armor.

After she parted ways with the merchant band early in the morning, it didn't take long before Lyu reached the land of sword makers. The first thing that greeted her eyes was the high city gate.

"A tremendous wall…Not as tall as Orario's great walls, but still some thirty meders high."

Its imposing gates gave the impression that Zolingam was a fortress city. Still appraising the height of the walls with her sky-blue eyes, Lyu approached the gate guards.

The dwarves protected the great iron gates with crossed axes, so Lyu produced the scroll she had received from Asfi, permission for passage provided by Hermes, and after several questions, she was allowed into the city.

Passing through the gate built to be an extension of the mountains, she walked a short distance on the large, well-appointed road.

There were entrances into tunnels sporadically here and there. There were ore deposits in the surrounding areas, and Lyu's enhanced senses picked up the clinking of pickaxes and the rhythmic shouts of miners. On either side of the large road were wooden warehouses and rail cars. It was clear the area near the city gate was rich in resources.

A steady supply of ore was crucial for the manufacture of weapons and armor. She could understand why the gates were so sturdy, imposing, and fiercely guarded.

Finally, beyond the large road, the sword-smithing city itself came into view.

"This is Zolingam…"

The first thing she noticed was clusters of squat buildings and dozens of tendrils of black smoke reaching into the sky.

Setting foot inside the city proper, she felt heat envelop her body. The stone buildings were mostly flat-roofed, and raucous shouts could be heard through open doors and shutters. That was also the source of the heat. Even without looking, she could tell that furnaces were blazing.

The loud clanging of hammers echoed. The symphony of tempering made it clear the buildings in this area were workshops. The people she passed in the streets had the appearance of craftspeople, and even children half Lyu's size were wearing overalls and hats. In fact, Lyu's travel clothes stood out, drawing glances from people here and there around her.

She got the impression there was no wall between home and

work in Zolingam. To the people living here, the workshop was home, and even when that was not strictly true, most had a place to eat and sleep right next door. Plainly speaking, everyone living in the city was an artisan, and they all had a trade.

In addition, there were many followers of deities. It was well-known that many smithing familias had settled in Zolingam. Word was that none other than *Hephaistos Familia* came to Zolingam for raw materials and regularly supported several workshops and artisans. There were apparently many Zolingam residents who became followers of Hephaistos.

"It reminds me of Orario's industrial district."

The flat-roofed workshops and factories would hardly be called a beautiful neighborhood. The buildings were purely utilitarian, like the industrial district of Orario expanded into an entire settlement. Orario was the larger city, but Zolingam was far larger than Orario's industrial district.

At a glance, the city appeared crude and stark, but there were also several structures that had an emerald-green gleam. She could not see their full shape for the surrounding buildings, but they looked like the lower half of an hourglass. From their mystical shimmering, she guessed they were particularly important structures for the city.

It cannot be called beautiful, but it is surrounded by mountains. There is forested land and a flowing river…

From the gate to this industrial area, Zolingam was surrounded by nature. The mountains extended from the west to the south, a thick forest stood in the east, and a river flowed from the north. There were ores and other materials, including ample lumber for charcoal and water for smithing. Anyone would be hard-pressed to find a more ideal location for making armor and weapons. It was easy to understand how a sword-smithing city had been founded there.

With the exception of the extraordinary source of materials that was the Dungeon, Zolingam boasted a much more bountiful natural environment than Orario. But Lyu also noted that there seemed to be few of her fellow elves.

Cutting down massive numbers of trees, spewing black smoke into the sky, destroying and polluting the world itself: The deforestation and despoiling of nature that fueled iron smelting—and steel-making—was loathed by elves, who loved nature. As she watched the smoke that was even now rising into the sky, Lyu found it difficult to appreciate this city. She recognized that her elven values were coloring her opinion, and yet she could not rid herself of the distaste she felt.

"Why did Lady Astrea come to such a place…?"

She covered her face with mask and hood.

From what Asfi had said, Astrea was in this city, but Lyu could not help but think it ill suited her.

The merciful goddess loved the mortal realm, and Lyu was certain that she would not have chosen to base herself in Zolingam, so far from what could be called pure and clean. She was a goddess of justice, not of flames or smithing.

As she wrestled with that doubt, Lyu walked on. At times, she spoke to passing people, asking the location of the point indicated on the map, as she made her way through the oval city.

The directions she was given by the residents led her to a place past the industrial zone—a forested area in the east of the city where the process of deforestation was not yet conspicuous.

For a brief moment, Lyu was relieved to know the goddess's quarters were not in the smog-filled industrial area, but just as quickly, her shoulders tensed.

In the distance, she saw a two-story building erected in an open area. And a girl who appeared to be a follower.

"Argh, what do I do…?"

She was human.

Her bright-blue hair was tied up on the left side of her head, and she was wearing an elegant skirt and combat gear. The white outfit was surely a familia uniform, and there was an emblem hanging from the left shoulder on her pelisse. She was sitting on a tree root, like a child hiding from a parent, groaning while cradling her head.

"I still can't finish the weapon order…How many deadlines would I have blown through by now if it were a normal order? That's why

Dad and them keep calling me a greenhorn…!”

Even at this distance, Lyu’s Level 4 hearing allowed her to clearly make out the girl’s frustrated and sad confession. Guessing her identity, Lyu had an inscrutable look on her face as she quietly approached.

“But…but…I just don’t feel like it. Why do I have to do this for someone who abandoned—?!”

And just as Lyu heard that, the girl finally noticed her and looked up with a start.

“Wh-who are you…?” Hurriedly standing up, the girl demanded her identity.

Perhaps afraid her words had been heard, the girl blushed ever so slightly.

Meanwhile, Lyu noticed her reddish eyes and was struck by a mysterious feeling.

If she had to describe it, it was almost like déjà vu. Setting aside the odd feeling welling in her breast, Lyu introduced herself.

“…I am Lyu Leon. I have come to see Lady Astrea, who I have heard is here.”

Aware of her nerves from the way her lips quivered, she revealed her identity.

“I am…I was one of Lady Astrea’s followers.”

Hearing that, the girl’s eyes widened. And she immediately glared at Lyu.

“Orario’s Gale Wind…! The traitor who abandoned Lady Astrea!”

Her words were laced with menace, but they were not wrong. Lyu herself did not deny it. Were it not true, had she not felt shame and guilt, she would not have corrected herself to say she *was* one of Astrea’s followers.

She had no expectation of a welcome. Not after what she had done to her beloved patron goddess. The girl had surely heard of Lyu and the sins she had committed. The girl’s eyebrows were arched in obvious anger, like she might lash out at any moment.

“What did you…?!”

—What did you come here for?

That was what she was surely going to say. But she did not finish

the question. Her hand that reached out to grab Lyu's cloak was swatted aside by Lyu.

"Wh—?!"

"…"

The girl grabbed her hand and looked at Lyu in surprise.

It was a custom of her home village to not allow anyone to touch their skin except those they acknowledged, and the girl's animosity had triggered a reaction. Lyu looked down at her gloved hand in embarrassment.

The girl's face grew redder and redder, and Lyu, struggling against her self-loathing, unable to explain herself, just awkwardly offered a warning. "…It would be better not to touch me. I always go overboard…"

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?!"

Lyu had intended them to be words of warning, but the girl interpreted it as contempt for someone inferior, and she raised her voice in anger.

It was the worst possible first meeting. Unbearable, even.

While Lyu thought that, the girl lashed out, stubbornly trying to grab her again, perhaps out of a desire not to lose.

"Just because you received Lady Astrea's blessing first, don't—!!!"

You have it wrong.

Without moving, Lyu was about to correct her, but…

"Cecille! What is it?!"

"What are you doing in front of the home?!"

Before Lyu could say anything, two other girls appeared. A prum and an animal person. They were wearing the same uniform as the first girl and ran over carrying baskets of fruits and nuts they had gathered.

The girl they called Cecille was a step away from Lyu when she stopped her with outstretched hands. She did not cease glaring at Lyu while addressing the girls who stopped at her side.

"This elf is Lyu Leon."

""…!!!""

The other girls reacted when she spat out Lyu's name.

"Watch her so she can't run away. I'm going to Lady Astrea."

Lyu's hand twitched in surprise when she heard the goddess's name.

The blue-haired girl headed toward the wooden home. The two girls left behind glanced at each other and, looking incredibly awkward, did as Cecille said.

Together with Lyu, they walked to the front of the home and took up positions on either side of her. Lyu did not say a word, her gaze fixed on the door of the home the girl had disappeared into, even as they peered over at her, passing a period of time in painfully awkward silence.

There was a throb in her left breast. Her throat was oddly dry, and yet her palms were sweaty. Without realizing it, she pressed a hand to her chest.

The time is coming…

Whether it would be a time of judgment or an emotional reunion, she could not say. But Lyu wanted the former. Her guilt and shame would not allow her to hope for the latter after all this time.

While recovering a little bit of composure, enough to scornfully ask herself how she ever thought she had any right to admonish Bell given her shameful state of affairs, she still failed to lay her worries to rest.

Indeed, perhaps this waiting was the greatest punishment for Lyu.

After an indeterminate time spent standing before the home like a criminal awaiting judgment, there was a creak, and the door opened.

"…!"

The blue-haired girl from before opened the door like a retainer.

Which meant that the next to appear would be none other than her—and Lyu's—goddess.

Long walnut hair and deep indigo eyes like the starry sky that were even clearer than Lyu's sky-blue eyes. In her immaculate, unblemished white dress, she looked exactly as Lyu remembered her.

Standing before the unchanged goddess, Lyu lowered her mask with a trembling hand and spoke with every emotion in her heart.

"Lady Astrea…"

The sun was low in the western sky.

The Goddess Astrea smiled tranquilly in the red sunset.



"Long time no see, Lyu."

Standing there in the fading sunset, Lyu froze, and her eyes widened.

Astrea addressed her with a beautiful, mellifluous voice. The kind smile and voice that Lyu knew so well, rolling back the five years that had passed. It was like she was speaking with a child who had just returned home. "And…welcome back."

Lyu's eyes grew damp when she heard that. Her slender legs almost gave out.

—She had been *forgiven*.

She knew that she had been forgiven. She had wanted to be condemned. To be slapped. She had wanted to suffer the divine judgment she deserved for allowing Alize and the others to die, for being the only one to live, for distancing herself from the goddess for selfish reasons, for the sake of vengeance.

However, Astrea had welcomed Lyu, like a mother who longed for her child to return home.

It hurt. Her heart ached. She was pitiful. And, as disappointed as she was with her own shallowness, it overjoyed her.

"You've finished your journey, haven't you?"

"…Yes…"

"And you've found your justice?"

"…Y-yes…!"

Astrea approached, stopping close enough to reach out and touch her.

Lyu's voice caught in her throat. She could not bear to look her in the eye.

There were so many things she had wanted to say, had wanted

to apologize for, but it took all she had to restrain whatever was threatening to spill out from her heart. Her heart and body had seemingly gained a mind of their own simply from seeing Astrea's face.

Astrea reached out to her with both arms.

"You've worked so hard, Lyu."

"!"

"I'm sure they are smiling at you from across the sea of stars."

She got a hug.

She could feel Astrea's body. The goddess's warmth enveloped her.

That was when Lyu stopped fighting the irresistible urge. Full tears the likes of which even her coworkers at the tavern had never seen in all her years there fell from her sky-blue eyes. Even though she knew it would dirty Astrea's clothes, her translucent tears would not stop.

She could only manage to muffle the sobs. She had no idea where she should put her hands. But the goddess's hands wrapped around her gently rubbed her back, like a mother comforting a child.

And so, Lyu's trembling hands slowly, haltingly reached around Astrea's waist, finally closing the small gap between them.

"There is so much I want to talk with you about. I'm sure there is much you wish to say, too. But…it would be hard to speak now, I suppose?"

"Y-yes, Lady Astrea…! I'm s-so sorry…!"

"It is fine. That's enough. Even for me, these five years have felt longer than eternity."

With Astrea's face right next to her long ear, Lyu accepted each and every one of her words. She could tell that Astrea had closed her eyes and was even now still smiling. The warmth told just how overjoyed Astrea was for this reunion.

Lyu suspected this was how a child who left home only to embarrassedly return felt. The only difference in this case was that home was not the elven village where she was born, but Astrea's breast.

Lyu's breath quivered, and she put more strength into her arms,

still wrapped around the goddess's waist.

Meanwhile, the three girls left outside the fold stared in supreme disbelief at the staggering sight of Lyu and Astrea hugging.

She's being hugged by Lady Astrea…! She's resting her head on her boobs*…!*

They're huuuge…! I'm so jealous…!

Even though we're scared to do it, this shameless elf is embracing her like a lover the moment they meet…! She's no elf! She's a seductress!

Enveloped in the goddess's enchanting, voluminous, and incomparably soft bosom, Lyu was experiencing one of the greatest blessings in the mortal realm. Astrea's other followers were overwhelmed, watching in begrudging jealousy.

The flame in the eyes of the girl called Cecille in particular had gone past begrudging jealousy into a furious envy.

"Cecille."

"—gh, hah?! Y-yes, Lady Astrea?!"

The girl who had been staring at Lyu like she had killed her parents panicked momentarily at Astrea's voice before returning to her senses and snapping to attention.

Releasing Lyu, Astrea said, "Prepare a room in the home. Lyu will be staying with us."

"Ehhh?! L-Lady Astrea, with all due respect, is there any need to do that for a rude elf knocking on the door without sending any word ahead…?!"

"Don't speak like that, Cecille. Lyu is your senior, after all."

Astrea had an almost mischievous smile as the girl aggressively leaned forward in open disapproval. The goddess spoke in a gentle tone that stopped the rebellious girl and everyone else from protesting.

"I'm sure we will have a long night tonight. And given her state, I want to let Lyu rest her body. So please."

Now it was the girl's turn to be at a loss for words instead of Lyu.

She seemed about to say something when she saw Lyu's hands and feet—her battered gloves and boots that were worn down from running like the wind all the way from Orario—and she stopped.

After a pregnant pause, not bothering to hide her displeasure, the girl finally relented.

"……Yes, Lady Astrea."

Astrea smiled wryly and looked at the other girls.

"May I ask you all to help as well?"

""Y-Yes!""

"Then, Lyu. Shall we go? I suppose you'll want to clean up first."

"…Yes, Lady Astrea."

Astrea softly took Lyu's hand and walked into the home.

Lyu followed meekly, her face reddening as she finally realized that everyone had seen the exchange.



Stars' Rest.

That was the name of the new base that Astrea had established in Zolingam after leaving Orario five years earlier.

It was a two-story building in the depths of the forest to the east of the city's workshops. It did not begin to compare to *Hestia Familia*'s current Hearthstone Manor but was plenty spacious compared to a standard lodge. It was constructed of wood rather than stone, but it resembled the Stardust Garden that was *Astrea Familia*'s home in Orario and almost made Lyu feel nostalgic.

There were six people living in Stars' Rest aside from Astrea. Those six girls were Astrea's followers.

"So then you built a new familia in this land?"

"I wouldn't call it a new familia, exactly. You are still a precious member of my familia, of course, and so are Alize and the others."

After cleansing her body and removing the accumulated grime of her forced march across the continent, Lyu was beckoned into Astrea's private quarters.

The sun had fully set, and the moon had risen in the night sky. An owl's hoots echoed softly as the forest's particular stillness enveloped the home.

Lyu sat across from Astrea at a table.

"This is the same *Astrea Familia* that you know and love…Though I suppose it can't be helped that it appears to be a completely new familia from the outside."

After Alize and everyone else fell in the Dungeon, and Lyu, the one survivor, became estranged from the familia, it most certainly seemed like Astrea had started over by welcoming new followers here in Zolingam, and that was how it was generally perceived by others.

Knowing that she was herself the direct cause of it, Lyu could not find the right words to address Astrea's lonesome smile. She was unable to do anything but embrace her shame.

"Anyway, Cecille and the other children here are simply your juniors. Unlike Alize and your old companions, they all hold different feelings and are searching for their own justice."

Astrea described the reborn *Astrea Familia* to Lyu, who was looking glum.

"Juniors"…It is a concept I've little familiarity with. In the past, I was the last to receive Lady Astrea's blessing.

Really, she was more used to being the junior, and even now, she considered herself inexperienced.

Lyra and Neze often teasingly called her the baby of the familia. If nothing else, she knew that she could not play the part of mentor.

And that was still true.

Apologetically, she accepted the meal provided by the girls and had her dinner alone with Astrea. Although that was because it was obvious to everyone that sitting around a table with the rest of the familia would have just led to squabbling.

Anyone could see that at the very least the girl called Cecille would tear into her. In addition to their unfortunate meeting, the fact that Lyu was being given special treatment by Astrea—at least in Cecille's eyes—had caused her to be extraordinarily hostile to Lyu.

Even if her attitude bothered Lyu, she would not rebuke her for it, either.

A senior who pushed away the goddess out of personal convenience and then came back to see her again? Had she been in

Cecille's position, she would have been just as furious.

In any case, Astrea seemed to have concluded that it would be difficult to have a quiet conversation with her followers around and decided to take her dinner tonight alone with Lyu.

"Lady Astrea…why Zolingam?"

"There was a *gift* I wanted to give. It is not finished yet…but you will understand when the time comes."

"…?"

Finishing their meals quickly, Lyu and Astrea's conversation led them in many different directions.

Lyu asked about how Astrea had spent the past five years, and Astrea wanted to know about Lyu's current situation.

After scorching herself with vengeance and burning out until there was nothing but ashes, Lyu had written letters to Astrea. She could not take up the mantle of justice again, but she believed it was her duty to watch over the Orario that everyone else had protected until the very end. And as atonement to Astrea, she reported her own situation and what had been going on in her life.

Relying on none other than Asfi and *Hermes Familia*—since Hermes alone knew Astrea's location—Lyu had technically maintained correspondence, but there were too many things, too many feelings, to be able to convey it all with written words alone.

Now, at last, the two of them finally had a chance to talk. Astrea was not a talkative goddess, and Lyu was even more reserved, but they had countless things to discuss. Their five years apart had left big holes to fill.

Lyu spoke of what became of Orario after the Dark Age ended. Of the tavern where she lived. Of the acquaintances and close friends she had made. Repeating the daily life she had shared in her letters, she conveyed all that she had seen, heard, and felt.

"I see. A child other than Alize who took your hand…"

"Yes. He grabbed it so suddenly, I was terribly surprised. However, Bell is a human worthy of my respect. I was guiding him as a fledgling adventurer who was just starting out, and yet, at some point, he became the one pulling me forward…"

"Hee-hee…you like this boy, don't you?"

"Gfh?! L-Lady Astrea?! Wh-what are you saying?!"

"When you speak of this Bell, your voice is so gentle, and a tad sweet. I wondered a bit when he came up occasionally in your letters, but…that is why your pen strokes were so gentle. You're like a girl in love."

"A-ah…Lady Astreaaaaa…!"

And when that conversation arose, Lyu made a pathetic sort of burble just like the boy who was the subject of the talk.

Her ears turned red in embarrassment, but she felt strange. Five years ago, when the others were still alive, she had never spoken with Astrea like this. It wasn't that she wasn't much of a conversationalist or that they were too busy. Everyone in *Astrea Familia* wanted the attention of the goddess.

Alize of course, but even the older Neze and Lyana and Maryu, and the younger Noin and Asta and Iska, and even the youngest, Celty…the moment Astrea sat down on a sofa, any of them were liable to pounce on the seat next to her and chat about all sorts of things or ask her about something. Even Kaguya and Lyra would often sit beside Astrea and ask her opinion.

Astrea really was a mother figure to all of them.

She would dote on them, scold them, and more than anything, correct them when they strayed.

That was why they followed Astrea. That was why they made her their pillar of support.

—"*I swear on the sword and wings of justice.*"

Even if Alize was the one who started it, they had all made that vow.

"To think the day would come when I would have this talk with you…I'm so happy. It's wonderful, Lyu."

Though Lyu was red in the face, when she saw her goddess smiling so pleasantly like a young girl, she also broke into a smile. And though she had hardly shared a word with them, she knew that her juniors also loved and respected Astrea, too. Of that she was certain.

I would like this warm, peaceful moment to last forever—as she thought that, Lyu closed her eyes.

She would have to stop avoiding reality. No matter how reluctant she was, she had reasons why she could not delay.

"Lady Astrea…there is something I would like to ask you."

"…Very well. Ask away."

Astrea sensed the change in mood as Lyu straightened up. She gave Lyu her full attention and listened closely.

"It will be a long story, but…it's about the current situation in Orario. And about my friend Syr."

In addition to Alize, there were two other people who had held Lyu's hand.

While speaking of Bell, she had intentionally avoided mentioning the other person—or rather, goddess. Only now did Lyu begin to explain.

The girl with the pearl-gray hair who had saved her after she had had her fill of vengeance.

The friend who had brought a measure of peace and light into Lyu's life was actually a goddess, and one whom Astrea well knew.

That deity's love had run wild, cornered Bell, and sparked a great battle that was even now shaking the Labyrinth City to its foundation.

"…Rumors of *Freya Familia* starting a War Game that embroiled all of Orario had reached Zolingam, but to think it was true. And that Hestia and even you are so deeply involved."

The merchant and bodyguards Lyu had helped on the way to Zolingam had already known the broad strokes, so it was no surprise that Astrea did as well.

Now that she had learned the details from Lyu herself, the goddess closed her eyes with an expression that seemed almost sad. Was it a lament for Orario, which was about to endure a familia war unlike any before, or pity for a goddess she knew so well?

Unable to guess her thoughts, Lyu finally revealed the reason she had come to Astrea.

"As I've said, I must return to Orario right away to fight at Bell's side. However…I would like to have my status updated."

The power that had been frozen in time these past five years…

Lyu did not avert her gaze from those starry eyes as she firmly

made her request.

From the moment Syr set her plan in motion, Lyu had experienced three defeats. Once to Warlord and twice to Dáinsleif—Ottar and Hegni Ragnar, respectively. In regard to the latter, the second defeat wasn't a complete blowout due to the intervention of the Sword Princess and her allies, but Lyu acknowledged that she hadn't stood a chance against him at the time. Gale Wind had been completely bested by the einherjar guarding Syr.

"As I am now, I'm sure they would just crush me again. That's how wide the gulf in our strength is. At this rate…I won't be able to help Bell."

"…"

"And I won't be able to stop Syr!"

Her voice grew more impassioned as she spoke.

She had fought to this day as a Level 4, overcoming countless hardships, but she had run headlong into an insurmountable wall. If Lyu didn't change, she wouldn't be able to do anything.

"I want to give her a slap and ask her what she really thinks…!"

That was the reason why Lyu came to stand before Astrea.

To come to terms with her past and to gain new strength.

"Please, Lady Astrea! I ask you to please grant this fool your blood once more…!" Each and every word was filled with her regrets.

Silence fell. Astrea met the fairy's unmoving eyes.

"…I understand."

And finally, she nodded.

Lyu could not tell whether the emotion she felt was relief, guilt at clinging so brazenly to a goddess, or shame at the selfish convenience of her request.

In the end, she decided to gratefully accept her goddess' mercy as she removed her shirt.

"It's been five years since you entrusted your back to me."

"Yes, it has…"

"Is it just me, or have you gotten more slender? Are you eating properly?"

"After everything that's happened with Syr…I don't think I have

been eating much."

"I see…I'm sorry, that was insensitive of me."

"No…it is nothing for you to trouble yourself over…"

After putting away the empty plates, they moved the chairs to the center of the room and sat down.

Perhaps sensing Lyu's state of mind, Astrea continued to chat while carrying out the preparations for the update. Lyu, with her back bare as the day she was born, pulled her hair that reached past her neck across and over her right shoulder, covering her chest with her other arm while allowing herself to indulge in Astrea's generosity.

She could not keep her heart from racing.

How much had her experience increased? Would she develop any abilities? Would new magic and skills emerge? And more than anything, would it truly be possible for her to level up?

The results of this status update would decide Lyu's fate. This was the watershed moment determining how much she could contribute in the coming War Game.

Without thinking, Lyu clenched her fists. And then, she started to pray. Though she had stepped away from the adventuring life and stopped partway through her journey, even if it was just enough to be able to continue fighting for Bell's sake and for all the other people she cared about, Lyu was hoping for something. Anything.

Please grant me strength. A weapon to save them and to stop Syr! I will leave here at once and return to them right away…!

Lyu's was already thinking about what would come next. She grew harried as her thoughts turned to the promised struggle.

One look at her slender back was enough to tell how much tension and impatience she was feeling.

"Let's begin."

That simple announcement made Lyu hold her breath.

The goddess's slender finger, red with blood, danced across the fairy's back.

The first thing Lyu sensed was the feeling of a seal being undone. The hidden symbol of sword and wings appeared, and the ichor rippled out, like across the water's surface. Hieroglyphs were changing or being added. The excelia was knitting itself into her

flesh and blood. She could clearly sense countless symbols flowing past, like pages turning.

The status update was long. The longest that Lyu had ever experienced. As Astrea had mentioned, this was drawing out all the excelia she had accumulated over that time.

Astrea was silent, reading the familia myth written in Lyu's back and composing the next pages…

"Ngh!"

"…?"

It was at that moment that Astrea's finger came to a jerking stop.

A small shockwave of surprise had erupted right behind Lyu.

Twice.

Curious about what could have been so shocking, Lyu tried to turn just her head to get a better look, but Astrea had already resumed working as if nothing had happened.

Lyu's doubts quickly faded as a surging sense of power filled her being.

"Nghhh!"

Sublimation.

After a feeling like a knock in the depths of her heart, a wave of heat she had never experienced before bloomed inside her.

In Orario, first-tier adventurers stood in a world apart. Though she did not have the means to put it into words, Lyu understood what it meant to cross that threshold.

Before long, the goddess's finger ceased moving.

"…It's done."

There was a quiet but deep sigh. The intense, sustained focus she had mustered for her follower had taken its toll.

Although she knew Astrea must be tired and concerned, Lyu could not help wanting to know the results of the Falna that had been inscribed in her back as soon as possible. Exhaling to steady herself, she unclenched the fist that had been curled up tight this whole time. Lyu still was far from calm. She was also still topless, covering her chest with one arm, forgetting about the pitcher of water she had prepared beforehand to offer to Astrea.

Astrea could not help a wry smile. Under any other circumstance,

Lyu would have prioritized getting dressed to avoid being shamefully naked in front of her goddess. And so, for the sake of her beloved child who had turned around in her seat and was feigning calm, Astrea quickly transcribed the results of the update onto paper.

"This is your current status, Lyu."

Bracing herself, Lyu took the paper.

Lyu Leon

Lv. 5

Strength: I0 Endurance: I0 Dexterity: I0

Agility: I0 Magic: I0 Hunter: G

Resistance: G Magic Defense: I Magic Control: I

Magic

Luminous Wind

- Wide area of effect.
- Wind and light element.

Noa Heal

- Healing magic.
- Environmental effect. Magic effect boosted in wooded environments.

Skill

Fairy Serenade

- Amplify magic effect.
- At night, magnitude of enhancement increases.

Mind Load

- When attacking, consume Mind to increase Strength.
- Active trigger ability, including the amount of consumed Mind.

Aero Mana

- When running, attack strength increases as speed increases.

Astrae Varmas

- Falna effect.
- Amplifies skills of followers who share the same god and ichor as the user and are in range.
- Enhances the Mind and magic of followers who share the same god and ichor as the user and are in range.
- Provides moderate resistance to psychological corruption to all followers of any deity who are in range.
- Passive effect.
- Degree, magnitude, and scale of enhancement and range increase with Level.

Level 5…!

When that leaped into her eyes, Lyu felt her heart beat louder as a wave of relief crashed into her.

The. Bare. Minimum.

She had cleared the bare minimum needed to be allowed a place

on the battlefield. To stand on the same stage as the einherjar.

The five years that Lyu herself thought were stagnation had not been a waste. In that sense, reaching Level 5 brought her some comfort. Lyu had already reached the pinnacle of Level 4 before parting with Astrea. And after that, she had hunted down *Rudra Familia* and the other Evils, experienced endless chaos and troubles after joining The Benevolent Mistress, and suffered greatly during this past half year of upheaval. Lyu had attained more than enough excelia to level up.

As she tried to calm her racing heart, Lyu glanced over the sheet again.

Basic abilities…all zeros. I suppose that's just how it is right after leveling up?

Surely it was a reflection of her final Level 4 numbers, whatever extra points Astrea had cashed in.

Even as she was struck, too late, by the thought that it would have been wiser to check her final Level 4 numbers first, her eyes moved on to another part of the sheet.

"A newly developed ability…Magic Control."

"Yes. There were only two options available this time, so I prioritized the one related to magic. I did it without consulting you. I hope that's all right?"

"Of course. With this ability, my magic will be significantly enhanced."

Magic Control was an ability that was indispensable for any magic user Level 2 or higher. It made it possible to deploy a magic circle when casting spells. Taking on the color of the user's magic power, the magic circle granted an immeasurable boon in increased magic power and Mind efficiency. For any serious spellcaster, that ability was practically required.

As a concurrent caster, Lyu had been at most a vanguard capable of using magic, but with this, she could call herself a proper magic swordswoman. Roles and titles did not really interest Lyu, but the fact that Luminous Wind, her strongest attack, had been buffed was something she was thankful for.

And while I did not develop a new spell…this fourth skill…

Astrae Varmas.

Just as it appeared on the page, it was both terribly complicated and multilayered. She confirmed the skill's effects with Astrea. Any followers possessing the same ichor as Lyu did would have their skill effects and magic enhanced, but the resistance to psychological control was unconditional, and applied to anyone with Falna, including enemies. Incidentally, Lyu also benefited from the effects of the skill, so it seemed quite powerful.

But she could not help thinking of another person.

Adi…

It was the name of someone precious to Lyu.

Shakti Varma was the captain of *Ganesha Familia*. Shakti Varma, who had overlooked her trespass when she had snuck into the Grand Casino. And Shakti, a human Lyu respected, had a younger sister. Adi Varma.

One of the people Lyu would call a close friend, she was one of the people who lost her life in the struggle between justice and evil seven years earlier.

Adi had saved Lyu's life beneath the twilight sky.

"Justice will go on."

Those words had become a pillar supporting Lyu.

In which case, she could not help thinking that this skill was evidence that Adi's sense of justice had returned to the world, that she had inherited it. Having finished her journey now, the words her friend left her had taken root in her very status.

There was a burning sensation in the back of her eyes, but she closed her eyes and composed herself.

If that was true, then she could not afford to cry yet.

"Thank you, Lady Astrea. I was able to attain the strength I had hoped."

If she were to be fully honest, she would have had to say that it was still dubious whether she could truly cross blades with *Freya Familia*. She could see that much as an adventurer. That was just how incomparably powerful the einherjar, the city's strongest army, were. They surpassed even *Loki Familia*. But to wish for more strength than this was to ask the impossible.

Having accomplished the goal she set for herself, Lyu finally realized she was still naked, and she went red to the tips of her ears.

After frantically putting her clothes on, she turned to face Astrea again, anxious to get moving.

"I am sorry for the rush, however, I must—"

—*return to Orario* is what she had intended to say, but she was stopped by a quiet voice.

"Lyu."

The voice was no different from before. It was not even imbued with a divine authority. But Lyu still froze when the goddess said her name, and she was pierced by those eyes containing the night's sky.

"You cannot go to Orario yet."

"…?!"

"You must stay here in Zolingam a while longer."

She could not believe her ears. Her mind almost refused to understand. Her limbs quivered as Astrea continued in the same voice.

"If you wish to stop the one you call Syr, the goddess I know so well, then you must remain here for a time. If you returned to Orario now, you would not be able to turn the tide of the battle."

"Ngh…! I am fully aware of that! The enemy is extraordinarily powerful! That is precisely why I must return to them as soon as possible and come up with a plan!"

What the goddess had seen was an oracle of her defeat.

Though she was aware of as much herself, to hear that from Astrea's lips shook Lyu to the core, and her voice suddenly grew louder and more unsteady.

"The terms of the War Game could be decided any day now! We need every moment we can get to prepare!"

"I am telling you to do that preparation here."

"What…?!"

—What are you saying, Lady Astrea?!

Lyu loved and respected her goddess deeply, but right now, all Lyu felt was confusion.

Even though she needed to return as soon as possible, Astrea wanted her to stay. She already had no time to waste. It simply

didn't make sense. Lyu had no idea why her goddess would ask this of her. Despite the logic of her arguments, she got the distinct feeling that disobeying would be a grave mistake given how unwaveringly, resolutely, and calmly Astrea was speaking.

The goddess was still looking straight at Lyu, who squirmed uneasily under her gaze.

"Ngh…pardon me for saying this, but there is nothing I can gain from remaining here!"

"Even if I say that I *intentionally did not* inscribe the magic you gained the potential for into your status?"

"…?!"

This time Lyu was speechless.

"Elaborating some, that magic is extremely powerful. Much like the skill you gained, it could also be called the result of your journey for justice. With it, you would be a match for even Freya's einherjar… I can tell."

Lyu's mind went blank. A small part of her realized Astrea must have known all along that this was how she would react and that was exactly why she had led with asking her to remain here.

It was hostage-taking. If that magic really possessed the strength to potentially turn the tide, then Lyu had no choice but to obey Astrea's will.

No matter how much she wanted to return to Bell and the others, she would have to stay in Zolingam until the goddess was satisfied.

"Why…why would you do such a…?!"

Astrea would never tell a bald-faced lie. She would never act in malice. No doubt there really was a spell that Lyu had the potential to develop. And that meant that Astrea's demand held some meaning that Lyu could not yet grasp.

However, even knowing that, Lyu couldn't stay silent.

"Even though I have so little time, even though I need strength so badly…why did you not grant me that magic…?!"

It was a desperate plea.

"Because you cannot master it in your current state. Not while your heart is restless and your eyes are clouded by impatience," Astrea explained firmly.

"And more than anything, you are on the verge of forgetting Alize and everyone."

The rampaging impulse urging Lyu onward instantly went silent.

Her sky-blue eyes opened wide. A single mention of that name was all it took to hear echoes of their voices in her long ears.

—Calm down, Leon. A certain red-haired girl seemed to be holding her little finger.

—As immature as ever. A black-haired master swordswoman seemed to sneer.

—Looks like you've grown up a bit, kid. A prum girl seemed to give her a slap on the butt with a knowing smirk.

And the seven other girls all gave her a pat on the shoulders or head as they came and left.

Even though there should only have been Lyu and Astrea alone in the room, it was as if she had returned to the Stardust Garden from five years ago.

She could feel the heat of ten people in her back that carried her new status.

"Lyu, you may think it's unreasonable. I won't insist you believe me. However, remember them. And, if you can hear their voices… listen closely."

That was what Astrea told her as she stood up calmly from her chair.

At some point, the paper with her new status had slipped from Lyu's hand. Now it was clutched tight to her chest. It was an unconscious movement.

She couldn't hear the voices anymore. But the storm roiling inside Lyu had gone quiet for the moment.

Astrea must have decided this was the time to strike because she offered a suggestion.

"With your growth, it's safe to assume your body and mind are not properly aligned. We'll resolve that here."

"…Even if that is the case, it would be far more efficient to do so in the Dungeon."

"True. I won't deny that." Astrea smiled upon seeing a rare pout from Lyu.

Meanwhile, Lyu still had no idea what Astrea was trying to achieve. And she was unsatisfied. Even now that she was a little calmer, she found it hard to swallow. But no matter how dissatisfied she was, her trust in Astrea won out.

That was how strong their bond was.

"I think this is the first time I want to disobey you, Lady Astrea."

"Like the first time we met?"

"Th-that's…!…Yes. Like then, it's difficult for me to simply agree to your request."

It was a rainy day, right after she had first arrived in Orario.

Lyu had been consumed by despair because of the behavior of other races but, more than anything, because of herself. Right when she was feeling lost and aimless, Lyu ran into Astrea for the first time. And on their first meeting, she had vented all her frustrations on the goddess.

When she recalled that old memory, Lyu's cheeks flushed in shame. Then she laid her innermost feelings bare as the goddess watched her with a gentle gaze.

"However, I believe in you. To not believe in you…Even were I not a follower of justice, I have not abandoned my pride as an elf—as an inflexible elf more stubborn than a dwarf."

"Hee-hee-hee. To think there would come a day that I hear that coming from you."

You've changed.

You've grown.

Murmuring to herself, Astrea reached out and touched Lyu's longer hair.

"Thank you, Lyu."

Part of her wanted to indulge in that warmth, but she shook off that temptation and moved away from Astrea.

Excusing herself, Lyu opened the door and left.

As she did so, the girls, who had been listening in until just moments before, frantically scurried away.

"Bell…Syr…Please wait just a little longer," Lyu said as she stared

out at the starry sky through the window.



"I'm sorry, Lyu…but this is all I can do now."

After the fairy girl had left, Astrea picked up the update paper that had slipped to the floor.

"I could go with you to Orario…but no, that wouldn't do, either. The city has reached a fever pitch in anticipation of the coming battle, and that pressure would just rob you of your calm."

Being in that environment would only increase her anxiety and impatience. That was what Astrea predicted after taking into consideration Lyu's state of mind and the situation in Orario. Here, far removed from the Labyrinth City, Lyu could carry out her first and last training.

"And…this is completely unprecedented. Even I don't know what is correct."

Astrea's expression held a mixture of concern, puzzlement, and what almost seemed like laughter as she took out another sheet of update paper.

Lyu Leon

Level 4

Strength: D587 Endurance: D501 Dexterity: S935 Agility: S954

Magic: S900

Hunter: G Resistance: G Magic Defense: I

That was Lyu's final Level 4 status.

It was an excellent status with an assortment of S evaluations,

and yet it brought only a troubled smile to Astrea's face.

"Hermes or Loki would be better at his sort of thing, but…I'll have to rack my brain as best I can, I suppose."

3

Lyu found it hard to sleep that night.

Even as she lay on the bed in the spare room provided to her, sleep refused to come, and if anything, unease took root behind her closed eyelids.

Was not returning to Orario the right choice? What about the War Game? What would happen to everyone if she failed to make it in time for the battle?

The quiet of the forest could not ease the troubles afflicting Lyu, and before she knew it, it was already morning. She had rested her body some, but her mind was heavy. Her skin and bones seemed like they were lined with lead.

"…This is nothing compared to the four days we spent in the depths."

The fatigue threatened to rob her of the will to rise, but she wrestled it down. She would not be Lyu Leon if she gave into the allure of such indolence.

Standing up without a noise, as if this were like any other day, she began moving early in the morning before the sun had even risen. It was not for nothing that Kaguya and Lyra and the others had called her stupidly serious about everything.

This was her second day in Zolingam.

Having grasped the general layout of the area on her way yesterday, her first steps upon leaving Stars' Rest were toward the river.

She had expected to be disappointed given the industrial area

nearby, but the water was clear. Surprised, she gratefully took the chance to wash her face. Right as she was about to wet her lips, she glimpsed her face and longer hair reflected in the water's surface. The girl who always cut her pearl-gray hair was not there anymore. Averting her eyes, Lyu drove away the dull pain and the heaviness filling her head and then retrieved her short swords, Futaba, which she had left at the base of a tree.

"I can't waste any time…Let's do this."

She approached a nearby trunk. Even away from Orario, the weather still felt like late fall. In the relatively cool climate of Zolingam, the green was fading, and the trees were wearing coats of dry autumn leaves. This large tree standing before Lyu would drop its leaves before long, given the season.

With an apology, the forest-loving elf hurried the hands of that clock along just a bit.

"Haah!"

She spun so smoothly it almost seemed weightless, then followed it up with a spear-like kick.

Though she had held back, the blow landed on the trunk with a crash that sounded like boulders smashing into each other. The great tree shook, and suddenly, a shower of leaves began to fall from overhead.

Her face already twisted into a grimace, Lyu leaped, silently clutching her two small swords. Before the glimmers of the first flash had a chance to disappear, there were four more, and a moment later, the count had climbed to thirteen. Silver slashes poured forth every second, catching each and every one of the falling leaves. Before the dozens, or perhaps hundreds, of dried leaves could reach the ground, they were all split, some vertically, others horizontally.

And as she performed her dance, the grim expression on Lyu's face only deepened.

"Nghhh!"

The final leaf.

As she slashed diagonally upward with the blade in her right hand, there was a faint current of air, as if a moment's vacuum had been created.

Not just the leaf, but even her hair, fluttered.

Remaining alert for a moment, she slowly came out of her combat stance and sheathed her swords.

A thin carpet of leaves that had not been there three minutes ago lay beneath her feet. Silently bending over she reached out and picked something up.

"…Not a neat cut. Torn."

She was holding a single leaf between her fingers. It was in worse shape than if it had been caterpillar-eaten. It was torn like a small tornado had ripped into it.

Her slash had not landed. The tremendous strength Lyu had gained from leveling up had slipped the reins. That movement alone had created a terrifying amount of force, tearing apart the leaf before her blade could even cut it.

There was no precision here. No technique. It was proof she could not fully control her status yet. The palpable disconnect between mind and body was too great to chalk this up as a mere miscalculation.

"So this is Level Five…"

Clenching and opening her fists, she looked at her fingers as if they belonged to someone else, and then she looked around her.

The only possible verdict was that this was remarkably low precision for the veteran Gale Wind. Disappointed by how noticeably her mind and body were out of sync as a result of her new level, Lyu let out a heavy sigh.

It's just one test, but to have this little control…and after I've been Level 4 so long already…or maybe that's the reason why.

Lyu had been Level 4 for seven years, and her abilities had not changed at all for five years. Unlike adventurers in a normal familia, Lyu had not had a status update once since she distanced herself from Astrea. There were others who went years without a level-up—adventurers who could not overcome the Level 1 wall, for example—but there were virtually none who continued to fight with the exact same abilities for such a longer span of time. That would essentially be the same as handicapping themselves. For an adventurer to gather excelia while not having it reflected in their status was

nothing more than suicidal.

And Lyu, who had fought like that for so long, was currently panicking at the sudden change and evolution she was undergoing.

Though it was merely speculation, compared to when the Sword Princess reached Level 5, Lyu was sure that she was adapting much more slowly.

This…may well take more adjustments than expected.

A feeling like a cold sweat writhed beneath her skin as the concern kept building until she turned around and called out.

"…Come out already."

There was a flustered rustle from one of the bushes.

"I will not deny being a shameless elf, but it is still unpleasant to endure prying eyes."

"—I-I'm not spying on you!"

"Yeah, just captivated."

"Slack-jawed and terrified…"

"Schau! Iselina! Be quiet!"

The blue-haired human Cecille appeared from the foliage, and after the interjection by the prum and werewolf girls, she erupted again.

Lyu had noticed them watching her from the shadows during her training with the leaves. They must have noticed her leaving the home in the morning and followed her.

It was just the three of them who came out of the foliage. Most likely the others were left behind to not leave Astrea alone.

"Do you have some business with me?"

"No! No, but…Lady Astrea said…"

Cecille started to angrily fire back, but then she looked a little guilty as she stumbled over her words.

They had no business at all with the forebear they hated, but Astrea had asked, and so they'd had no choice. Gathering that much, Lyu waited as the girl finished brusquely.

"…to help you adjust."

Lyu failed to hide her surprise.

Cecille reluctantly pulled out a wooden sword and training weapons with dulled blades from the cylindrical bag she was

carrying over her shoulder. Splitting the blunted weapons among her comrades, she tossed the wooden sword to Lyu.

Lyu reflexively caught it and, despite herself, was struck by its quality.

"…Are you serious? I don't know what Lady Astrea said to you, but it would be better to stop this."

"Lady Astrea asked us to! Of course we can't tell her no! What kind of followers would we be if we went against her will just because someone who popped up out of nowhere said otherwise!"

Lyu had done her best to give an earnest warning that would not be mistaken for scorn, but Cecille stubbornly gave her a cutting reply. It was plain to see her respect and loyalty to Astrea outweighed her hatred of Lyu.

The pelisse adorned with an emblem of a sword and wings arranged in the shape of scales fluttered as Cecille placed her palm against her chest.

"And me and Iselina are Level Two! We can do a lot more than any monsters or thugs you might find around here!"

As Cecille furiously declared that, the prum girl's eyes started to water and she covered her head with her clothes. "Wait, wait, I'm just Level One!"

The werewolf Iselina did not bother hiding her sigh.

This was *Astrea Familia.* The one and only. Even if these followers were younger, they had been worked over by Astrea—*or rather, watched over by her*. Lyu had no doubt they had the strength to fight. To seek justice was to resist power without purpose. At the same time, it was impossible for justice to stand on its own in the real world if their purpose lacked strength.

"But I am Level Five now."

And so, it was important that Lyu state it plainly. If they were assuming the role of justice, then Lyu would naturally be the evil that opposed them. She would be an embodiment of violence that swallowed them and their ideals whole.

"I mentioned it to you yesterday as well, but I always overdo it."

"""…?!"""

She did not mean to intimidate them…or perhaps she did, but

only a little. She could not really deny that a small corner of her heart wanted to avoid this because there was no way it would serve as proper training.

She'd intended to simply state the facts, without malice or animosity, but the girls' reaction was dramatic. Cecille and Iselina gulped, and the small Schau turned deathly pale. Before Lyu had even assumed a stance, they had gleaned a small fragment of her true strength. Remembering her training with the leaves earlier, they correctly grasped that the elf standing before them was a being more menacing than a dragon.

The warning about overdoing it was not a lie, either. Nor the statement that she was an overly serious and awkward elf.

When Cecille met Lyu's gaze, a bead of sweat dripped down her throat—and then she raised her hammer before her.

"…There's no way to know without trying!"

The others stared up at the sky for a moment and then followed her lead.

Deep in her heart, Lyu sighed again.

She would not say that Cecille was just stubbornly being antagonistic. Lyu started looking at this as a rite. A rite of passage that would not even begin to wash away her sins.

Crossing blades with a senior who walked in like she owned the place. An opportunity for mutual understanding. A familia mixer.

If Lady Astrea truly believes they can contribute to my adjustment…then I can only say that that is far too optimistic.

If so, then the discontent she had held back yesterday might well erupt again.

Managing to push away the figures of Syr and the others in the back of her mind for a time, Lyu crouched slightly.

"Come."

Hammer, twin blades, wand, and dagger.

Each with their own weapons, the young girls were overwhelmed even as they leaped forward.

"Here we go!"

Their mixer ended within *a minute*.



Bringing up the rear was the prum girl—who was slowest of the three. Lyu closed in on her and pounced.

"Eek?!"

Unable to react, let alone block or evade, the prum was hit with a fast leg sweep along the ground.

"Wh—?!"

Seamlessly transitioning from her last attack, Lyu struck the startled werewolf girl from behind with the hilt of her sword.

"Haa—?"

On one side, Schau was caught by a kick that practically scraped the ground, lifting her off her feet and sending her spinning four times through the air like a ball.

On the other side, Iselina had managed to raise her elbow in defense, but the wooden sword's hilt slipped past her guard, landing a clean hit on her vulnerable side. She was also sent flying, eyes wide in pain.

Stunned by the instant domination that had been too fast for her to even follow, Cecille froze when she felt the tip of Lyu's wooden sword resting at the nape of her neck.

"Shall we continue?"

"Grr…Youuuuu!!!"

Even after that demonstration of the insurmountable difference in their levels, the blue-haired girl refused to break. At the same time as Schau and Iselina thudded to the ground, she turned and swung her hammer. Lyu dodged it with ease and parried it like a chill breeze.

Cecille was not lying about being Level 2. She had left a visible mark in the ground where she had anchored her stance, and the attack she unleashed could have shattered a boulder. Her movements were passable, too. Lyu had no way of knowing how she had managed to level up out here, but she certainly had what it took to at least reach the fourteenth floor in the Dungeon.

A hammer made of light metal with a long haft…

Though it wasn't quite a match for a spear, Cecille's weapon did have an impressive length. The hammer itself was made of a light material, and it possessed an unmistakable lethality, but it was Cecille's arm strength and determination that made the attacks particularly strong and sharp.

In Lyu's eyes, her techniques and tactics were still lacking and naive, but each individual attack was well practiced.

Each blow carries a weight like she's putting her whole being into each swing…is she, perhaps…?

Lyu used her wooden sword to deflect or parry the attacks while occasionally evading to the side or edging backward.

"Are you a blacksmith?"

"!!"

Cecille's eyes widened and her upper body jerked slightly. Lyu had intended to let her swing until she was satisfied, but she couldn't overlook an opening like that.

Her wooden sword immediately punished that mistake, knocking the hammer from the girl's hands.

"Ugh?!"

"I understand now. The quality of this wooden sword and all of your equipment is not because this is Zolingam…it's because you are a high smith."

The hammer flew through the air and embedded itself in the trunk of a tree as Cecille fell on her bottom in shock from having her weapon knocked away. Meanwhile, Lyu stood alone, examining the wooden sword in her hands.

She had noticed it was a fine weapon—that much was clear—but if it was produced by a high smith, then it made sense. Not only their weapons but also the battle gear and the familia's uniform were probably all Cecille's handiwork. Their high-quality clothing—which was both light and strong—was undoubtedly made with great care by her.

Lyu was confident that the other members of the familia were grateful and proud of Cecille's pieces. But even as she thought that, they were experiencing something completely different.

"Nyaaa…?!" Schau was rolling around on the ground and groaning while holding her ankle.

"……Ngh…ugh…gah?!" Iselina was holding her side with both hands and wheezing as she sat on the ground.

Lyu had exercised great caution and held back as much as she could, but her control had still been lacking. She still hadn't adjusted to her newfound strength. That was what she wanted to explain, but instead…"I guess I really did overdo it…" she murmured apologetically. "…And I am a little curious why you would become Lady Astrea's follower while being a blacksmith, but I will not probe further."

"Gah…!"

As if something about that rubbed her the wrong way, Cecille's cheeks flushed, and her face twisted in a grimace even as she sat there on the ground.

While Lyu had her questions, she waited for Schau and Iselina to recover.

"However, I hope you can accept it now. Helping me with my adjustment is too heavy a burden for you. Getting involved with each other like this is just a waste of all of our time."

She felt sorry for them, but still she declared that they were unqualified.

In a battle that did not last even a minute, there was not much Lyu could accomplish. If she had to wait for them to recover like this every time, training by herself would be a better way to slowly regain mastery over her body.

Schau and Iselina were visibly shocked, and they took it hard. And Cecille stared at her feet in frustration, unable to argue against such an overwhelming difference in strength.

"The disconnect between mind and body I have right now is too big…It isn't something that can be resolved in a short period of time. Perhaps it really would be better to go back to Orario…"

She had felt it painfully in the fight with them, too, and she started murmuring to herself.

The many events that came before and after the Goddess Festival in Orario swirled in her mind. Astrea had spoken to her just last

night, but it suddenly seemed to Lyu like her original course of action was better after all…

"…I *knew* it."

Cecille's voice rang out. She stood up, swaying like a ghost. Lyu looked at her in confusion as the girl raised her head.

"You really don't care about Lady Astrea at all!!!" she shouted roughly. "All you care about is yourself! Saying you came to apologize, but you're just using her!"

"Wh—!"

"Take that back at once!" was what Lyu started to say. Insulted, forgetting for a moment that she was talking to her junior, she started to scold her. But something stopped her.

"All you talk about is your *new home*, Orario!"

"……"

That furious shout pierced her heart.

"War Game or whatever, you care more about your current home, don't you? You abandoned Lady Astrea once already; you don't care about her anymore, do you?!"

"Th-that's not tr—!"

"It *is* true! You don't think of her as anything more than a tool to update your status! That's why you're trying to disappear back to Orario now that you don't need her anymore!"

Her furious accusation didn't leave any room for argument, even though Lyu was supposed to be unquestionably stronger.

Lyu had an argument. It was a perfectly reasonable explanation. There was a decisive battle that she could not afford to miss. But Lyu found it impossible to move her lips.

—If I say that I came here without ulterior motives, wouldn't that be a lie?

Even if she didn't think of Astrea as a tool, it was true that she had tried to go back to Orario as soon as her status update was finished. Was she not neglecting her goddess?

As Cecille had pinned down, Lyu was thinking of herself and had

not considered how Astrea felt at all.

"Every time Lady Astrea got your letters, she was so happy! Even if we didn't want to hear, she would tell us about your stories, but her smile was so happy, so gentle…It was frustrating, but I had to accept that you were a special person!"

That was why Cecille was so furious and glaring daggers at her ungrateful, selfish senior.

That was the other side of her love for Astrea.

Her animosity had been building ever since she had eavesdropped on Lyu and Astrea from the door to the goddess's room.

"And yet, you don't care about Lady Astrea at all!!!"

Her face was twisted in rage. But at the same time, her eyes were brimming with tears.

Lyu stood frozen to the spot. Her lips and the rest of her body had stopped moving. The difference in level between them no longer mattered. Cecille's words had dealt a devastating blow to Lyu.

"Why do I have to make a weapon for her…?!"

Cecille probably imagined she had said it quietly enough that Lyu would not be able to pick it up in her shock.

"Heartless, selfish elf! I'll never acknowledge you!"

With that parting shot, Cecille turned away. She angrily retrieved the hammer that had fallen to the base of the tree and left. Schau and Iselina looked incredibly uncomfortable, and after glancing at Lyu, who still did not move, they followed after Cecille. It was safe to assume they more or less agreed with the girl's accusations.

"……"

Lyu simply kept standing there.

At some point, the sun had shown its face in the east, and even as the early morning passed, she remained there, as if her time had stopped.

The chirps of unknowing little birds rang out. A mean breeze messed with her hair, and dappled sunlight filtering through the trees baked her face.

The nearby babbling brook was the only comfort as Lyu quietly looked up.

The stars were not visible in the clear blue sky. Without any guidance, Lyu looked for where she should point her feet. She held the wooden sword weakly.

Like a child who could do nothing more, she walked to the river, turned upstream, found a more powerful current, and walked into the middle of the stream.

Standing with her thighs in the cool running water, she started swinging her sword. As if to hurt herself. Over and over. Enduring the reproach from the weapon Cecille had made all the while.

In the water with unsteady footing, she lost her balance several times as she continued swinging the sword in atonement. Meanwhile, the sun rose to noon and fell in the west, ushering in the night. Even when blood dripped from her hands, Lyu kept swinging.



Seeing Lyu when she returned late to Stars' Rest, Astrea widened her eyes with fear, and the first words out of her mouth were "What happened to you, Lyu?"

Lyu was drenched, and her clothes were in tatters. She was soaked from head to toe because she had been using those powerful swings to drive away all her wicked thoughts and her lack of control over her newfound strength had caused the water to splash wildly. Her clothes were in ruins simply because the material could not withstand the raw, unrestrained power of a Level 5. And also because she had blown away a monster that had appeared, which created a void in the water and made her lose her footing once again.

Sixteen hours. Sixteen hours she had spent swinging the wooden sword and dealing with herself.

"Cecille lambasted my behavior. She said I'm not thinking of anyone but myself…"

Standing there in the hall, just the two of them, Lyu confessed what happened, looking down like a child stumbling back home after

running away. As if guessing everything from that much, the goddess smiled.

"Lady Astrea, I apolo—"

"Why don't you warm yourself up and get changed first? I set aside some leftovers from dinner."

She gently interrupted Lyu's attempted apology and took her cold hand. Lyu tried to say something, but the words did not come, and she just let herself be led to the bath.

The water from the showerhead was warmed by a magic-stone device, and steam started to form. Maybe because she was so miserable and ashamed, the warmth felt almost sinful. She even considered switching to cold water, but she stopped herself. If she came out with her body still cold, all that would do was make Astrea worry. Making such a kind goddess sad was not what Lyu wanted, so she let the almost scalding heat wash over her head. The bluish-purple sores on her palms stung.

After she slipped into the change of clothes she had been provided and stepped out into the hall, Astrea found her and dragged her to her personal room.

Astrea sat her down in a chair and tended to the wounds on her hands with ointment, linen, and bandages.

"L-Lady Astrea, it is fine. I have healing magic."

"And you intend to use that on yourself right now?"

"…"

"You and Cecille are both direct and fastidious. Because of that, if someone says something you think is correct, you can admit your fault, and you brood and torment yourself in your thoughts."

The goddess saw through everything.

Lyu resigned herself to the point and let Astrea continue without saying anything.

When both of her hands had been bandaged, Lyu finally apologized.

"…I am sorry, Lady Astrea. I was so concerned for Bell and everyone, I…" She shook her head as she started to invoke other people and then instead acknowledged that it was just her own foolishness.

"…No, I was simply pushing my problems on those around me and have behaved terribly disrespectfully."

As Lyu looked into her eyes, Astrea slowly shook her head.

"It is true that you need to hurry. It's entirely reasonable for you to be impatient. And you have not hurt my feelings in the slightest, so don't worry about that."

"But even so, I do not believe I can forgive myself. Even though I wished to be forgiven by you. I was relieved not to be condemned, and the moment I gained strength, I immediately turned my back. If Kaguya had been here, she would have scolded me, and Lyra would have put me on cleaning duty, I'm sure…"

"Then as punishment, why don't you sleep with me tonight?"

"What?!"

"There are so many stories I didn't get to hear last night that I still want to know. Especially about this Bell boy!"

"Funaaa?!"

The elf squeaked as the goddess smiled invincibly.

In the back of her head, she heard Kaguya snicker, *Aren't you glad?*

And Lyra smirked: *You just got the worst possible punishment for you.*

Lyu screwed her eyes shut with a groan, her whole face turning red as she just accepted it. No matter what she did, Astrea was one step ahead of her.

Her patron goddess knew all the ways to unclench her stubborn follower's fists. Exhausted in more ways than one, Lyu felt the guilt subside some, and seeing the shadow pass from Lyu's face, Astrea stealthily broke into a grin.

"If the situation were different, you would have spent a long time talking with me, right?"

"Yes…"

"If you really didn't care, you wouldn't have kept sending letters all this time. Right?"

"Yes…"

"If you hadn't found people precious to you, you would still be on a journey searching for your justice. That's what I think."

"…Yes. I think so, too."

Astrea took in all of her feelings and assured her that the five years she had spent after the end of the Dark Age had been necessary. She explained that Lyu was not just weighing Astrea on the scales against Bell and everything else, but that she was trying to do the best she could for the sake of the future. It was true that Lyu was hasty because of her impatience and unease, but it was not as if she were slighting Astrea or Cecille and the rest of the familia.

When the goddess revealed the true nature of the anguish that Lyu could not discern and did not know how to deal with, Lyu was incredibly grateful. And she was sure that from this point, she would not simply be at the mercy of her own unease. Lyu would not doubt the merciful goddess who had grasped the workings of her heart so well and was lending her wisdom to guide her.

And while finishing her dinner late in the night, Lyu asked a question.

"Lady Astrea. May I ask about her, about Cecille?"

"Oh, are you curious?"

"Yes. I think it is understandable to feel some ill will toward me. However, she seems far more hostile than the others. And…"

When she first met Cecille, there had been an odd sense of familiarity. But Lyu refrained from putting it into words, because she wasn't entirely sure where it came from.

"It's nothing." Lyu shook her head.

Astrea looked her in the eye for a brief moment and then responded.

"Yes, while the other girls are mostly from other lands and cities, Cecille was born here in Zolingam."

"…A blacksmith, or else some other artisan family?"

"Yes. She was born to the Blackliza family, a prestigious and noted family. They have been blacksmiths in this city for generations."

Cecille's father was the current head of the Blackliza workshop, and he had eight children. She was the youngest and the only daughter. Lyu, who had been treated as the youngest daughter in the familia until five years ago, felt a little kinship with her on that

one point.

"After you left, she was the first child I scouted."

"!"

"So in the sense of the newly reestablished familia, Cecille is the oldest."

"…In which case the captain…"

"Is Cecille."

Lyu had stopped eating and was just listening as Astrea preempted her question.

"The reason I sought Cecille out is because there was a commission I wanted to entrust to her. I thought if anyone could, she would be able to achieve it…and more than anything, because she was so similar."

"Similar?"

"To Alize, and to you, Lyu."

"!"

Lyu's blue eyes filled with shock. It felt like that was the source of the familiarity she had not mentioned before.

Me aside, to say she resembles Alize is…difficult to accept.

Alize Lovell, the first girl who grabbed hold of Lyu's hand, thought more of justice than anyone, never hesitated to follow her principles, and was like a bright shining sun no matter how difficult the situation, occasionally letting loose with a stupidly loud voice without reading the mood and sometimes annoying or bothering Lyu and the others…*Stop it, my head is starting to hurt.*

It was supposed to be a reflection on Alize's good points, but remembering her reckless side too, Lyu put a hand to her forehead and finished with the analysis that Alize was rather far removed from normal. *"How rude, Leon! You can be a little more honest about how you feel!* Smack!*"* echoed in her ears, but Lyu did her best to ignore it. Maybe it was the nostalgia of being with the goddess she loved so much, but the star maidens in her mind seemed to be getting rowdy.

Astrea, likely aware of Lyu's conflicted feelings that she couldn't help but show in her ever-changing expressions, merely giggled softly.

"Anyway, she is a good child. Frank and always asking herself if

she is mistaken…It really is like looking at how all of you were.”

Astrea’s eyes softened; she was probably thinking back to their first meeting.

Still not ready to accept it, Lyu started to say something, but Astrea got there first.

“Has she told you yet?”

“…? About what?” Lyu had no idea what Astrea could have meant.

Hearing that, the goddess closed her eyes and smiled slightly.

“No, it’s fine. If she hasn’t spoken about it yet…then it isn’t for me to say.”

“Lady Astrea…?”

“If Cecille tries to tell you something, please lend her an ear. If you just keep that in mind, that’s enough.”

With that, there was nothing more Lyu could ask. As Astrea watched, she finished the meal of mostly vegetables and fruits and then went to clean the plate and wash her hands. At that point all that was left was to go to sleep.

Astrea put her hands together as she asked, “All right then, shall we update your status today, too?”

“…Huh?”

While she knew it was rude, Lyu’s eyes spun, and that was the only answer she could manage.

She had just leveled up, so there was no way her status had changed. Certainly not here, so far removed from the Dungeon.

A day spent swinging her sword in the woods wouldn’t add anything to her abilities. But even as she said that, Astrea just smiled and got on with it, half pushing her into the seat with both hands as she started going about the update.

It was her patron goddess’s will, so Lyu reluctantly removed her top.

Lyu Leon

Level 5

Strength: I 0->50 Endurance: I 0->50 Dexterity: I 0->50

Agility: I 0->50 Magic: I 0->50

"…That's impossible…"

Seeing the updated numbers, she gasped.

Just like last night, she forgot to put back on her top and stared at the update sheet.

That short spar with them and then swinging a sword in the river increased my abilities that much? No, there's no way…I'm Level Five now. Maybe if it were an expedition down to the deep floors of the Dungeon…but Lady Astrea would not write a false update sheet…

Her abilities had gone up by a combined 250 points *exactly*. For a Level 5, that was an unthinkable amount of growth. Lyu could only stare grimly at the paper. The goddess merely smiled.

"Do your best again tomorrow, Lyu."

4

The morning arrived soon.

When it came to actually sharing a bed with a goddess, Lyu, who had not experienced that ever before, groaned in distress as she fought her own nerves.

And on top of everything else, she blushed and groaned some more as she was questioned and probed and prodded about Bell. Lyu braced herself for yet another sleepless night, but mysteriously, her eyelids began to sink while she talked with Astrea. The goddess's warmth guided the fairy into a peaceful slumber.

But when Lyu woke up and found herself in the warm, soft

embrace of the goddess's bosom, she almost screamed.

"I never knew Lady Astrea had that side to her…"

It had already been a decade since she had joined Astrea's familia. Lyu's ears reddened slightly at making such an unexpected discovery. "No, I know she is just doing all she can for my sake since I couldn't sleep. I know that…but…!"

This was her third day in Zolingam. The sun had yet to rise.

The birds were still sleeping in the woods as Lyu began her early-morning training again today. This time wielding not just Futaba but also Cecille's wooden sword, which she had not had a chance to return yesterday.

She thought she really should have returned it last night, but Lyu had not been in a proper state of mind, and it seemed like Cecille would not be willing to see her anyway. She wanted to apologize as well, but she was sure that would not be accepted.

There was always the option of asking Astrea to return it for her, but Lyu did not want to leave it to someone else—she wanted to return it herself. After she finished her training today, she would ask one of the familia members in the home, and no matter how awkward it might be, she intended to return the sword with an apology.

That was her intent at least, but…

"Oh, good morning, Lyu!"

"We were up early today. Did you have a nice sleep in Lady Astrea's room?"

"Sleeping with Lady Astrea…my precious goddess's bed…I—I won't forgive you…"




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In the part of the woods she had used yesterday, Schau and Iselina were waiting. Cecille did not seem to be there, but instead, there was a fresh, new face. And apparently Lyu's night in the goddess's room was already common knowledge in the familia.

The prum Schau was cheerful, the werewolf Iselina was smirking tauntingly, and the black-haired human girl was…well, something was creepy about her.

Lyu struggled for words, but she coughed awkwardly to cover it. Struggling against the heat threatening to spread to her cheeks, for some reason she asked a question.

"Why are you here? Are you really…?"

"That's right. Lady Astrea asked us to!"

"Well, Cecille is one thing, but…we'll come along for the ride. You're the incredible predecessor who overcame Orario's Dark Age, after all."

Lyu was stunned at Schau's and Iselina's answers.

"We ended up siding with Cecille in the argument yesterday, but…"

"We've heard about you from Lady Astrea, too. But it's been tense from the moment we met you, and you were hard to talk to… and, well, like I said yesterday, we were scared. But we really did want a chance to talk with you this whole time."

Schau, who was half Lyu's height, moved her arms and gestured to explain herself, and Iselina smiled even as she scratched her cheek. And finally, the black-haired girl said something terrifying.

"I…because of you doing this and that with Lady Astrea…my impression of you has sunk low enough I want to curse you to death, though…"

"…Ah, and you are?"

"Uranda…"

Lyu's question got a muttered response.

She had long, wavy hair that covered her eyes. It was perhaps an awkward comparison, but she looked almost like a combination of Chigusa and Cassandra. She was one of the familia members who had been watching the home yesterday.

"We heard about your situation from Lady Astrea. We can help

you, even if it's just us."

After distancing herself slightly from the quiet aura emanating from Uranda, Iselina explained why they were there. And with that, Lyu finally understood.

Thanks to Astrea, Lyu could now maintain some level of composure. The sharpness, like a bare blade, had disappeared, and her demeanor was gradually softening. Thanks to that, the girls who had found her unapproachable before could now speak more freely.

It would be rude and uncouth to say I've been dancing in the palm of Lady Astrea's hand.

Astrea may have told them that Lyu would be better tomorrow. That motherly concern for her children made Lyu smile gratefully. Of course she was also grateful to Iselina and the others for taking that final step of actually reaching out.

There was still some distance between them, but with Alize and the others gone, the thought of being able to be part of the familia again was like an impossible dream.

It was overblown, but it made her think of the word *family* and made her nostalgic.

"Especially with yesterday's incident, I am sorry for being a careless senior…And I am thankful that you were still willing to meet me halfway."

Putting her left hand on her chest, she said what she needed to, just like an overly serious elf. And while she had not realized it herself, but there was a faint little smile on Lyu's lips.

The boyish Iselina giggled a bit and scratched her head, and the small Schau blushed without bothering to hide it. And Uranda stared. She really was hard to understand.

Trying to hide her embarrassment too late, Schau red-facedly changed the topic.

"Ah, are you still using that wooden sword?!"

Before Lyu could say she was intending to return it, the prum girl smiled innocently.

"It was made for you, so I'm sure Cecille will be glad!"

"…? For me?"

Confusion crossed Lyu's face. Iselina raised her hand and

smacked the prum girl on the head.

"Schau, you dummy."

"Ah! S-sorry, please pretend you didn't hear that, officer!"

That was a tall order, but seeing Schau bowing so low she practically touched the ground, Lyu chose not to delve into it for now.

Chatting with her juniors like this was nice, but her adjustment was the top priority. There was no time to waste.

The amount of growth yesterday, while small compared to the level-up, should reduce the disconnect I've been feeling, too… Though I still don't understand how my abilities could have grown so much so quickly…

Thinking back to last night with Astrea, she shifted her thoughts in the face of that question and started to think about her training today, but…

"Umm, Lyu! Why don't we play tag!"

"Tag…?"

Schau offered that proposal as if to redeem herself.

"After getting crushed so quickly yesterday, I've been thinking this whole time! About how we can beat you down!"

"Our goal isn't to beat her down, it's to help her, though."

Ignoring Iselina's exasperated comment, Schau raised her hands high and hopped around.

"And what I came up with was tag! If you catch us while we run around in the woods, you win! If we slip by you and touch you, then we win!"

She was Level 1, from what Lyu had heard, but while accepting she could not contribute much in combat, she had apparently put quite a bit of thought into this. Her eyes gleamed like a cute little animal's as she looked questioningly up at Lyu.

While not wanting to let Schau's efforts go to waste, Lyu gave her an honest answer.

"It sounds interesting, but I believe the fundamental difference in strength is too large. I don't believe it will be a proper match—"

"It's fine! We've got a secret weapon on our side!"

As if expecting Lyu's answer, she pulled something out of the

small bag on her back. They were three pole-like things wrapped in white cloth.

Lyu was not sure what they were, but Schau looked awfully sure of herself. Looking down at her, Lyu then glanced to the side. Uranda was silent still, and Iselina had a wry smile, but there was a sense that she also wanted to try it, too.

"We're definitely gonna surprise you!"

Schau was leaning forward, almost snorting in excitement even after seeing the difference in their strengths yesterday.

If she was going to go that far, then fine. That was what Lyu thought.

"Very well then, I'll go along with your proposal."

"Thank you so much! All right! Let's kick her butt!"

"Like I said, you're forgetting the point of this."

Schau grinned in satisfaction as Iselina sighed and then took one of the poles from her. Uranda did the same.

"All right, we're going to hide, so give us one minute please!"

With that, they hurriedly disappeared into the forest.

Lyu felt almost bemused and wondered if that was how Maryu and Lyana must have felt.

But it was a waste just waiting, so she swung her wooden sword while counting the seconds. She had intended to return it, but to avoid injuring them, she was going to use it today, too.

"Fifty-nine, sixty…here I come."

Whoosh!

The sixtieth swing sliced through the air sharply enough for the girls to hear it, and then Lyu flew forward.

The instant acceleration would have terrified any lower-class adventurer who saw it. Following after them into the deep woods, she leaped forward like a gale wind.

"Since you asked for this, I'll be a little bit rough."

Careful not to break any trees, she kicked off their trunks and made a conscious effort to move chaotically. Even though Lyu accounted for her enhanced abilities, her body was like a bucking bronco. But being a little bit over-the-top like this made it easier to adjust. Her goal today was to fully grasp how much of a disconnect

there was between her mind and her body.

A thudding *bambambambam* rang out as Lyu darted around at high speed searching for the girls. To test her heightened senses, she carefully listened so she wouldn't miss anything covered by the sounds of her own movement. This was an impossible feat for Level 2s, never mind Level 1s, and the girls hiding must have found it astonishing, and possibly terrifying. However, Lyu had accepted their challenge, and she had no intention of letting it be a simple game.

"Since we're already here, I'm going to make the most of it."

And that feeling had surely made it through to the others. Almost as if casting aside any doubt, a sudden gust of wind arrived.

"?!"

The blast of air struck her in the side. Lyu, who had been racing forward like a bullet, was suddenly sent flying, though she quickly righted herself after landing on a tree trunk. A flash of surprise registered in her sky-blue eyes, and then she realized what her juniors were planning.

"This is…the work of a magic sword!"

The gust of wind had been imbued with magic power, but there was no chance it was actually magic. Lyu had her ears peeled this entire time and never heard any casting. In which case, the only possibility was a magic sword that could be activated with a single slash.

Cecille is a Level 2 high smith…If she's developed the Smithing ability, then she would be able to forge magic swords, too!

Those three bundles wrapped in white cloth. Those had to be magic short swords.

Most likely, Schau had asked Cecille to borrow them, maybe even telling her it was to kick Lyu's butt.

That she had chosen wind affinity ones in order not to hurt the forest was worth high marks as well. But more than anything, because the wind they created was colorless and translucent, it was difficult to sense. If she could find where the wind was coming from, it would lead her right to them, but the attacks weren't coming from just one direction—they were coming from three. Schau, Iselina, and Uranda were unleashing a constant barrage from their hiding spots,

buffeting Lyu's body.

On top of that, the forest was a natural maze once they ventured this deep. The blasts of wind were flying through gaps between trees and leaves and undergrowth, bouncing off things, making it seem like the attacks were coming from every direction.

The wind was completely drowning out other noises.

"This is well thought out…!"

Squinting her eyes as she endured the magical winds, Lyu complimented the strategy.

This area around their home was like the girls' backyard, where they had lived for many years. When they chose this as the battlefield, they naturally had the advantage. They knew exactly where they should hide and the perfect places to launch their attacks from.

Lyu had been caught in a well-constructed plan.

But…this is good!

Though Schau may not have intended it, the blasts of wind pressing down from all sides demanded excellent balance and control. Even now that Lyu was Level 5, maintaining her posture in this vortex required effort. In other words, enduring these gusting winds was well worth it.

Because it continued without end, it was far more useful than training by herself normally. Lyu repeatedly jumped around like she was cutting through the wind that howled in the forest and then facing it straight on.

"I'll answer with my full strength, too!"…is what I'd like to say, but there's still something else, isn't there?

Lyu was still calm.

These magical winds alone were not enough to corner a Level 5 like Lyu. Forget hurting her. Just getting close enough to touch her would be difficult. And the magic swords would break when they reached their limit. This cage of wind could only be maintained for a time.

Lyu's movements were limited in this situation—in other words, they had successfully restrained her for the moment, but the girls were still far from victory. No doubt, they were perfectly aware of

this.

"…Just to be safe, I should prepare something."

As she mumbled that to herself, Lyu readied a little insurance.

In one smooth moment, as Lyu moved swiftly through the torrent of wind, she suddenly caught sight of the green-haired prum.

"Whoa?! That's crazy!!!"

Schau, who had been constantly changing her hiding place as she used the magic sword, let out a shriek and turned around. As she tried to catch the girl who was frantically running away, Lyu stored up power in her legs.

Not resisting the gust of wind that side, Lyu landed against a tree trunk that was close by, and the moment she leaped off…

"Now, Uranda!"

She heard Iselina's voice clearly. The next moment, a dark chant echoed in Lyu's ears.

"Open, my love. Lunus Wolfsbane."

An intense pressure enveloped her body, completely restricting her movements.

"…?! A status down! And I can't move!"

Lyu immediately noticed the negative status effects. And the source of it, Uranda, was writhing in the shadow of the tree she had been hiding behind.

"Ugh, it hurts…it hurts…but I won't let you go…hee-hee-hee…"

The girl's hands were gripping a dark shard of magic that looked like a pitch-black stake that was piercing her chest, and she smiled eerily even as she groaned in pain.

Once she saw that out of the corner of her eye, Lyu was sure of it.

—A curse!

From her appearance, she had seemed like someone who fought from the rear rather than standing on the front line, but it turned out that Uranda was a curse-user, of all things. That magic stake tormented her, and in exchange for her pain, she could bind the target of her curse—in this case, Lyu.

Lyu was a little surprised to discover a type of person who had never been one of Astrea's followers before.

She was curious how she had come to receive Astrea's blessing, but…this was not the time.

"Nice one, Uranda!"

"Got you!"

Schau, who had been running around acting as bait, saw her chance and turned back. Iselina had been blocking Lyu's path with her magic sword and she quickly joined Schau.

Seeing the two of them closing in with their hands stretching toward her, Lyu realized it was all a trap.

I see—the secret weapon was Uranda.

Lyu remembered the smile on Schau's face when she had let Lyu see the bundled-up magic swords, almost intentionally showing them off.

That had been the key to ensnaring Lyu in this trap.

While Lyu had not given Uranda's unique aura much thought to begin with, they had splendidly drawn her attention with the magic swords. Schau was probably the one who acted as the brains of the party, just like Lyra once had.

But, that's still not enough.

If it were the prum Lyu knew, there would have been at least another layer or two of traps. Remembering the peach-haired prum girl's nasty smile, Lyu decided it was time to use her bit of insurance.

"Imbue the light of stardust and strike down my enemy—Luminous Wind."

One burst. She fired off just a single green ball of light aimed at her own feet.

"Eh?!"

"Wha—?!"

When the girls were just one step away, she cast her queued up spell. Schau and Iselina both were stunned to see Lyu disappear as the explosion went off.

Lyu had anticipated an unexpected and had preemptively performed a concurrent cast in a voice soft enough that they could not hear her while she gave chase.

Ironically, the gusts from the magic swords they had relied on for their trap had completely drowned out the chanting. Because it was

cast using just a small amount of magic power—just enough for a single orb of light—none of them had even noticed.

That was Lyu's small bit of insurance.

"If it had sealed not just my movements but my magic as well, you might have reached me, but…what a shame."

Quickly dodging the Luminous Wind blast at her feet, Lyu leaped backward with a single spin and then planted her boots against the trunk of a tall tree. Now that she was out of range, the effects of the curse went away. Her eyes turned to Uranda, who looked stunned. She couldn't let that opening go, she leaped.

"Kh!"

It was an absurd amount of acceleration and movement. The sheer difference between what she expected and what her body actually did made Lyu furrow her brow. She steadied herself as much as she could and closed in. She leaped from trunk to trunk six times. Zigzagging like a lightning bolt, she appeared without warning in front of Uranda.

"One."

"Ugh!…Even if you finish me, more will rise to take my place…!"

Uranda went down with an odd shout as Lyu landed a carefully controlled strike with her wooden sword.

It sounded like she was still muttering something after going down, but Lyu quickly moved on.

"Two, and three."

"Damn iiit?!"

"Aaaaargh! We lost again!!!"

She closed the distance in a flash and the remaining two became fodder for her wooden sword.

Unable to fully block the attack, Iselina slammed into a nearby tree while Schau went tumbling and landed on her back as she groaned in frustration.

After their game of tag was over, the four gathered for a break.

"You're too strong! And I was so sure of that plan…" Schau slumped to the ground.

"So long as you don't let it go to your head, you can be proud. The follow-through was lacking, but the strategy itself was excellent. That was a much better workout than I expected."

Lyu gave an honest assessment of the game. The training had put Lyu through her paces and had just the right amount of tension. She could already feel an improvement in her ability to rein in her Level 5 strength. And despite already knowing the tricks involved, she was ready to try it again.

"Reallyyy? You think so?"

Schau started squirming when she heard Lyu's sincere compliment.

"…She said as long as you don't get let it go to your head…" Iselina could already tell that Schau was on the verge of outright boasting, so she reminded her of Lyu's warning. "…But you escaped it so easily in the end. When I heard the plan from Schau, I thought it had a real chance…" Iselina smacked her forehead. "Where do you think we went wrong?"

"With another two or three layers, you would have had a good chance of catching me off guard," Lyu answered frankly.

"Ugh! Not even one more?! Two or three?!" Schau groaned.

And Uranda, who was sitting away from Lyu, started muttering to herself, too.

"I think I might start hating Orario adventurers…"

Though she had not fully adjusted to her status yet, Lyu laughed a little to herself at her juniors who seriously tried their best to win against a Level 5 adventurer.

In Lyu's mind, being able to think that at all was due to their youth and lack of experience, but she also felt that was just right for them. That impertinence and overreaching was what led to growth, so long as they had comrades to support them. That was what Lyu thought, having fought through and survived the Dark Age.

As the three of them began to overlap with the old *Astrea Familia* she knew, her voice grew warmer.

"At the very least, the prum girl I knew would have gathered more information and prepared far more traps."

Hearing that, Schau suddenly shot up.

"Is that prum Lyra?!"

"…! You knew Lyra?"

"No, not at all! But I've been so curious after hearing Lady Astrea's old stories!"

Schau seemed almost ready to leap onto Lyu she was so excited. Iselina grabbed her by the collar and warned her she'd get swatted aside, but the prum girl didn't settle down even when as her arms and legs spun in the air.

"When I became Lady Astrea's follower, I didn't have any confidence, since I was just a prum…! But when I heard about Lyra, it gave me hope!"

"!"

"Even though she was weaker, she was smart and came up with lots of plans and was relied on by all of you! Isn't that incredible?! I thought even if I couldn't be like the prum's hero, maybe I could be an ally of justice like Lyra was!"

"A-an ally of justice…"

"Mmhmm! I don't know what she looks like, and I won't be able to meet her, but…I want to be like her!"

Thoughts of sly, coarse Lyra and whether she was really a proper ally of justice or if it was a good idea to be like her and all sorts of questions filled Lyu's head, until she was not sure what sort of face she should make, but…before her mind could catch up…

"Schau…have you found your own justice?"

"I do! I want to be a prum who helps weak people like me!"

Schau answered immediately without any doubt. It was a wonderful goal. When Lyu looked at her, Schau averted her eyes, and Iselina smiled awkwardly.

"I don't yet," Lyu confessed. "It's embarrassing to admit as a follower of Lady Astrea…but I am still searching for my justice at her feet."

Lyu thought that was enough for now.

"My justice is of course protecting the beautiful, abundant,

honorable, and lovely goddess…that is my justice…hee-hee-hee…" Uranda was confusing and sounded a little scary. But it seemed she had her own beliefs as well.

"Lyu, for future reference, could you tell us more about our predecessors? Even if it isn't complicated stuff like what justice meant to them. Even if it's just something that we could have used in the tag game just now, for example."

"I want to know, too!"

"Me too…"

Lyu was at a bit of a loss when they asked that, but she was also glad. Glad to be able to talk with the next generation about the comrades who had always helped her. Glad that there were others who wanted to know them.

Lyu was aware she was not the best storyteller, and so…

"I'm not sure that I can do their story justice, but…"

And then, she spoke. About the human captain, Alize Lovell, who was as radiant as the sun. About the human second-in-command, Gojouno Kaguya, ever the wolf in sheep's clothing. About the prum strategist, Lyra, who was more devious and cunning than anyone. About the human attacker, Noin Unic, who was always deft and tactful. About the dwarf defender, the brave Asta Nox, who protected everyone with her small frame. About the werewolf middle guard, Neze Rankett, who was surely Iselina's direct predecessor. About the Amazon brawler, Iska Bra, who was the most eccentric and the most fashionable. About the human healer, Maryu Réage, who was a beacon of tolerance and motherliness. About the human wandering mage, Lyana Lietz, who originally came from the distant magical land of Altena. About the elf who was their anchor in the rear, Celty Srowa, who was the only one actually younger than Lyu.

There were ten of them, not counting Lyu. She was happy to tell Schau and the others about their great predecessors, who had always teased her, taught her, and guided her, and whom she had always fought alongside.

And they were the ones who had asked her to carry on the vow "On the sword and wings of justice."



"…"

Breaking into smiles at Lyu's old stories, the girls pressed her for more and more. And hiding alone in the shadow of a tree, Cecille watched.

"Are you not going to join, Cecille?"

"…! Lady Astrea…"

Astrea had appeared behind her at some point, and when Cecille spun around, she could not hide her initial shock, but she quickly adopted a gruff scowl.

"I won't…I hate that woman."

"I would be happy if you and Lyu could get along. You're bumping heads right now, but I'm sure you'll come to like Lyu if you give her a chance."

"…Even if that's true, I won't go." She looked down almost apologetically as a shadow crossed her face. "I can't even fulfill a single commission…"

She trembled as those words slipped past her lips, and then immediately, she excused herself.

Astrea watched in silence as she left alone.

"…"

The only witness to their exchange was Lyu, who sensed Cecille's presence, even at a distance.



"How is your adjustment going?"

"Proceeding much better than I expected. It's all thanks to Schau and them, I suspect."

After spending the day honing her mind and body, night had fallen and the moon sat high in the sky.

Lyu and Astrea were alone in Astrea's room again tonight, sitting

around a table and having dinner. She had gotten much closer with the other members of the familia over the course of the day, so it was probably about time for her to start eating with them in the familia's dining room, but…

"I'm sorry, Lyu, but I'd like to keep you for myself today, too."

Astrea had asked, so Lyu of course had to accept. Lyu personally felt that it would be better to eat in the dining room because she could've sworn that behind Uranda's wall of hair, a pair of baleful eyes were skewering her for having the nerve to monopolize Astrea.

…Of course, it's probably more for that girl's sake than mine.

Recalling the exchange between Cecille and Astrea she had seen that morning, Lyu had a feeling that was probably the main reason. It was just instinct, but she felt like if she started eating dinner with the others now, Cecille might lose her own place. And that was perhaps what motivated Astrea to request Lyu's company again tonight.

"If things keep going this smoothly, the adjustment should be done soon."

As Lyu explained the progress of her training, the food adorning her plate steadily disappeared. While she silently thanked her juniors for preparing her portion since she was terrible at cooking, Lyu waited for what felt like the right moment to ask her burning question. "So Lady Astrea, about that magi—"

"All right, Lyu, shall we update your status again tonight?"

"……"

When Astrea spoke over her, Lyu closed her mouth. She didn't think Astrea was deceiving her. She just suspected it was her way of saying that it was not time yet.

Astrea smiled apologetically and started to prepare for the status update.

Lyu would have liked to think there was no way an update like yesterday's would happen again. But in that moment, Lyu already had a feeling.

Level 5

Strength: I50->G200 Endurance: I50->G200 Dexterity: I50->G200 Agility: I50->G200 Magic: I50->G200

It jumped again…

All of her abilities had gone up, by a combined 750 points exactly. It was a growth that made last night's results look small in comparison. Her basic abilities had gone up evenly across the board. Almost like the record holder's ability growth.

Even Lyu had to question it.

"Lady Astrea, this is…"

"I'm sure it is *exactly* what you are imagining," Astrea answered her topless follower. "This is a first for me as well, but I believe this process is necessary, for your sake."

"…"

"Once everything is finished, I will give you the magic that is waiting to manifest. So I would like you to come to terms with your five-year journey and make it your own."

Lyu felt like she finally understood what the goddess had seen when she'd unsealed the record of the past five years inscribed in her back.

And so, her answer was, of course, "As you wish, Lady Astrea."

5

The order was for a weapon designed to be used by an elf.

A weapon for someone nimble, skilled at magic, and who excels at high-speed combat. Someone who races like the wind, bombards the enemy ranks with magic, and even has the ability to use healing magic. When she first heard the order, it sounded so absurd that her first thought was *Are you out of your mind?*

From that description, the image that came to mind was an agile, lithe fairy using hit-and-run tactics. To put a name to it, the closest category would probably be a magic swordswoman who mostly fought on the front line. In which case, it needed to be a serviceable weapon and also serve as a staff that boosted magic power.

If the user raced around the battlefield concurrent casting, Cecille concluded the weapon should be as light as possible. But the weapon would also have to endure serious wear and tear if it would primarily be used on the front lines, so durability was essential. Those two demands were at odds with each other, but that was where a blacksmith could prove herself. The best possible materials would be needed to manifest both of those traits.

A branch from an elf village's great sacred tree was a must to act as a catalyst for an elf's magic. And with no margin for error, Cecille decided to use Altena-made magic stones ground into a fine powder.

As she worked the branch into a suitable shape and embedded the powder in it, she hit on the idea of using the spring water from the Star Cavern to help infuse the powder and increase the baseline magic power. Though she hesitated to sing her own praises, Cecille was proud she had come up with this revolutionary idea. To the extent time allowed, she would keep the branch soaking in a barrel full of water drawn from the sacred spring. If she could just add a bit of spirit material like the goddess suggested, the result would undoubtedly be something incredible.

With the materials lined up, the next step was modeling the weapon. If it was a sword or ax for a dwarf to swing around, then she could just focus on the metal and swing her hammer, but this was an elf's weapon, which demanded delicacy. She had to work to strip away any excess for weight reasons, and also make sure it functioned properly as a staff.

That was the domain of mages who specialized in creating staffs.

That was distinctly different from the conventional weapon manufacturing she normally did. So until the deadline arrived, she decided to deepen her understanding of staff construction even more than she honed her blacksmithing skills.

In the process, as a blacksmith rather than a mage, she hit on the idea of constructing the sword and grip separately. The grip could house all the functions of a magic stuff while the sword served as a melee weapon. Cecille thought that was the answer. This way, it could stand tall as a sword *and* a staff.

The image she had in her mind was a wooden sword imbued with stardust. The next step was turning that idea into reality. A hundred or more test pieces using provisional materials was just natural. She had come up with a thousand different designs, crumpling and discarding many along the way.

She messed up. Things didn't go as planned. And yet in the beginning, it wasn't so bad. Cecille believed without a shred of doubt that these failures were stepping stones that would eventually lead to success.

But almost like it could see the doubts in her heart, that skeletal idea refused to take shape.

Cruel reality kept whispering in her ear, telling her that her idea was nothing more than empty theories. She had sleepless nights. A vague dread loomed over her. Her heart ached. Even though she gritted her teeth and pressed on, at some point it became so torturous that she started wishing this was just a nightmare. The suffocating thought that she would never get anywhere grew with each passing day.

There's still time.

That was what she told herself over and over, deluding herself… without ever achieving anything.

Dozens of branches of the sacred tree soaked in sacred spring water had been wasted. She could not make any more test pieces. There was no going back.

It was terrifying to imagine what the client—her own goddess—would think of her. There was no time to be dwelling on that, but she was scared.

Her mind raced until she found it impossible to hold her tools or even a pen, and she started spending more time away from the workshop, staring blankly up at the sky…

And finally, the deadline arrived.



"Ngh……is it morning?"

The sun had not risen yet, but she could tell from the dull pain in her head that it was morning.

Cecille had passed out at some point on her desk. Still groggy, she raised her head.

She was in her workshop built at the back of Stars' Rest. The blacksmith's bedroom, the one stone construction in the home, had not been properly cleaned recently, and there were crumpled designs and spent materials scattered all around. The only decorations on the walls and shelves were the weapons she had made with pride, but a close look revealed a thin layer of dust on their sheaths.

A furnace was set in the corner, and the anvil beside it had not seen use in a long time.

They were all signs of a stagnation so great that the word *slump* would hardly do it justice, and Cecille found it hard to look at them.

Even though she was Level 2 and could be called superhuman, her eyes hurt, and they felt heavy. She wanted to just lie down and not do anything, but she could knew that if she did, sleep wouldn't come. She listened to her empty stomach growl with a grimace. Fighting the desire to do nothing that refused to leave her, she wobbled to her feet.

"…Was I wearing a cape…?"

She paused and cocked her head as she noticed something slip

from her shoulders.

Her throbbing head could not conceive of the possibility that someone—or some goddess—had visited and draped it over her shoulders. In a daze, Cecille picked it up and slowly shuffled to the corner of the room.

After removing the basin's lid, she stuck her face into the water.

Lately this had been all she could manage. She was sixteen, a tender age for young girls, and yet she didn't even bother with a shower. The most she did was wipe herself down with a wet cloth. If her late mother could have seen her now, she was sure she would have gotten a deep sigh and a good smack on the head.

This is all because that elf came here…

"…Pathetic…"

Taking a hammer to her foolish thoughts of wanting to drown to put her out of her misery, as well as her weak heart that wanted to pin the blame on others, Cecille raised her face out of the basin.

She scrubbed her face with a nearby cloth, wiping away that peculiar dark mood that came right after waking up. Starting now, she would be the same strong-willed, unyielding Cecille Blackliza as ever. With a long sigh at how her body creaked so loudly from so little movement, she decided to sneak into the dining hall and get some food before heading to the workshop.

That was when she noticed a letter placed on a shelf filled with weapons.

"'We're borrowing the magic swords!'…Schau took all the magic swords I made?! No way!"

The familia's strategic reserve of magic swords that she had painstakingly stocked was missing from the workshop. She wanted to scream and ask if Schau had any idea how much effort and resources went into making a single magic sword as she tried to decide whether she should be angry or exhausted.

She staggered forward a couple of steps as concern filled her. Her eyes squeezed shut and her brow knit in frustration, she bumped into the window, and then realized…

The faint sounds of a furious battle was coming from deep in the woods.

"…Schau and Iselina are helping that elf…"

When she opened her eyes, Cecille glared at the forest from the workshop window.

She wasn't sure about Uranda, but Schau and Iselina were absolutely helping Lyu of their own volition. Even after Cecille had complained and shouted so much in front of them and listed all the things that she disliked about Lyu.

They were siding with her over their captain, with that terribly serious, cold, unfriendly senior who had been fighting in Orario all this time.

"…So damn pathetic…"

Caught up in her thoughts, Cecille continued to look toward the forest with a tinge of sadness in her face.



"Hurry, Schau! She's catching up!"

"No way! I can't!!! Carry me, Iselinaaaa!!!"

It was her fourth day in Zolingam.

Lyu, diligently training in the early morning like she always did, had become a hunter.

Iselina and the others continued to liberally use their magic swords and had gone as far as to set up pitfalls and all sorts of other traps, but Lyu crushed everything they threw at her.

Now that she had broken through every obstacle put in her way, she was currently hunting down Iselina and Schau, who were desperately fleeing through the forest.

My body is finally getting used to my new status…!

Her status had gone up significantly again last night, but she was starting to get a feel for it and was starting to move like a true Level 5 adventurer.

Sometimes, Lyu asked the girls to attack her with their magic swords and spells at ultra-close range. Other times, she would ignore their protests and leap from dizzying heights in the mines.

There were countless trials.

Many would have considered this sort of training extreme, or as reckless as possible, but it was all in service of becoming strong enough to call herself a first-tier adventurer.

I wonder what they'll do in today's game of tag…I'm looking forward to finding out.

"If you can't win by strength, then use your surroundings to your advantage."

"Use anything and everything you can."

What would they come up with after hearing her advice and the stories of Lyra and the others yesterday? In that sense, Lyu found herself enjoying this as something more than training.

Of course, she could have already caught Iselina and Schau, but curious about what they might try next, she chose to stay just close enough to keep them on edge as they scrambled to escape.

Then the scenery of the forest began to change.

The canopy overhead started to block out the sun, casting the forest in an eerie, twilight-like darkness. There was barely any light, yet strangely, the verdant green of the forest seemed to make it possible to still see, almost like an elf village.

…It's…green?

That was when Lyu realized something.

It was late fall. The forested part of Zolingam—or at least the area around Stars' Rest—was already dyed in the colors of autumn. And yet all around her was the sort of lush green of summer. The unmistakable, rich scent of plant life filled the air.

Rather than putting her on guard, the first thing Lyu thought when she noticed the sudden change in scenery was *This illusory, mystical sort of feeling…*

Before she could finish that thought, she heard a shout from Uranda, who had stayed completely out of sight until now.

"Yufie! She's here! Play all you want with the scandalous fairy who deceives the goddess!"

Lyu wanted to lodge a complaint about that uncalled-for description, but this was not the time. As Iselina and Schau quickly split to the left and right while Lyu slid across the grass to slow

herself down, she came face-to-face with a massive tree. In front of the giant tree was an incandescent child floating in the air.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Is it playtime? Is iiit?!"

A high-pitched voice that seemed to echo directly in her head rang out, and when Lyu looked up, she was stunned by what she saw.

"A spirit…!"

There was no mistaking it.

Powerful magic emanated from the spirit. The forest was half-visible through an almost translucent body. What looked like a young girl floating in the air was a member of the race often called fragments of the gods.

"This is Yufie, the spirit living in the woods of Zolingam (age unknown)!"

"Ordinarily, no one comes to *their* den other than Lady Astrea…! But you said yesterday to use whatever we could!"

Schau and Iselina shouted from behind the same trees Uranda had made her hiding place, sounding like cornered bandits. There was a good sheen of sweat on their flushed cheeks.

From their obvious fear and the storm of magic power emanating from overhead, Lyu could tell that this spirit was an innocent yet dangerous bundle of power.

"A lesser spirit…no, an *intermediate* spirit! Even if she isn't a great spirit, she's still a powerful miracle bearer!"

Yufie had been leaning back like she was lazing in an invisible cradle, but perhaps reacting to the shouting, she put her big round eyes on Lyu.

"You wanna play? Let's play!"

A whirlwind erupted around them.

Lyu instinctively raised her arms to cover her face as she caught a glimpse of lesser spirits turning into orbs of light, drifting through the forest.

"Yufie is a good kid, but she's the sort who tends to break her toys while playing with them!"

"I know we brought you here, but um, please don't die!"

"This is divine punishment for the fairy who monopolizes the

goddess…”

Schau, Iselina, and Uranda called out encouragement—and a bitter grievance.

At this point, they had completely abandoned any semblance of restraint, and the original game of tag was clearly no longer on anyone’s mind, but Lyu steeled herself all the same.

“A spirit as a sparring partner…this is the sort of training I wouldn’t get in Orario!”

Lyu declared her resolve with a sharp swing of her wooden sword and the innocent spirit beamed.

“Let’s aaall play together!”



And so…

Playtime ended with an earth-shaking crash echoing in the woods.

“A-are you all right, Lyu…?” Iselina worked up the courage to ask.

“No problems here. If anything, I wish you had brought me to her sooner.”

After leaving Yufie’s home, they returned to the woods near the familia home, now bathed in the brilliant colors of the setting sun.

Iselina was clearly uneasy after seeing how intense the fighting had been, but Lyu remained utterly calm and composed. This was in stark contrast to the Level 1s, Schau and Uranda, who had trouble simply getting out of the spirit den and were currently slumped on the ground and leaning against each other.

“The spirits don’t know how to hold back, so we thought it might be better not to take you there when you’re not in top form…but I guess we didn’t need to worry about that.”

Iselina fell back on the awkward smile that was starting to become a habit when she couldn’t help but notice that Lyu was completely unscathed.

They had never encountered a first-tier adventurer—there were

hardly any Level 5s in the world outside Orario—so they had exercised some common-sense precautions. Of course, if this were Orario, any adventurer who had seen a first-tier adventurer before would have simply said things like, *"Worrying is a waste of time." "Those guys won't die even if you try to kill them." "Logic doesn't apply to monsters."* That was what it meant to be Level 5.

Iselina's obviously forced laugh made Lyu reflect on how their preconceptions differed, but ultimately, she thought it was a welcome miscalculation.

I'm sure Lady Astrea must have known that those spirits would be able to put me through my paces and help me with my status adjustment, even in this place, far from Orario.

That was most likely why she had kept Lyu here without hesitation, despite Lyu's initial concern. Lyu would have preferred it if her goddess had simply told her so from the beginning, but she had to admit that if that had happened, she would have charged straight into the spirit den before she had a chance to get used to her new powers. As impatient as Lyu was, she still couldn't argue that this greatly reduced the risk of injury.

Lyu was grateful to her goddess who constantly had her best interests in mind, and she couldn't help but feel a smile creeping onto her face.

"By the way, when did that spirit Yufie start living there? To be honest, I never would have dreamed of running into an intermediate spirit in a place like this."

"From what Cecille said…she's been in Zolingam since long before we were born."

As an outsider to Zolingam herself, Iselina answered as best she could.

There were many lesser spirits such as gnomes in Orario, but the number of intermediate spirits had dwindled in modern times, even when counting all around the world. And what could be called great spirits were now the stuff of legend, mythical beings that could only be found in tales from a bygone age.

"I've heard that Zolingam was established here specifically because there were spirits living here. It's common knowledge that

spirits will enrich the soil and trees and bodies of water wherever they live."

"I see…"

This explained why the region was so blessed in materials for smithing and was such an ideal environment for weapon-making. However, even if it was a paradise for artisans and crafters, the spirits would not remain silent if nature was carelessly despoiled, polluted, and destroyed. That could easily lead to a fate similar to what befell the Crozzo family. In response to Lyu's furrowed brow, Iselina shrugged, as if guessing her thoughts.

"Of course, the spirits did get mad. That was just a few years ago. Apparently it was Lady Astrea herself who reined them in."

"What?"

Lyu's eyes widened in surprise. At the same time, it sounded entirely plausible. Despite her serene appearance, Astrea could be a bit of a tomboy. That was how a certain impudent god had described her, but Lyu knew there was truth to that statement.

As her lips unconsciously contorted into a strange shape at the thought of that, the werewolf girl chuckled, shaking in amusement.

"From what I heard, Zolingam had angered the spirits so badly that it came very close to being completely annihilated…and then five years ago, Lady Astrea suddenly appeared and managed to patch things up. So you could say that this place is peaceful now thanks to you in a way, Lyu."

"That's not a very good joke…and all I did was selfishly push Lady Astrea away—nothing worthy of praise…"

"I'm sorry, that was rude of me," Iselina immediately apologized, seeing the pained look on Lyu's face. "Anyway, it seems Zolingam and the spirits are able to coexist thanks to Lady Astrea. What's taken from the woods and mountains are carefully managed, and the blacksmiths provide offerings and entertainment for the spirits at annual festivals…"

"So the reason Lady Astrea is living out here rather than in the city proper is…"

"Yes, it's to watch over the spirits and the forest."

Astrea was never one to boast about her work, so Iselina

explained in her stead, and in the process answered several of Lyu's lingering questions.

She still didn't know why Astrea had come to Zolingam in the first place, but she had a feeling that would get answered soon, too.

"The people of Zolingam are really grateful for Lady Astrea. Even me. I came here and asked to join her familia because I heard about everything she had done here."

"…Cecille, too?"

"Yes. In her case, she saw Lady Astrea negotiate with the spirits herself, so I imagine she probably leaped at the chance to join her familia."

Lyu stayed silent for a moment. She was curious about the blue-haired girl she had hardly seen since that tense morning.

"We've been chatting for a while now, but what are you planning to do now? As for us…sorry to say, I don't think we're in any shape to help you train right now…"

"That's fine. You should rest. I've more or less adjusted to my status. I should be able to do the rest on my own."

After she gave her thanks to Iselina, Schau, and Uranda, who were all visibly worn out, Lyu turned away and stepped onto the barely maintained trail that led back to the familia home.

Yes, I've gotten the hang of it. So next is…

As her thoughts turned to the status update that awaited her tonight, she hardened her resolve and pressed on.

"Lyu. Are you done training for the day?"

"Lady Astrea?"

The goddess appeared on the path directly ahead. Lyu hurried over to her patron goddess, whose walnut hair rustled in the gentle breeze of late autumn.

"Please do not go out alone without a guard…Iselina and the others have reduced their numbers, but there are still monsters in these woods."

"It's fine. I brought Cecille's sword with me."

Astrea brandished the longsword she was carrying. Lyu awkwardly stared at the weapon that was so at odds with the pure white gown Astrea was wearing.

Although it was difficult to imagine due to her gentle manner, this goddess of justice could more than hold her own in a fight. In the heavens, one of her duties was doling out just punishments, and in terms of skill, Kaguya once described her as *"Strong enough to make you cry in a sparring match. I know I did."* Alize had also recounted tales of harsh training during her travels alone with Astrea before they settled in Orario. Rigorous training that, while necessary, were anything but gentle.

Alize once described being left to fend for herself against a group of monsters that were too strong for her to defeat without awakening her full potential while Astrea watched with a smile. Even as Alize became more and more battered, the only help Astrea offered was bits of advice. According to Alize, the advice had been incredibly effective and precise, but it had been given in a do-or-die situation, so in that sense, she absorbed the lessons fast and thoroughly.

Astrea herself never directly intervened, but she showed a talent for pushing people past limits that they assumed were insurmountable, squeezing out every last bit of potential. And now that she thought about it, Lyu had a similar experience while fighting criminals shortly after joining *Astrea Familia*. In other words, everyone in the familia had to run the gauntlet. And the girls who had already leveled up, like Cecille, had no doubt gone through something similar.

"Isn't Lady Astrea kind of crazy? Like super scary?"

Lyu recalled Lyra asking that seven years ago, after hearing Kaguya's and Alize's jaw-dropping stories.

"It's fine, because she let me rest on her lap and lie on her chest after!" Alize had responded smugly. *"You're the only one who could do that." "But there is some logic there." "I'll follow Lady Astrea forever."*

Getting back to the topic at hand.

Doing her best to ignore the nostalgic, if exasperating voices of the star maidens worshipping their goddess in the back of her mind, Lyu sighed ever so slightly.

"I heard from Iselina. About the spirits…when you first came to

Zolingam."

"Oh…you heard that? How embarrassing." Still holding the sword, Astrea blushed and put a hand against her cheek with a shy smile. In an attempt to deflect, she said, "I'm sure Hephaistos would have done something, even if I hadn't. She visits Zolingam fairly often."

When Lyu decided to not let that pass without comment, Astrea looked even more embarrassed. As inappropriate as it may have been, Lyu found that bashfulness incredibly endearing.

"…Did you have some need of us, since you came all the way out into the forest, Lady Astrea?" Lyu asked, having no interest in teasing the goddess like Lyra and her other old friends often did.

Astrea smiled softly and said, "Cecille went into town and hasn't come back yet…Could you please go find her, Lyu?"

This prophecy from her goddess caught Lyu by surprise.

The fairy dashed through the encroaching twilight, heading west, where the city still glowed madder red in the rays of the setting sun.

As she watched her go, Astrea stuck the tip of her sheathed sword into the ground and retrieved a letter from her robes.

"There's no time…Sorry for rushing you…Lyu, Cecille…"

The letter bore a wax seal marked with a winged traveler's hat.



It was her second time seeing Zolingam in the sunset.

Just like three days ago, when she first arrived, the city was terribly busy, and the pounding of hammers was incessant.

It was normal to see artisans working on the side of the street here, much like it was nothing out of the ordinary to hear blacksmiths from different schools shouting loudly at one other. Hooded and masked, Lyu kept moving as she consulted a map marked with a circle that had *Blackliza* written in Koine next to it.

Apparently, Cecille had left the familia home around noon. Astrea had explained that she had most likely gone to her family's

workshop, one of the largest and most well-known in the city. The closer she got to the center of Zolingam, the more the sound of hammers and the heat grew. Lyu marveled at the relentless energy of the city that forged weapons without pause, even as the sun slipped under the horizon.

"That's…"

She spotted a familiar-looking structure—a metallic inverted hourglass missing its top half that essentially looked like a massive funnel and emitted emerald-green light. When she had first come to Zolingam, she figured it was something important based on that mysterious glow.

And now she saw that it stood right next to the massive Blackliza workshop.

"Please! Let me use the spirit forge! With that, I'm sure I can complete the weapon for this job…!"

The entrance of the workshop was open, and Cecille was standing in front of it, surrounded by soot-stained men in work clothes.

"What are you saying now, girl? You're the one who ran away and went cryin' to Lady Astrea. You think you can finish the weapon just by using different gear? Don't make me laugh."

"Argh…! But Dad!"

Lyu had started to run over, sensing an unsettling mood in the air, but when she overheard that last bit, she came to a stop after piecing together their relationship. The man standing across from Cecille with his arms crossed was her father, while the younger men beside him must have been her older brothers. And then there was Cecille, desperately pleading with her family and completely oblivious to the fact that Lyu was behind her.

"And what happened to all that big talk about being able to convince tons of spirits to listen to you? You haven't even won over any lesser spirits, have you?"

"Th-that's…!"

"I'm not lending Zolingam's spirit forge to a good-for-nothing half-ass who can't get a single tear…You're a greenhorn who doesn't have enough determination or skill. I was right not to let you have

even one workshop."

The girl shuddered under her father's cruel evaluation and then exploded.

"I-I'm working as hard as I can!!!" The smiths who had been passing by as if this were a normal scene started to stop and stare. "All of you refused to acknowledge me, so I left and made lots of weapons with Lady Astrea! I'm Level Two and have the Smithing ability! I can even make magic swords! At any other workshop, I'd be leagues above any other blacksmith!!"

"…"

"And here you are, saying I don't have the skill! What are you even talking about?! What do you mean not enough determination?! What do I need to do to be good enough?!"

It was an agonizing shout, a tearless cry that almost made Lyu's heart ache.

But the blacksmiths standing in front of her didn't so much as react. They continued to look down at their family member, whose head was bowed as she shouted at the ground.

"You don't get even that much?" "This is why you're no good." "What have you learned these last five years?" "Determination comes from the heart, obviously!" "Watch what you say, dumbass." "You gonna cry again?" "Crybaby Cecille."

The seven brothers were merciless. The girl clenched her fists as their words rained down on her, until finally, the father spoke.

"You can't even finish a job you took. That's proof you're still a greenhorn."

"…?!"

"Your heart's not in it. As Lady Astrea would say…you still don't have a justice you can call your own." As his daughter's face swung up to meet his, he coldly drove her away. "Hurry back to Lady Astrea, you whiny little brat."

The girl's eyes flared, and she grabbed her much taller father by his shirt, ready to punch him.

"Wait."

"!"

Silently closing the distance in a flash, Lyu hooked her wooden

sword in the girl's elbow, stopping her. Cecille spun around in surprise, and her brothers looked just as shocked. Her father alone remained unfazed, even as his daughter still held him by the chest.

"Why are you…?!"

"Lady Astrea was concerned. I don't know what led to this situation, but…it would be better for you to calm down."

Lyu wanted to say that she shouldn't become emotional, but Cecille started yelling like she had finally lost what little remained of her self-control.

"Grrrr…Stay out of this! Why do I have to hear that from you, of all people?!"

"…"

"Stop acting like you're my mentor!"

After she freed her arm from the sword and let go of her father, Cecille sped away from the workshop and melted into the shadow of approaching night.

It was then that time finally unfroze. The sound of hammers began to ring out once more and the bustle of the sword-smithing city filled the air again.

Lyu felt incredibly awkward when she noticed that Cecille's seven brothers were still looking at her in open shock, so she got ready to leave when…

"So you're the one?"

The large man fixed his clothes as he directed the question at Lyu.

"The one…?" When she turned to face him, Cecille's father looked her carefully up and down. She explained, "I am Lady Astrea's follower…nothing more than Cecille's senior."

It could not have been a satisfactory answer. But even so, he seemed to nod slightly, and then said, "Please take care of Cecille."

Lyu's eyes widened as the head of the family and his seven sons entrusted Cecille to her.

The girl did not return to the familia home.

When Lyu got back, she heard this from Schau and the others, who were in a panic, and so Lyu immediately set out into the woods all on her own.

"Lyu, I'm sure she went to see Yufie."

Just before she left, Lyu received that revelation from the goddess. She quickly traced a path from memory. Racing like the wind, brushing aside the foliage with her hands, jetting through the sky at various points.

When I think about my original goal…I have to wonder what I'm doing?

The largest battle Orario had ever seen was fast approaching. Lyu had to rush back to it as soon as possible for the sake of a certain boy and girl. Astrea had asked her to stay, and Cecille's family had asked her to look after their daughter, but at this very moment, she could ill afford to bear other people's burdens.

She had not forgotten her feelings for that boy. She had not abandoned all the complex emotions she felt toward that girl. And she had no intention of making excuses for herself with convenient proverbs about how the roundabout path is sometimes the fastest.

But I am a member of Astrea Familia.

Lyu believed that this was a form of justice. Alize and the others, the former *Astrea Familia*, would have saved Cecille *and* helped Bell and everyone else. Kaguya would have grumbled, Lyra would have complained about drawing the short straw, and Alize would have laughed and said it was fine, and in the end they all would have chosen to pursue the ideal outcome.

And Lyu couldn't forget how that boy had stayed true to his principles, even in that treacherous journey through the depths of the Dungeon.

That was why she was sure she could be forgiven for her greed now.

"No matter how inexperienced I may be…I have a responsibility as her senior."

And so, Lyu poured everything into this moment.

Turning her muttered words into a font to summon another gale,

the fairy accelerated.

She rushed through the russet forest beneath the black curtain of night, and it wasn't long before she reached the verdant green realm where the spirits dwelled.

"Yufie! Give me your tear!" In the distance, Lyu could see Cecille standing under a giant dome of leaves. She pointed her hammer at the spirit floating overhead. "Everything will work out if you just give me your tear! My family will finally acknowledge me, I'll make a proper weapon, everything will fall into place! It will! It has to! If it doesn't, then I…!"

Though her voice held firm as she called out her demands, from behind, she almost looked like a lost little girl on the verge of tears.

Meanwhile, the spirit, who seemed to know Cecille, was lounging in midair and looking terribly bored.

"Just say yes already!"

Cecille took an insistent step forward, but Yufie just laughed impishly.

"Don't wanna."

"Ugh…You stupid spirit!"

Cecille launched herself off the ground with an angry shout, swinging her hammer at the spirit floating overhead.

Not good.

Lyu sped up to close the distance, but she did not make it in time.

The smirking spirit's prank was faster.

"I hate when you're like this, Cecille!"

And with that, a powerful gust of wind blew the girl away. Unable to maneuver in the air, Cecille froze in surprise as a section of the dome of leaves peeled away, creating an opening that led out of the forest.

Beyond it stretched a sheer cliff.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The spirit's innocent laugh pierced the night as Lyu became the wind once again and leaped into the hole. She reached out to the astonished Cecille, and they plunged together over the side.



It would have been a stroke of fortune if there had been a deep river at the bottom of the cliff—but there was not.

Instead, there was a small copse of trees, and Lyu began to perform extraordinary maneuvers like kicking off the cliff face and leaping from trunks and branches—all while carrying Cecille—until she gracefully landed like a Far Eastern ninja.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Urgh?!"

At some point on the way down, Cecille had gotten caught on a branch, but it quickly snapped and she ended up sharing a nice embrace with the ground.

"Are you all right?"

"…Of course I'm not all right! Yufie was seriously going to kill me…!"

Lyu walked over without a mark on her while Cecille peeled herself off the ground, her body trembling in either anger or terror.

As she stumbled to her feet, Cecille turned toward the spirit den yet again, but it was no good. Her strength had left her, and it was all she could do to lean against a tree trunk and slide to the ground.

"You should rest a little."

"I don't need to rest! I'm a Level Two. I can handle this much…!"

"You'll collapse in your condition. You're worryingly pale."

"Ngh…!"

Noticing the shadows of exhaustion beneath her eyes and in her gaunt cheeks, Lyu could tell Cecille had not properly slept in days.

After she'd fallen down the cliff, her taut nerves finally snapped, and she was in no condition to move. A normal person would have passed out already.

Unable to argue, Cecille bit her lip in frustration as her body refused to obey her.

They were currently in a forest clearing. There was enough starlight shining down on them to not need a campfire.

Maintaining a slight distance, Lyu sat down, and after some time,

Cecille finally opened her mouth.

"…Why did you show up again?"

"Lady Astrea and the others were worried about you. And I was concerned as well."

She opted to not mention Cecille's family's request. She decided it would just make things more complicated, and with how furious Cecille was, she probably wouldn't believe it.

Cecille's face twisted into a grimace.

"To think I'd be saved by someone I said I hated…"

"…"

"Pathetic, awful, lame…this is the worst…"

It was hard to say whether she was angry or disappointed. But probably the latter. Given how much she had laid into Lyu at their first meeting, she would surely be shouting again now if she were in top form. That she did not was proof of just how exhausted she was in body and mind.

Lyu continued watching her carefully, not sure what to expect, but what she got was self-deprecation.

"…Did you come to laugh at me, too? Or to complain about me not delivering on time…"

Lyu was genuinely confused.

"What are you talking about?"

"…Did you not hear anything about it? From Lady Astrea?"

"No."

"…Or Iselina and them?"

"Now that you mention it, I recall Iselina telling Schau not to say something."

Cecille looked down.

"Lady Astrea is really mean…"

In response to that, Lyu, rather than rebuke her, simply asked, "Do you really believe that?"

"…No, not at all. I'm just a coward…"

Cecille leaned against the tree trunk she was clinging to, as if she was having trouble even staying standing up. In a moment, as if admitting her own pitiful state, she said it.

"Lady Astrea commissioned me to make a custom weapon for

you. Five years ago."

"!"

"She said there was a child she wanted to give a pair of wings when they met again. A gift so that child could begin a new journey…"

Apparently, when the goddess had first come to Zolingam, and settled things between the city and the spirits, she suddenly found Cecille, and, smiling, she walked right over to her.

"When we are finally able to meet again, it will surely be after she has finished a long journey. When that time comes, she will need a new power, a new starlight. I would like you to make that for her."

That was what Astrea had said to Cecille.

Of course she surely had not predicted everything leading up the present and the great familia war that had started. But Astrea had believed in Lyu. Believed that the elf who had lost Alize and everyone and scorched herself in the flames of revenge would start walking again and be able to find her own justice. And believing in that, she had tried to provide a pair of wings with which to create a new future.

That was the reason Astrea had come to Zolingam. It was all for Lyu's sake.

That's…

Lyu was stunned, and her heart was trembling terribly. A whole deluge of emotions flooded her heart. Yet again she felt the goddess's mercy beside her, she wanted to bury her face in her hands and cry.

But also, she understood just why Cecille had been so furious with her. It was a natural anger. Because Lyu had tried to go right back to Orario without even attempting to understand Astrea's feelings or the depths of her compassion.

"I leaped at the chance…I had been looking for her in the first place, wanting to join her familia no matter what it took."

"You did?"

"That's right. Because after she calmed Yufie and the other spirits, she was like a hero of Zolingam. Even my dad and brothers respected her. I thought if I could become one of her followers…they

would finally acknowledge me, too…”

Cecille’s words began to reveal the core of her being. Lyu hesitated for a moment, unsure whether to push further. But she quickly cast aside that doubt and moved closer to Cecille. Though they were not around anymore, Alize and the others would not have hesitated to ask for the whole story. Just as they had done to Lyu when she first met them and had made the same sort of face as Cecille was now.

“Is there a rift between you and your family?”

“What do I know. Is it even anything that fancy? I dunno.”

“…”

“But, me and my dad and my brothers are all stubborn…Even after Mom died, we were always fighting.”

When Lyu asked, Cecille made up her mind. Or perhaps she just gave up. The fiery attitude that Lyu had come to know died down, and she started talking haltingly, like a mechanical doll whose gears no longer fit together.

“I was born in Zolingam. My family, extended family, we’re all blacksmiths. Making strong weapons and providing them to the people who need ’em is our city’s mission, and it’s practically our reason for existing.”

It was an idea deeply rooted in the culture of Zolingam. This city of famed blacksmiths, well-known throughout the mortal realm, had a clear role to play. To produce great weapons. To produce great power.

They understood the true nature of weapons, and they knew that it was pointless to attach labels like good or evil to them. If they didn’t like a customer, they simply wouldn’t sell to them, and that was enough. They focused solely on refining their craft, striving to create ever greater weapons.

In a way, everyone in the city was trying to reach the peak of their craft with their own hands.

Noticing Lyu’s probing gaze, Cecille smiled faintly.

“I liked making swords. Seeing an ordinary hunk of metal transform into a beautiful sword felt like art. When the person who bought the first weapon I ever worked on came back to buy another

one, they told me that sword had saved them. I was so happy when I heard that."

The girl made it clear she was not just a slave to the ways of her hometown like Lyu had been, but even so, her expression darkened.

"But I was the youngest, and I couldn't keep up. I was the only girl, and my brothers always made fun of me."

"…"

"It bothered me so much…I holed up in the workshop, hammering at the steel like crazy. I thought up all sorts of designs for weapons, taking my own approach to things. But they would never acknowledge me."

"…Why do you think they refused to acknowledge you?"

"Every smith at Blackliza other than me is part of a familia, so if they wouldn't let me join, then what explanation is there other than them not acknowledging me?"

Lyu could imagine her, face covered in soot, burns all over, her hands raw and calloused, sweating in front of the blazing furnace while swinging her hammer.

"Lady Hephaistos comes here from time to time, and I tried asking her to let me join her familia, even. But she just shook her head. Maybe my dad said something to her…"

So she tried to *use* Lady Astrea.

Lyu's eyes widened as she confessed like a remorseful criminal.

"At first, I was just after the Smithing ability…"

"!"

"I thought if I became a high smith, my family would have to acknowledge me. And if that wasn't enough, I thought I would try to get my hands on a spirit's tear."

"A spirit's tear…?"

"Zolingam has always been deeply connected to spirits, even long before Lady Astrea came here. There are still several buildings in the city that come from spirits…You saw the spirit forge, didn't you?"

The emerald glow flickered in the back of Lyu's mind.

Apparently by using the spirit forge, it was possible to strengthen a weapon far beyond what standard work could achieve. And it proved its true worth when making magic swords and superior-grade

gear. The feeling Lyu got was that it was sort of like a boost to the Smithing ability using external tools.

Although the city's traditions had become a hollow shell of their former selves, and the smiths had become haughty, provoking the spirits' anger five years ago, Zolingam had coexisted with the spirits since ancient times.

Like spirits in fairy tales granting strength to heroes, they had given the blacksmiths all sorts of boons, including the spirit forge.

"In Zolingam, being acknowledged by spirits is crucial. Only those who commune with the spirits who live in the nearby forests and mountains and bring back a tear—a spirit's tear—are allowed to use the spirit forge. I wanted that. To make a weapon that would blow my dad and brothers away…"

In addition to the spirit forge, Zolingam was also provided with salamander wool, undine cloth, and various other spirit materials.

Those who returned with spirit tears, like Cecille's father and others like him, negotiated with the spirits to procure these materials. When Lyu heard that Zolingam even provided a small amount of what they acquired to Orario, she was stunned. She knew the spirit materials on sale in Babel came into the city by various routes, but she did not know Zolingam was one of them. It was possible that *Hephaistos Familia*, who also had a store in Babel, was involved as well.

The conversation had derailed a little, but this explained the fundamental origins of Zolingam's old customs.

"That's why when some goddess I knew nothing about asked me to make a weapon, I thought she was trying to use me. So I figured I might as well use her, too…"

That was how Cecille became a follower of Astrea. All full of calculations herself, she privately scoffed at the goddess of mercy and justice and simply focused on leveling up.

"Of course, I got taught some hard lessons by Yufie and the other spirits…"

As expected…

"That was really because I was asking for too much, and Lady Astrea was just answering in kind…I was always complaining back

then. Even though she surely saw through my lies and everything… she never once got upset and always helped me."

Cecille's tone was growing just a little lighter and softer. As she thought back on her time with Astrea, her lips at some point slipped into a little smile.

"At first, Lady Astrea and I made a shabby little cabin in the woods here, and I would go see Yufie every day, then I would work on weapons whenever I had free time…"

"…And then?"

"We ate our meals together at a tiny table, just the two us. I would always complain, and she would listen, and sometimes we would end up laughing and smiling…"

Lyu could not help feeling disappointed at how bad she was at keeping the conversation flowing, but even so, the girl could not hide her slight smile as she continued reminiscing about the path she had taken to become who she was now.

"I couldn't help wondering what I was even doing when I so desperately needed to polish my blacksmithing skills. But it's a weird thing. Even though it was a detour, it all ended up working out."

She had improved at a remarkable rate, and the weapons she made became good enough that even the craftsmen of Zolingam were in awe. Her family still refused to acknowledge her, but even so, she had grown so much that even she could feel the difference.

And finally, Iselina joined the familia, having heard the story of Astrea's heroism, and when there were occasionally reasons for Astrea to leave the city, Schau and Uranda started tagging along for some reason. After that, they gradually got more members, and *Astrea Familia* grew larger.

Because of that, they tore down the cabin and built up a proper home together. That was when Astrea had asked a craftsperson to build a workshop just for Cecille.

And at some point, she managed to reach Level 2. Cecille was stunned to realize she had practically forgotten about that, even though she had been so obsessed with it to begin with. Somewhere along the way, she had grown to adore the goddess who was always smiling.

"I didn't know anything about the justice Lady Astrea represents, but…I started to feel like I wanted to be at her side."

"…I know that feeling."

"Really? That's surprising. But I guess that's how it goes with Lady Astrea. Her kindness can even envelop a stupidly serious elf and a pain-in-the-ass human…"

For the first time, Cecille looked Lyu in the eye with a smile.

Lyu was a little bit relieved at that. But the girl's eyes grew distant, seeing something elsewhere.

"Honestly, getting acknowledged by Dad and them stopped being so important to me. It felt like I had found my place in the world. But…in order to keep that place, I had a promise I had to keep."

That was Lyu's custom weapon. The thing Astrea had come to Zolingam in order to get.

Cecille's right hand trembled slightly as she rested it on her chest.

"As I came to respect and love Lady Astrea more…I grew more and more jealous of you!"

"…"

"I know it's selfish of me! That I was just trying to use her myself at first! And then the moment I was bound by this bond, I started begging to be loved!"

She exploded. She vented the emotions she had bottled up, never sharing them with the goddess or her fellow familia members.

"I didn't want to make it! But I had no choice! If I didn't, I wouldn't be a real member of the familia, I would just be a villain lying to Lady Astrea all this time!"

Cecille's connection with Astrea had begun with the order for Lyu's weapon. It was unthinkable for her to go back on her word. She had spent countless days and nights questioning if she could even call herself a follower of Astrea if she broke that promise.

Her goals and means had flipped somewhere along the way. The guilt and shame Cecille felt tormented her. And Astrea, as the other side of that deal, could not resolve it no matter how much she tried. Indeed, the more she demonstrated her concern for Cecille, the worse the pain became.

"So I did it! I tried to make a weapon, imagining you, someone I

had never met before!" she kept shouting. "I thought I was losing my mind, but I managed to come up with all sorts of designs! I drew blueprints, gathered materials, finally designed a weapon that I thought could work! I even asked Lady Astrea about the wooden sword she said you used and tried to re-create it!"

Once the torrent of words was unleashed, it couldn't be stopped. The pain and troubles welled up. In the deluge of all the feelings Cecille had kept hidden until now, Lyu finally understood. The wooden sword she had ended up using these past few days, though not perfect, fit cleanly in her hand. Cecille had thought of all sorts of things for Lyu working on just Astrea's descriptions alone, trying to get closer to Lyu's beloved sword as much as possible, and this was the result.

"And yet…why can't I finish it?!"

As if she was reaching her limit, tears started to well in her eyes.

"I kept thinking, kept trying, kept struggling all this time! So why can't I finish your weapon?!"

"Cecille…"

"Why won't Dad and them acknowledge me?! Why would Yufie do that?! What am I missing?!…What is it…?"

Her trembling fingers clutched her chest. Translucent tears fell behind the hair covering her eyes as she looked down.

"I won't be able to keep my promise to Lady Astrea at this rate…!"

It was like seeing herself when she had arrived in Zolingam. Three days ago.

Unease and impatience were strangling Cecille's body and mind, creating a negative feedback loop. Unable to take care of things using just her own power, she'd swallowed her pride and gone to ask her father, clinging to the hopes of using the spirit forge. And even after that was rejected, she had tried to bring back a tear from Yufie.

Even now, Cecille fought against the dark tides, continuing to struggle.

At the same time, that had brought into relief for Lyu what she was lacking as a blacksmith, which her father had pointed out to her.

That was surely the reason they had been so cold with her.

If there's one thing I can understand about this…then it would be that her eyes are being clouded by jealousy of me and a sense of inferiority.

Her anxiety and other turbulent emotions were getting in the way of making the sword. That she could not finish the weapon, even though she had manifested the Smithing ability, was at least partially due to that. And it was incredibly difficult for Lyu to help her overcome the complex she had developed, since she was essentially the source of it.

"When you showed up, 'oh no, this is it,' I thought…the deadline was finally here. The promised day that I had been running away from for years…"

Cecille let it all out as the tears fell.

It would have been better if the one who would use the sword were someone loathsome. If she could just say she would not make a weapon for that elf or if she could just bring herself to give them a half-assed weapon. Cecille had pinned her hopes on that.

But Lyu was fastidious, forthright, willing to accept her own faults, able to acknowledge her mistakes. Lyu had been so honest and upright that shouting at her only made Cecille feel even more pathetic. She had thought Lyu was truly worthy of being called Astrea's follower. Meanwhile, could she really say she was not hoping in some part of her heart to tarnish Lyu's dignity?

"I'm just getting more and more pathetic. I don't want this. I hate what I'm becoming. I'm the worst…"

Her thoughts were quickly losing any semblance of logic, and the pained words kept tumbling from her lips like falling tears.

"I'm scared to think how Lady Astrea sees me now. Is she fed up with me, disappointed in me…? I don't even want to know…!"

Her voice cracked. She kept rubbing her face to no avail. The uniform she had made with love was dirty and covered in tears, like an outward expression of her heart.

That was all Lyu could think while she watched in silence.



“Lady Astrea, will they be all right…? Cecille and Lyu…” Iselina asked uneasily.

Beneath the dark night sky, the familia members could not bear to stay inside and were waiting outside Stars’ Rest for Cecille and Lyu to come back. It was already nearing midnight. The dinner they had set aside for the two of them had grown cold hours ago. Astrea was also standing outside, looking out into the forest.

“They aren’t coming back…Maybe it would be better if we looked, too…”

“She isn’t great at explaining things, either…Even if she finds Cecille, I’m sure it will turn into an argument…”

“C’mon, that’s saying too much, Uranda!”

“Even if it isn’t a fight, she seems crazy bad at talking to people…”

Schau was swaying back and forth, and Uranda was making pretty rough evaluations. Even when Schau corrected her, the long-haired girl was unconcerned.

Listening to them, the goddess acknowledged her followers’ anxiety and smiled.

“It will be fine.” There was no doubt in the conclusion she had already reached. “If it’s the current Lyu, it will be fine.”



“‘A weapon made specifically for someone can possess a special power.’”

That was what Lyu said after collecting her thoughts.

“Huh…?”

“Something I heard from an acquaintance. The deeper the feelings poured in, the more unique a gleam the weapon takes on compared to any other.”

The acquaintance—a certain white-haired boy—had apparently heard it himself from someone else, but Lyu could understand the logic of it.

"Cecille, would you please make a weapon for me?"

And so Lyu asked her herself. Not as a request from Astrea, but in her own words.

Cecille was surprised, even as the traces of tears still stained her cheeks.

"Wh-why…? You heard my pathetic story just now, didn't you…?!"

"I heard it, and I thought I would like to try holding your weapon."

Lyu spoke plainly as ever, but Cecille, who managed somehow to wipe her cheeks, was confused. Lyu slowly started putting what she felt into words.

"Unfortunately, I cannot fully comprehend your envy and jealousy. If I could put myself in your position, perhaps it is something to be ashamed of, as you say."

"Ngh…"

"But those feelings aren't necessarily worthless."

"Huh…?" Cecille couldn't believe her ears.

"Though my thoughts were rather different, I have also struggled against doubt and indecision. I have accumulated sins utterly incomparable to yours and was always troubled…unable to progress in any direction."

"Y-you did…?"

Cecille looked like she could not believe Lyu's confession. And before answering that question, Lyu started with the conclusion.

"And because I continued to struggle against my doubts and worries, I was eventually able to find an answer I could accept." Cecille's eyes widened. "I am sure you, too, are in the middle of a journey in search of your justice."

"…A journey in search of justice? Something this painful is…?"

Cecille froze absentmindedly and looked down at her own two hands. As she watched her, Lyu remembered what Astrea had said the other night.

"…because she was so similar."

"To Alize, and to you, Lyu."

She was beginning to understand. It felt like she now understood the odd sense of familiarity before. In her own immaturity, she had continued to struggle with self-doubt, coming to a standstill and stagnating even, before finally completing her journey. And because she had reached the end of that journey, she was able to stand before Astrea and meet Cecille, another new traveler.

This was, in a sense, a crossing of orbits. A locus of stars.

Perhaps this is also how Alize felt when we first met. Like she was seeing a fellow traveler.

"Cecille, will you listen to an old story of mine?"

For the sake of their crossing paths. For the story that she wanted to pass on.

"……Okay."

Cecille agreed, and Lyu slowly began talking.

A story of an elf, more troublesome, less flexible, more fastidious, more stubborn than Cecille. Of an elf who loathed her home village that looked down on all other races, who ran away and went to Orario. Of a child who vented at Astrea and her familia for her own failure and disappointment. Of sweeping through the Dark Age with her vexing, reliable comrades. Of the great battle seven years ago. Of what she lost and what she gained. Of the calamitous fight five years ago. Of new loss and of being scorched in the flames of retribution. Of the days of revival spent in a benevolent tavern after becoming a hollow shell of herself. And now. Overcoming thousands of darknesses, a terrifying past, in search of a future.

In telling her story, she could not spin a tale like the ancient bards of her race, but each and every word was imbued with both her current feelings and the vision of the scene in the moment. A single shooting star crossed the sky and disappeared into the darkness as Lyu continued.

"…Did that really happen?"

"Yes. It is all true."

"Even as pure and perfect as you seem…you spent so long unsure like that, too…"

With her tears dried, Cecille looked at Lyu, whose face was clear,

and then finally she looked up. There was a sky full of stars above them.

As many stars as there were different definitions of justice.

And there were surely stars that had shattered and crumbled into stardust. Yet they endured. So long as people like Lyu and her companions existed, those feelings and justice would go on.

"I shall say it again, Cecille. Lose your way. Hesitate. That is nothing to be ashamed of."

"…"

"Continue to struggle. Even when you find an answer, keep questioning yourself…That is what my irreplaceable friends taught me."

As she looked at the blue-haired girl before her, Lyu smiled, recalling the memory of the red-haired girl from her past.

Cecille said nothing. Her silence was no longer born of pain, but because she was facing her own feelings.

This should be enough, right? Alize, everyone…Adi…

Lyu was aware she must have sounded like she was preaching. And that she had no right to do anything of the sort. But she was still a senior member of the familia, even though she didn't feel like one. It was an embarrassing, bittersweet realization.

The youngest and most inexperienced member of *Astrea Familia* was now lecturing a new generation. But that was what it meant for justice to return. And, as if affirming her thoughts, she was filled with a warm feeling as Cecille spoke up again.

"…I still don't really know about any journey or justice. And I'm kind of doubtful that even if I find the answer it will make me a good blacksmith."

"…"

"But it's weird. Even though I thought I could never make it… right now, I sort of feel like I can."

She held her head high.

"I don't know if I can make something that will satisfy you…but I think I can make a weapon for you, Lyu."

Lyu had never seen such a gentle smile on her face. Like beautiful blooming rudbeckia. And Lyu smiled back, just as she once had to

an old friend.

Standing up, she walked over and held out her hand.

"Let's go."

"…Yeah."

The girl nodded as her hand clasped the fairy's without being brushed aside.



"Ceciiiiiille! Thank goooooodness!"

When the two of them returned to Stars' Rest, they were met by a loud and boisterous welcoming party.

Schau wept and clung onto Cecille, who wrestled with her, telling her to let go, and Iselina and Uranda and the rest gathered around the two of them, the relief clear on their faces.

They are a good familia, Lyu thought as she smiled, seeing the joy and smile that had returned to Cecille's face.

"Thank you for your work, Lyu. Looks like you made a proper mentor, after all."

"Please don't tease me, Lady Astrea…"

She averted her eyes, enduring the embarrassment at Astrea's comment, but the goddess just giggled and then she walked over to the blue-haired girl.

"Welcome home, Cecille."

"…Yes, Lady Astrea."

"You're finally looking my way again."

"Nguuuh…I'm sorry…!"

"It's all right. It's also my fault that you ended up tormenting yourself…Maybe it would have been better if I were pushier like Schau?"

"No! I was the one avoiding you…! I just decided by myself I was too ashamed to see you…!"

Cecille's eyes watered up as the goddess teased her.

Unable to make a weapon, always feeling burdened, she had

been afraid of Astrea, too. It was because Astrea's words and outstretched hand could not reach her that Astrea had chosen to entrust it to Lyu. And that had been the correct choice. There were words and feelings that could only come from a fellow familia member like Lyu rather than an all-knowing deusdea.

As Cecille looked about to cry, Astrea gently embraced her. Cecille was stunned, but after a moment, she wrapped her arms around the goddess's narrow waist. Uranda and the others were dumbstruck as her head nestled deep in the goddess's bosom.

It seemed there really was not anyone like Alize in the new *Astrea Familia*, no one who would behave so irreverently around their goddess.

Ending the embrace, Astrea gave instructions, and the gathering came to a close.

"All right, everyone, let's go back into the home. Cecille, make sure you properly rest…And Lyu, sorry, but could you come to my room after?"

Lyu had expected to be called out from the start and so went into the home together with Astrea.

The girls watched them disappear into the home, and one girl murmured a curse.

"Uuugh, that elf always gets special treatment… How come you didn't just stab her in the back, Cecille…?"

"Argh, this isn't that kind of story…Quit saying such scary things, Uranda!"

Schau shuddered and shouted as Cecille continued looking at their home.

"She's…going to leave after this, isn't she?"

"Yeah, probably."

Even without saying where, Iselina still knew what she meant.

Cecille looked down at her right hand and clenched it in determination.

"Lyu, read this."

After washing and preparing herself, Astrea handed her a letter as soon as she came into the room.

"News from Orario, from Hermes."

"…!"

"The details of the War Game have been decided. They are written there."

Lyu hurriedly broke the wax seal marked with a winged traveler's hat, the *Hermes Familia*'s emblem, and confirmed its contents.

There was a simple, general description of the rules that were being settled on and the date it was to be held. The contest would be decided with hide-and-seek. And it would start in…

"Three days…!"

"It seems Hermes and others have been hard at work at the Denatus to obtain as many advantages for Hestia's side as they can, but they've reached their limit. They won't be able to win any more favorable conditions."

"…Considering the distance to Orario…"

"Yes. At the very latest, we will have to leave in the morning two days from now or we won't make it in time."

There was a scrawled note in Koine saying *I can't disrupt Denatus any further.* As well as *I've bought all the time I can. If possible, please make it back for the battle.*

While it was not exactly working from the shadows, Hermes was setting the stage for Lyu and Astrea to take part in the War Game. And he believed that without them, there was no hope of defeating *Freya Familia*.

That was why, when Lyu had left for Zolingam, she'd had Asfi help her with the troublesome process of leaving the city. Hermes had placed a slender hope on Lyu getting her status updated and returning with Astrea as a powerful reinforcement for the decisive battle.

Even Andromeda is pinning her hopes on this…

She pulled out the magic item Asfi had given her before leaving Orario, which she had kept on her at all times. It was shaped like a feather, with a blue jewel near the quill tip—one of a twin pair of

crystals that were used in the making of the item. By breaking the gem, it would signal the paired magic item, sending a message to Asfi.

Leon, a letter will come as soon as the detailed rules and date of the War Game are settled. After you leave Zolingam, if you determine that you will not arrive in time, break this item. So long as you are anywhere near Orario, I will use Talaria to deliver you no matter what it takes.

The letter that had arrived this evening had come from a fleet-footed *Hermes Familia* member who had been waiting outside Orario. Though it was the instructions of their patron god, Hermes's followers were all doing everything they could to insure Lyu's and Astrea's participation in the War Game.

With how far apart Orario and Zolingam were, there would be a time lag in receiving the report, but befitting a god, Hermes had foreseen the delivery date accurately. Or more like, there was a very little note scrawled in the corner of the letter saying, *Just in case, while making sure no other deities saw, I added Astrea's, Demeter's, and Njörðr's names to the roster.* In other words, he was cheekily telling them to be sure they made it.

His chic plan, or more like his almost desperate wish upon a star, made Lyu's head hurt. Apparently, the trickster god was trying to support Bell from the shadows.

"I would have liked to give you and Cecille more time, but…it seems we have little choice in the matter."

Astrea had kept Lyu in Zolingam and given Cecille as much time as possible. Lyu looked up with a resolute expression, knowing what the goddess would say next.

"Lyu, I will update your status one last time."

After she pricked her fingertip with a needle, a bead of crimson welled up.

It was a solemn ritual to bequeath a new pair of wings to a traveler who had finished her long journey.

The goddess's ichor dripped onto Lyu's bare back. There was a

glow and a ripple as it touched her skin like a water surface.

"Lady Astrea, my five years' worth of status update was not finished in a single session, was it?"

As the update was happening, she asked, knowing the answer already. As the goddess's finger scrawled across her back, recording new hieroglyphs, Astrea nodded.

"Yes. I did not release all the excelia dormant within you. Neither the higher-grade nor the lower-grade excelia."

"May I ask why?"

"Because you would have leveled up *twice*." Lyu herself gulped when she heard that. "The amount of excelia you accumulated over these five years was enormous. Calculating it all, if I released everything…you would have been able to go from Level Four all the way to Level Six."

From the annihilation of the Evils' main force five years ago, to the Black Goliath and the Xenos incident and Juggernaut, Lyu had overcome countless struggles and fights to the death. A series of trials that the gods hailed as great feats, and goddesses mourned as terrible tribulations.

Considering that she had been at the upper range of Level 4 when she parted from Astrea, Lyu's body and soul possessed the right to reclaim her five years' worth of stagnation.

"And because you fought those five years at Level Four…with the same status the whole time, what would happen to you if you jumped all the way to Level Six in one go? Most likely, you would have suffered a far, far worse disconnect between your body and your mind than you have these past few days. It would have taken more than a week, perhaps even more than a month, to recover."

"…!"

"You likely would have destroyed at least one limb because you would have failed to control the sudden change in your physical form. That was why it was crucial to take this one step at a time. First letting you adjust to Level Five, then gradually adding abilities."

Meaning Astrea had carefully calculated the burden this process would have on her follower's body and provided her with appropriate tasks. That was the real reason why she did not send Lyu to Orario

right away and had her stay in Zolingam instead.

Two level-ups…?! Me?!

Finally understanding Astrea's divine will, Lyu felt a cold sweat.

Last night, Lyu had been sure that there was no way her abilities could have grown that much from just some practice swings and working with Iselina and the others on adapting these past four days. While it was perhaps a rude way to put it, it was because Astrea had been holding out on her.

A growth in abilities beyond mere leveling up must have been occurring.

That much Lyu had managed to deduce. Until now, she had thought Astrea was controlling the adjustment in stages out of concern for the effects of a sudden increase in abilities. She had not even considered the possibility of leveling up a second time, which was nearly unthinkable. The world was vast and filled with mystery, but she had never heard of anyone who had achieved consecutive level-ups. It was a feat that even the record holder had not accomplished.

"B-but, releasing excelia in stages, is that really possible…?! I thought that everything, including extra points, was unconditionally released in a status update…!"

Lyu struggled to quell her unrest as Astrea smiled wryly behind her.

"These sorts of strategy game tactics were never really my thing…but it's surprisingly common with other gods."

The extraction and release of excelia was entirely discretionary.

For example, suppose a goddess *sniffed out* the development of a dangerous bullet point in a follower's status—something that might be considered a self-destructive skill. In that case, supposing she could suppress her curiosity toward the unknown, she could let the excelia that *would* develop into that skill to lie dormant instead, sidestepping the potential danger entirely.

Astrea had done largely the same thing. She had chosen not to release all the excelia relating to abilities and leveling up, *holding on to them* for a moment.

"Loki and probably Hermes are pretty skilled at this sort of thing,

I would guess. Deities are always balancing their followers' status with an eye on what would be most optimal."

It was widely known that some goddesses avoided leveling up even when it was possible in order to push the limits of basic abilities. And for a faction as large as *Loki Familia* it might even be considered standard practice.

It was just one of the tricks that deities had at their disposal and was sometimes called the status loophole.

It was a normal thought among deities to want the children they had brought up personally to be strong, and it was an important tool in familia management. (Such as a certain goddess who postponed a level-up when the record holder returned from the deep floors because she did not want to draw even more attention.)

Ability growth and leveling up were at the patron deity's discretion. And so, Astrea had gambled everything on that loophole. Judging the optimal point for the final update of Level 4 and Level 5 in order to provide the greatest growth at Level 6.

"In your case, the crucial factor came down to the fact that you had actually accumulated enough excelia to be able to level up twice, which is unprecedented."

"…!"

"No other deity has experienced it, and honestly, I've been fumbling my way through this as well…"

To speak in more detail of this case, Astrea was capable of skipping the second level-up, just as Loki did for some of her followers. Because Lyu already had more than enough excelia to level up, Astrea could wait for Lyu to have a satisfactory growth in her basic abilities—in particular waiting for her to reach S in some of her more important areas like magic—and only then allow her to level up.

Other deities would do the same. It was more efficient and would ultimately make their follower stronger. However, in Lyu and Astrea's case, circumstances would not allow them the luxury.

"I am going to raise your Level Five abilities to the limit and then level you up. All right, Lyu?"

"…! Yes!"

A great battle awaited them. The strongest enemy, *Freya Familia*, would not allow them to hold back. Lyu had to grow all she could now in order to challenge the fearsome einherjar.

"This is your final status."

Once Astrea stopped her work, she handed Lyu a paper.

Lyu Leon

Level 5

Strength: G288 Endurance: G201 Dexterity: E494 Agility: D507 Magic: E457

Hunter: G Resistance: G Magic Defense: I Magic Control: I

The minimum requirement for a level-up was a D in a basic ability. Ordinarily, many of Lyu's abilities would reach S, but this was not the time for worrying about that sort of inefficiency. Lyu had people she wanted to protect no matter what, and people she had to save no matter what.

The goddess checked one last time. "Is this really okay?"

Lyu nodded without hesitation. "Please."

It began. A flow of hieroglyphs. The feeling of a knock in her soul, just like she had felt when reaching Level 5. It was stronger this time, and a blazing heat swelled inside her all of a sudden. Lyu shut her eyes and her spine shuddered.

"This magic, too, will *return* to you."

With that proclamation, Astrea finished the update.

Lyu Leon

Lv. 6

Strength: I0 Endurance: I0 Dexterity: I0 Agility: I0 Magic: I0

Hunter: G Resistance: G Magic Defense: I Magic Control: I Successive Attacks: I

Magic

Luminous Wind

- Wide area of effect.
- Wind and light element.

Noa Heal

- Healing magic.
- Environmental effect. Magic effect boosted in wooded environments.

Astrea Record

- Inherited justice.

Skill

Fairy Serenade

- Amplify magic effect.
- At night, magnitude of enhancement increases.

Mind Load

- When attacking, consume Mind to increase Strength.
- Active trigger ability, including the amount of consumed Mind.

Aero Mana

- When running, attack strength increases as speed increases.

Astrae Varmas

- Falna effect.
- Amplifies skills of followers who share the same god and ichor as the user and are in range.
- Enhances the Mind and magic of followers who share the same god and ichor as the user and are in range.
- Provides moderate resistance to psychological corruption to all followers of any deity who are in range.
- Passive effect.
- Degree, magnitude, and scale of enhancement and range increase with Level.

"!!"

She had already heard, so the Level 6 did not surprise her. What made her sky-blue eyes widen was in the magic slot.

The third spell and its effect. Astrea Record. It was translated as "inherited justice" in Koine. Seeing that, Lyu teared up.

She did not know the specific effects, but there was something she did know. The justice that Alize and everyone else believed in had not disappeared. They were still with her, even now.

I finally understand why Lady Astrea didn't let me develop this magic immediately.

With the unease and impatience from a powerful enemy looming before her, Lyu had become unable to do anything but look and

move straight ahead. She would not have been able to look up to the sky. She would not have noticed the gleaming stars that were watching over her, even now.

"…Thank you, Lady Astrea."

As she lowered her head, her voice was faint as she said only that. Smiling, Astrea gently draped clothing over the fairy, who was still sitting there naked as the day she was born.

"Tomorrow we'll put on the last finishing touches. I'll speak to Yufie…Are you ready, Lyu?"

Lyu paused before answering, and then asked, "…Lady Astrea, can you return my hair to its original color?"

"Hmm?"

"I want to face Syr without hiding myself…the way I was when I fought with Alize and the others."

Astrea stood still at that request. Lyu's faint green hair was dyed, a favor from Syr to help hide her identity. Lyu's original hair was a beautiful blond that befitted a noble elf. Seeing her follower's tearful eyes and open smile as she sought to reclaim herself, the goddess smiled.

"Yes, of course."



Night broke, and the sun began to rise in the east.

The chirps of birds had not yet started. The stillness of the forest did not feel like the calm before a storm.

Looking out the window to the faintly lighter sky, Lyu began to set out for the forest, the natural blond hair Astrea had restored rustling as she moved. She humbly ate the food that the goddess had prepared for her, and after finishing her meal, she stepped into the hallway of Stars' Rest.

"Whoa, you changed your hair?! Why?!"

Her junior's voice rang out gratingly loud in the early morning. She hesitated, and then, her voice tinged with embarrassment…

"Hey, umm! Just a sec, um…Lyu!"

Stopping and turning around, she saw Cecille rush over, holding some cloth over one arm.

"…I still can't get used to hearing you talk to me like that."

"You don't have to comment on every little thing! More importantly, this!" Blushing, Cecille pushed what she was holding into Lyu's hands. Taking it in surprise, she spread it out…

"Battle clothes…?"

"You're going to Yufie today, right? I heard there's is some crazy battle that's going to happen in Orario…It's sort of like a defensive outfit? It's made with spirit cloth, so it should be better than just standard combat gear."

Surprise filled Lyu's eyes. She could tell just by feeling it that it was an excellent set of equipment. Seemingly approving of that reaction, Cecille sniffed proudly.

"This is thanks for yesterday! I haven't finished your weapon yet, but I thought I should give you this first."

"You did this last night…?"

"That's right! I can make things happen when I need to!"

"You were already sleep deprived. Did you get any rest last night?"

"A-a Level Two can handle an all-nighter, okay…?"

She started out rather loud and proud, but beneath Lyu's cool dorm-mother gaze, she quickly looked away and her words trailed off.

Lyu was about to scold her, but…

"I—I took a nap, okay?!" she hurriedly explained. "I just reused a spirit dress uniform I'd made for snatching a tear from Yufie! It was just modifying something I already had, so it didn't take that much time! Really!"

With that confession from Cecille, Lyu chose not to probe further. Cecille was not lying about the making of the outfit, at least. And Lyu was in no position to scold people for pushing themselves. So instead, she smiled at the girl, who had become so much closer in this past day.

"Thank you, Cecille. I would be happy to wear it."

"Ah…uh, mhm!"

Cecille's awkward expression transformed into a big smile.

Lyu went back to the guest room she was borrowing and changed into the battle clothes. A hairband was included with the outfit, and she gratefully used it to tie her long hair back behind her head. She could tell even without looking in the mirror that the size was a perfect fit.

Impressed, she started to leave the room, when she suddenly remembered and took a certain fragment of wood from her bag.

Cecille clapped upon seeing Lyu return in her new clothes.

"Ohh! I knew it! It looks great on you! How does it feel?"

"Wonderful. It doesn't get in the way of my movements at all." Lyu complimented her without restraint and then asked the question that had popped into her head. "However, I have to ask—how did you know the size? You never took any measurements."

"Huh? Even when people are wearing clothes, it's easy enough to tell stuff like height, bust, and hips, right?"

"…?!"

Lyu was startled, as if she had just run into a talking monster in the Dungeon. Suspecting she may have just glimpsed an aspect of this girl's abnormality, she just cleared her throat.

"Cecille, this is from me."

"…? This is…some wood? No, does this come from a sacred tree…?"

"It is a piece of the weapon I used before."

"!" Cecille looked up with a gasp.

It was a fragment of Lyu's main weapon, Alvs Lumina. It had been broken by Juggernaut in an encounter in the lower floors, but Bors, the head of Rivira, had recovered it and given it to her when she was leaving Orario.

"The weapon that was broken was given to me by a dear friend. If it is possible, please use it in the new weapon."

"A-are you sure? This was originally a branch of a sacred tree, wasn't it?"

"I do not mind. I can never meet her again. So at the very least, if it could be reborn in a new weapon…I would still be able to feel

my bond with her.”

Cecille looked down in shock at the piece of wood Lyu held out to her. And finally, as if handling a precious jewel of stardust, she carefully accepted it.

“…I thought I would try to finish your weapon while you were with Yufie. But…”

“Cecille?”

“Umm, can I come with you?!”

Seeing her look up and lean forward excitedly, now it was Lyu’s turn to be surprised.

“I don’t want to make a half-assed weapon! I want to make a sword worthy of the things you’ve inherited and carry inside you!”

“…!”

“So I want to use the spirit forge, too! I’ll steal a tear from that jerk Yufie and make my stubborn dad let me use the forge! I can picture the weapon now! If I combine this with the spirit tear and the last bit of material I have left, I’m sure I can make a custom weapon just for you!” Cecille’s eyes were blazing with a blacksmith’s spirit. “Not because I want to be acknowledged! But because I want to make this weapon for you!”

It felt almost like the entire building was shaking. As if it were resonating with her determination.

“I swear I’ll make it in time. So…please,” Cecille pleaded in a soft voice.

The sense of déjà vu welled in Lyu again. That recklessness, and the gallant determination…

It was like looking into Alize Lovell’s face.

“…”

Lyu couldn’t say no to that look. Before long, a resigned smile spread on her lips. A combination of Lyu’s subtlety and Alize’s strength, just like Astrea said…Cecille resembled them both. Patting her on the shoulder once, Lyu started walking.

“Let’s go.”

“—!! Thank you!”

Lyu set off for the spirit den with her junior in tow.



In that strange place, time of day meant nothing. The thick canopy overhead and the magic of the spirits kept it always dim and gloomy.

In that twilight realm…

"Yufie, please play with Lyu and Cecille. You can play together, as much as you want," a goddess called out to a beloved child.

"Really? Can we? Can we, goddess?!"

Cecille trembled, possibly because she knew the terrifying nature of the supernatural being who took the form of a child and could tell that her innocent voice carried an undertone of cruelty. Shuddering slightly, her right hand touched the fairy beside her. She held on to her pinky, wrapping it in her hand.

Oddly, just that was enough to blow away the terror in her heart.

"Yes, you may. To your heart's content…because these children won't break."

Astrea turned to them with a smile.

Lyu and Cecille, who stepped into the den together, both nodded firmly.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Then let's play! Let's play!"

As Yufie floated in the air, her joyous voice echoed. And as if answering the call, several balls of light—red, blue, gold, white, black—rose with her, emanating magic power. The din of lesser spirits. An excited, flickering chorus rang out as the child of light summoned a storm.

"Let's play! To the end!!!"

The rustling wind enveloping her small body was the starting signal. Lyu and Cecille immediately covered their faces with their arms as a four-legged beast appeared, tearing through the wall of wind.

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

A mare with a deep green mane. A spirit steed clad in a turbulent wind. That was the true nature of the intermediate spirit called Yufie.

"I-I've never seen that…! That's Yufie's real form…?!"

Cecille must have heard the myths of spirits taking the form of weapons, but she had never seen or heard of a spirit taking the form of an animal. The floating little girl who could have easily fit in her arms before was now far taller than Cecille or Lyu. She was far more imposing, and the wind, overflowing with powerful magic, threatened to sweep Cecille away.

Cecille gulped as the spirit seemed to trot across an invisible platform in the sky.

"Cecille, stay behind me." Lyu stepped forward. "I will protect you no matter what."

Wearing the clothes Cecille had prepared and wielding the wooden sword Cecille had made, she faced off against the spirit mare staring them down.

Seeing the fairy decked out with all the things she had made, Cecille felt her heart tremble for a reason other than fear.

"Here I come."

"OOOOOOO!"

Lyu took the lead. As the spirit whinnied to meet her, she *disappeared*.

"Huh?"

"!!"

Cecille did not know what had happened, and Yufie gazed in similar wonder. However, Astrea was completely unfazed, as if this were only natural.

With blistering speed that was impossible to keep up with for anyone but a deity, Lyu closed in on the spirit mare right in front of her.

"Hah!"

The raw power of a Level 6 was plain to see in the sword slash that left no room for evasion. The spirit almost seemed frozen in time……

"—Mgh?!"

…But the attack failed to connect.

Managing a sound that was both a forceful cry and a surprised gasp, she slipped just by the spirit with a big swing and a miss.

"Huh?"

"Oo?"

Cecille and Yufie were dumbfounded, and Astrea grimaced a little.

This was the disconnect between mind and body that occurred right after leveling up. Lyu was very obviously not able to adjust right away after her explosive growth transformed her into a star so fast that left even Cecille exasperated.

But, the next instant, the gale came. Lyu's miss created a buffeting Yufie.

"GHHHHHH?!"

Pummeled by the wind, the mare, glowing with a jade light, stumbled. Lyu charged diagonally upward on a ballistic trajectory into a giant tree, twisting gracefully, and then *BOOM*, her boots landed against the trunk, and she leaped again.

The spirit desperately dodged the furious gale charge. Then it was time for the flowery meadow to explode.

"Whoa??! I-incredible…!"

Cecille almost toppled over from the impact shaking the ground and caught her breath when she looked back up at the battlefield.

The fairy and spirit had already exchanged places in their dance.

Lyu slashed in, and Yufie responded by summoning wind, holding off the sword swipes that tended to be big swings. The magic-imbued wind rampaged, deflecting the wooden sword and keeping it from reaching its target. However, each and every attack made by a Level 6 being overwhelmed by her own power and skills was absurd, and even a grazing hit was enough to send the spirit flying several times.

A half-translucent dome, a faintly green spirit wall, sparked whenever the wooden sword grazed it.

"KHHHHHHHH?!"

"Don't run!"

The fairy took flight with a leap, sweeping down at the four-legged beast floating in the air.

Unable to bear the string of attacks coming from all directions, the mare galloped through the air to get some distance. Lyu gave chase, tottering a bit from her speed going out of control, and

ultimately failed to land a blow. However, there was a thundering boom.

It was hard to tell which of them was the real wild horse.

"I was right to have Yufie handle the final adjustment… Iselina and the girls wouldn't be able to handle this."

Astrea moved to a corner of the clearing as the battlefield expanded, never sitting down and keeping her distance as she watched the fight unfold.

Lyu was overwhelmingly stronger in raw physical ability. But her speed control was disastrous. She also could not rely on her sense of distance. Yufie was a wind spirit, which already made her difficult to catch. Lyu's perception problem was just making it all the more difficult.

The fairy and spirit were engaged in a one-sided struggle. Lyu just kept attacking, and even though she had not adopted a counterstance, the spirit was dodging everything like a matador, with dodges and well-aimed gusts of wind. It went without saying which one was in the worse position, though.

Protected by Lyu's rampage, or rather, her status's rampage, Cecille was watching the tremendous scene in awe.

What changed the situation was Yufie's annoyed command.

"OOOOOOOOOOO!!"

It was an order to the glittering lesser spirits who had been left behind. The lesser spirits, who were even less self-aware than Yufie, glowed and obeyed the impulse that rushed through them. Tracing perfect arcs, they launched bolts of light at Lyu from above.

"!!"

The spirits charged Lyu right as she set foot on the ground. As she accelerated to avoid them, with each step, the ground where she had been a split second earlier was bombarded by blasts of light, tracing the path of the elf's flight. Lyu ducked and dodged with the barest margins, passing through the fusillade of light kicking up a storm all around her.

"Lyu?!"

Cecille's shout was swallowed the incoming barrage of lights. The lesser spirits that did not charge Lyu flew overhead, unleashing a

constant rain of flames, lightning, and ice. It was a miracle that Lyu was still unscathed despite not being in full control of her status. This was a sign that she was gradually correcting her senses and adjusting with each passing moment.

However, it was madness still. Even with all that, it was absurd. With the glitter of the lesser spirits, the forest clearing was like a night sky filled with shooting stars, and what would happen to the little fairy closed inside? Would she be crushed by the crisscrossing comets or scorched by the fiery star?

Cecille blanched as the forest, or even the whole world, seemed to be attacking, but Lyu herself saw it differently.

The injustice inflicted on us by the world itself. She was intimately familiar with something incredibly similar.

"It's almost like the Dungeon…! This is even a match for the bane of adventurers!"

The scale and depth were incomparable, of course. But within this clearing, the spirits' woods were beginning to match the danger of the Dungeon. At last, there was no doubt that training here was just as intense and demanding as training would have been in Orario. Lyu was so overjoyed by this realization that Cecille could not believe how palpable her excitement was.

That incredibly small, illusory world had become as vicious a battleground as the deadly Dungeon.

"OOOOOOOOOO!!!"

"?!"

And if this den of spirits was the Dungeon, then naturally, *she* was obviously a powerful floor boss.

Recovering her freedom with the support of the lesser spirits, Yufie whinnied and flew at Lyu from above. She struck back at the troublesome fairy with a horn formed with swirling eddies of air.

Under the lesser spirits' relentless attacks, Lyu shifted to the defensive for the first time.

The wooden sword and horn of air clashed. They held for a moment, and then there was a crack as the wooden sword shattered.

"…?!"

The concerned voice was not Lyu's but Cecille's. The training sword she had made had been completely obliterated from the hilt up. The weapon had not been able to endure Lyu's newfound strength. As Lyu sliced into Yufie's barrier so many times, more and more cracks had formed in the sword's body. It was only natural it would shatter the moment Lyu shifted to defense.

My weapon is holding her back…

Unable to do anything but watch, Cecille stood there in silent despair.

I'm putting her in danger…!

This was the primordial fear of any crafter.

"It's all right, Cecille."

Lyu leaped back to avoid Yufie's follow-up attack and landed right in front of Cecille, almost as if she had heard the cry in Cecille's head. Stunned, Cecille stared at her in disbelief as she continued to grasp what should have been the useless remnants of the broken wooden sword.

With nothing more than a hilt in hand, Lyu raised her head and looked at the goddess on the other side of the battlefield.

"I am going to use it, Lady Astrea."

"Yes."

They shared a smile.

The next instant, the spirits mercilessly unleashed a six-element magic barrage on the entrance to the battlefield. Lyu and Cecille stood there as the lesser spirits' fire, water, lightning, light, and darkness, plus Yufie's wind, bore down on them. The destructive gleam illuminated Cecille's face as Lyu held up the broken wooden sword and closed her eyes. Then she spoke.

"Astrea Record."

This was the answer of justice she had obtained.

"Duty shall be fulfilled, and scales shall be balanced."

The chant that began with the magic name summoned innumerable characters of light. The hieroglyphs were adorned with

the wings and star sword, just like the status on her back, and they marked off an area with a five-meder radius, deflecting the spirits' barrage.

"Huh?!"

"?!"

Cecille and Yufie were equally shocked by the appearance of the barrier. Countless hieroglyphs like glimmering stardust filled the air around them and created a powerful wall.

"Bastion of order, crown of the righteous, vanquishing torch."

Focusing on her spell with her eyes closed, Lyu reflected on what had happened that morning.

Before setting out for the spirit den, she had tried her new magic once with Astrea. After hearing the chant from her goddess and confirming its meaning, Lyu was already sure what this spell was.

"In the goddess's name, racing across the sky, bind the star trails to this land."

It was a ritual. A ritual that Lyu might recall a fragment of justice.

A prayer. A prayer for a fairy who had lost everything, that she might reclaim her justice.

A vow. A vow to travel beside *them* beneath the never-ending night sky.

I swear on the sword and wings of justice—

"—Justice will go on!!"

Transforming her friend's teachings into the final verse of the chant, Lyu opened her eyes.

The starry sanctuary that had protected her until the coming of justice had just shattered, transforming into stardust that Lyu drew into herself.

Cecille witnessed the exact moment that vow was made.

And then Lyu called *her* name.

"Agris Arvensis!"

A noble blaze enveloped the fairy's arms, legs, and the broken wooden sword.

"…A fire…enchantment…?"

Seeing the crimson petals that emitted a powerful heat, Cecille was awestruck. She did not know exactly kind of magic Lyu had used. But somehow, she could tell. This crimson flame was not Lyu's magic. Because she could see *her*.




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The crimson-haired girl overlapping with the back of the senior Cecille had long since forgiven and come to respect.

"Here I come. No…"

Correcting herself, Lyu and *she* both crouched.

"Here we go."

There was an explosion.

To avoid catching Cecille by accident, she took two running steps forward. Then the inferno swelled and Lyu transformed into a red shooting star. She left the regular flow of time and hurtled at the spirit mare floating in the sky.

"Haaaah!!!"

"OOOOOOO?!"

This time, it was Yufie's barrier that shattered, and she was sent flying backward.

Lyu's sword, extended by flames, tore into the spirit's body with tremendous force. Yufie screamed and blew it away with a blessing of wind while another lesser spirit healed the burn, but Lyu did not stop there.

After giving the intermediate spirit a moment's respite, she unleashed flaming slashes one after the other like so many red blooming petals. Even with Lyu's senses out of alignment, Alize's magic continued exploding over a wide area, scorching everything around her.

"…Alize Lovell…*Astrea Familia*'s first captain…"

Lyu pressed on, paying no heed to the supporting attacks of the lesser spirits. As Yufie's shouts rang out, Cecille's blue hair swayed as she muttered quietly.

"Strong, righteous, precious…the one who held Lyu's hand…!"

From Astrea's stories and Lyu's reminiscences last night, Cecille knew exactly who she saw overlapping with Lyu now.

And it wasn't just her.

"Justice will go on—Gokou!"

The eastern swordswoman who unleashed five bright slashes.

"Moose Mine!"

The shrewd prum tactician who set traps.

"Irivute!"

The human mage who used balefire, the human attacker who rushed forward, the dwarf shielder with a steel wall enchantment, the werewolf warrior with claws of wind, the healer who could treat everything, the Amazon brawler who unleashed a two-stage punch, and the elf girl who summoned lightning.

Cecille knew the identities of every disciple of justice who was lending Lyu strength. They were the *Astrea Familia* who had once guided Lyu and were still fighting beside her, even now.

"*Astrea Record*…It's a magic that Lyu alone can use to inherit everyone's magic." Astrea watched over her former followers with a gentle smile. Just like Cecille, her eyes glistened. "Their justice has been passed down through my ichor…Even if Lyu converts to another familia, her bond with them will never break."

The very first Falna engraved in Lyu with Astrea's ichor would never disappear from her back, no matter what happened. Through Astrea's blood, Lyu and her dear companions would continue to remain together. That was the true nature of *Astrea Record*. The miracle bringing together ten different justices etched into Lyu's soul.

"Don't ever forget them, Lyu. Don't push their voices out of your heart. If you do, the inheritance will lose its power."

That was the one thing that could be called a demerit. *Astrea Record*'s output relied almost entirely on Lyu's mental state. If she became consumed by other matters or began to lose sight of her justice—like she had four days ago when she was filled with anxiety about Bell and Syr and felt pressured to do something about the powerful einherjar—then she would find it difficult if not impossible to use this magic.

Astrea had grasped the nature of this inherited justice before it even manifested. That was why she made Lyu stay in Zolingam. That was why she had asked Iselina and the others to help with her adjustment, wanting them to have some contact with Lyu.

She trusted that by interacting with them, and with Cecille, Lyu would be able to remember Alize and everyone.

"Go, Lyu. Go with them…wherever your wings take you."

It was time for her to leave the nest. The fairy was leaving the goddess's side and setting out again. She carried those eternal

bonds within her now.

"Alize, everyone…" Testing the magic over and over, calling to her comrades over and over, Lyu danced around the spirits and whispered, "You were always there, weren't you?"

Her lips quivered, and small tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

"Always fighting alongside me!"

The wild flame roared in acknowledgment, flaring as Lyu smiled.

The spirits had reached a point of desperation where they were simply trying to overwhelm Lyu with sheer numbers, and she met them with her own swelling emotions.

"She's…smiling…" Cecille murmured softly as she stood alone, watching. The fairy that had been so close just last night suddenly seemed so far away. Sadness ate into her heart.

"…This is ridiculous…"

And the next feeling that emerged was frustration. Because Lyu was smiling so much. She was so overjoyed by her bond with the *Astrea Familia* that didn't include Cecille, with the power of her magic rather than her weapon. The weapon Cecille had made wasn't giving Lyu any strength at all.

No, it's not that.

Weapons existed to help those who fight. They had to understand their wielder better than anyone to become an extension of them.

In which case Cecille wanted to become the other half of the noble, sublime Lyu she was watching now. She wanted to become part of that light, the gleam of justice that was supporting Lyu.

"I want to be a star, too!"

Cecille ran forward.

It was like a hammer had struck her, propelling her body forward as she let her emotions take over. The lesser spirits were focused on supporting Yufie and did not notice Cecille.

So she rushed to the fairy's side with fiery determination. She wouldn't let her senior ignore her and only have fun with all her old comrades.

"OOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

"Gah?!"

Under pressure for the entire battle, Yufie struck back in a burst of rage. Lyu responded without issue, but suddenly, her knees buckled.

It was a light case of Mind Down. She had gotten too excited at reuniting with her dear companions and her excessive use of *Astrea Record* had strained even her Level 6 reserves. In the distance, Astrea grimaced as the wind horn rapidly approached Lyu only for Cecille to come charging in.

Raising her hammer in both hands, she swung it down at that annoying spirit!

"Urrrrrrrrryaaaaaa!"

"Wugh?!"

"…! Cecille?!"

Before the horn could reach Lyu, the hammer slammed into the spirit mare's forehead. The spirit screamed and Lyu gasped. Ignoring them both, Cecille tossed the hammer aside and grabbed the teary-eyed horse by the face.

"Listen here, Yufie! I have a dream now!"

"…?!"

"I'm gonna be this dummy's blacksmith! I'm gonna become a star and support her, too!" The horse and the fairy were both stunned as she reverted back to the gruffer style of speech she had inherited from her father and brothers, before she corrected herself to behave more fittingly for a follower of Astrea. "Not 'cause I want recognition or praise! Not 'cause I can't bear to have Lady Astrea stolen away from me! It's 'cause I wanna make a weapon for the person I like!"

Even Astrea gazed in wonder. Cecille leaned in, forehead to forehead, threatening the spirit that had never once acknowledged her.

"A weapon made specifically for someone can possess a special power."

It made sense. If she used the flames burning in her chest and the starry gleam she felt when she thought of a certain fairy and poured that into a weapon, then it would be stronger and nobler than anything.

"You're a spirit, right?! You should understand! Wanting to lend

your strength to a hero like in those legends! It's the same as that!" The spirit who had laughed her off every other time before now listened to the girl's every word with wide eyes. She was inspired by a resolve that was a match for even the spirits of old who lent their strength to true heroes in ancient times. "I'm sure this is what I was missing! I'm sure this is my justice! *Protecting the people I care about with the weapons I make!* Got anything to say about that?!"

No matter how far she went, no matter how much time passed, it would always be a part of her just like the justice she had inherited. That would be her bond with the fairy. Cecille vowed on the sword and wings to become one of those stars.

"If you get it, then gimme that tear! There's no time! Let me have my justice! If you won't hand it over, I'll keep pounding you till you cry!"

"C-Cecille, that's a little…"

Grabbing the horse by the jaw, she raised a threatening fist just like her father taught her as Lyu watched with an ashen face. The lesser spirits all around them faltered, unsure how to react to this sudden development.

Yufie's jaw creaked, closely studying the girl who practically looked like an enraged ogre. Not with the contemptuous eyes she had always used before, but with the gaze of someone facing a fellow traveler.

"…Hmph…"

Suddenly, she shook her head, as if breaking free from her restraints. Cecille stumbled as Yufie's deep green eyes blinked…and a single bead of light fell.

"Ah…"

The light fell into the palm of Cecille's hand. It seemed to float, as if encased in a small current of air. The crystal was the same color as the spirit's eyes.

A spirit's tear.

Proof to all in Zolingam that she was a first-rate blacksmith.

"Yufie…are you sure?"

"Bleeeeeeeeh!"

Cecille had been prepared to descend into the depths of hell and

do whatever it took to get it, and yet when one fell into the palm of her hand, all of her determination evaporated as she looked at it meekly. Meanwhile, Yufie stuck out her tongue and shook her body. It wasn't the least bit cute, since it was a horse and not a little girl.

Cecille raised her fist in annoyance at the spirit she seemed to never be able to escape, but then she lowered it with a smile. "Thank you, Yufie. I'm going to be an incredible blacksmith."

"……"

The spirit gave no response. Instead, she turned around and ignored her. Cecille smiled again and turned to Lyu.

"Sorry for getting in the way. I'm going now."

"…Okay."

"To make your weapon! This time, I won't miss the deadline!"

With a beaming smile on her face, she ran off.

The spirits made no effort to interfere. As countless lights like starlight looked down on her from above, Cecille hurried to the clearing's entrance.

Just once, she glanced back at the goddess. When she saw Astrea watching her with an expression of joy, Cecille smiled like the sun.

"It seems she's overcome her own trial as well…" Astrea murmured as she walked over.

Lyu's eyes softened as she watched her junior leave.

"She is stronger than me…a human worthy of respect."

"If she has your seal of approval, then she'll be fine."

Giggling, the goddess walked over to the spirit mare, who was swinging her tail moodily.

"It's okay, Yufie. Cecille will come here to talk with you again. So there's no need to worry that she won't come by anymore now that you gave her the tear."

"Mmhmm…"

Lyu was a little surprised to hear that, but she chose not to pry. Her own relationship with Cecille was complicated enough, so in a way, it was almost expected for there to be misunderstandings

between a person and a spirit.

A calm, soothing atmosphere had descended on the clearing.

"Well then, shall we continue?"

"Yes, let's."

Lyu raised her sword and faced Yufie. Astrea smiled and handed Lyu a magic potion. Draining the flask, the Level 6 who had been on the verge of a Mind Down was back on her feet with the fighting spirit of a dragon.

All the spirits froze.

"I brought plenty of items. Don't worry, Lyu. I promised them you would play with them lots."

"Thank you, Lady Astrea. I am sure I can push myself as much as I need here."

The goddess flashed a bright smile as she pulled out a bag. It was filled with potions. Meaning, no matter how hard Lyu pushed herself, she would be able to keep fighting until supplies ran out.

Seeing the goddess and fairy raring to go, the lesser spirits that danced like fireflies started shuddering. Even Yufie, the green-eyed mare, seemed to turn pale.

Lyu was an elf who *always* went overboard.

And Astrea was a goddess who was skilled at *working people hard*.

Alize and the others had always known that Lyu and Astrea were a bit similar in that regard.

"All right, Yufie. Please tag along with my training. As before, there is no need to hold back."

"Don't worry. I'll share the items with you, too."

They were not going to let go of something that could compare with the Dungeon anytime soon.

Lyu, shrouded again in fire, was terrifying, and Astrea, with her gentle, merciful smile, was even scarier.

There was a whine as even the spirit mare let out a young child's cry.



"Haaah, haaah, haaah…!"

She ran.

Leaving the spirits' domain, crossing the river, passing the familia home—through the woods and into the city. To familiar old Zolingam, already clanging with hammers in the rising sun.

"Ceciiiille! Over here!"

"I brought all the things you said, but is this what you wanted?!"

"Is Lady Astrea with that thieving fairy again…?"

Near the center of the town, right in front of Blackliza's giant workshop, Schau was waving and Iselina was holding up an anvil and a bunch of other tools. And Uranda was there, too.

Out of breath from running at the breakneck pace of a Level 2, Cecille slowed down, but she did not pause for a rest.

While a bunch of smiths around them were glancing over in annoyance, she peeled off the top of her uniform and stripped down to a sweaty undershirt.

Schau, Iselina, and even Uranda were taken aback as she strode over to her father and brothers, who had come out of the workshop.

"Dad, let me use the spirit forge! Now!"

"Wh-what? Dumbass, what's a girl your age doing…?! Put something on already!"

"Then lend me some work clothes! There's no time!"

The stubborn father from yesterday was nowhere to be seen as he panicked at his daughter's state of undress. Cecille ignored him and ran off, catching the work clothes her eldest brother tossed to her before turning toward the spirit forge attached to the workshop.

"W-wait! I didn't say one word about letting her use the—"

"I got a tear from Yufie! I've got the right to use it! That should be enough!"

"!!!"

Their shock redoubled.

"Get out the materials," Cecille shouted.

Iselina and the others opened the carefully kept metal case. Inside was a neatly preserved branch of the sacred tree that had soaked in water drawn from the Star Cavern spring for four years and was embedded with magic stones ground into a fine powder. Undoing the metal pieces, she carefully, delicately, picked up the separate sword and grip pieces.

They were the last of the materials she had specially prepared for Lyu's custom order. This would be her absolute last chance.

Then Cecille took out the wooden fragment and spirit tear with both hands.

There was no room for hesitation.

Clutching them tightly, she forcefully slipped her arms into the work clothes.

"Cecille."

As her family murmured and gulped, her father took a step forward with pursed lips. He looked straight at Cecille when she turned around, as if he sensed something and was trying to judge her.

"Did you find your center? What is… What's your justice?"

Cecille's lips curled into a smile, just like her beloved mother's.

"I'm not saying! It's embarrassing!"

"What?!"

The girl held her trusty hammer in one hand, standing before the gate to the spirit forge, and smiled, as if hammering away her old resentment.




© nilitsu

“If you wanna know, then shut up and watch, stupid Dad!”



Lyu Leon

Level 6

Strength: I0->5 Endurance: I0 Dexterity: I0->7 Agility: I0->15 Magic: I0->14

Hunter: G Resistance: G Magic Defense: I Magic: I Successive Attacks: I

Seeing the minor increases on the update sheet, Lyu felt a bit of relief, as if she had finally gone back to being a proper, normal follower.

“Lyu, how is your body feeling?”

“I am fine, Lady Astrea. There is no disconnect.”

Lyu opened and closed her hands a few times and nodded with confidence.

Since the early morning when she had first come to the spirit den with Cecille, night had fallen and morning had come again. Having fought for an entire day, Lyu had fully adjusted to her new status and had new hope.

The price for that hope was paid by the lesser spirits that had fallen limply to the ground all over the clearing, flickering in exhaustion. The spirit mare Yufie had it worst, and in the end, she simply threw herself to the ground and refused to so much as move. Even after Astrea gave her an elixir, it did not look like she would be summoning more wind anytime soon.

“My adjustment is complete…All that is left is Cecille…!”

“You go to the Blackliza workshop first, Lyu,” Astrea said seriously.

"I'll go by the familia home and prepare for our journey."

While Lyu had finally finished her preparation, she was still waiting for one more thing. With a quick "Thank you!" she hurried to Zolingam first.

"As soon as Lady Astrea is ready, we'll have to leave or we will be too late for the War Game…! Cecille…!"

If Cecille's work was finished, that would be ideal. But if she still was not done, Lyu would be forced to make the difficult choice of leaving before the weapon could be completed. Trusting in her junior, she raced with a prayer in her heart.

It wasn't long before she stood in front of Blackliza.

"Lyu!"

"Iselina! Is Cecille…?!"

"Not yet! But…"

Following her gaze, Lyu saw the upside-down funnel structure. The spirit forge glowed with an emerald light.

"…? Where is Cecille? No one is in front—"

"She's *inside*."

It was Cecille's father who answered her question as he walked over. Ignoring Lyu's dubious look, he continued watching the spirit forge with crossed arms.

"The spirit forge ain't like the standard sort of forge you're thinking of. A blacksmith with a tear goes inside and *gets cooked by the spirit magic* alongside the weapon they're smithing."

"What…?!"

The spirit forge was itself sort of like a workshop. The smith's tools and the materials were bathed in spirit magic—boosting the potential of their tools, their materials, and their own Smithing ability.

He explained that the spirit magic was equivalent to the extreme heat of a raging fire, so any smith not skilled enough to be granted a spirit's tear wouldn't have the strength to bear it.

Lyu took a step forward, when Cecille's father's voice rang out.

"Don't try to stop her. Cecille's takin' on a serious fight here."

She didn't take another step. Lyu stared at the emerald light coming out of the dangerous forge that was letting off magic steam

before stepping back.

"And…she's about done."

The sound of a hammer echoing from inside the forge seemed to be reaching a frenzied peak. Waiting outside, Lyu had no clue whether she was swinging a hammer to make a wooden sword like she would with a metal one. What she could say, though, was that it sounded like the hammer was carefully checking the weapon's condition, as if performing a final adjustment. It tapped out a delicate, tranquil rhythm.

Just like Lyu, she had surely been working without rest since yesterday. The Level 1s Schau and Uranda were in the crowd watching the spirit forge, looking sleepy but still waiting, trusting that Cecille would come out. Iselina was standing stock-still with Cecille's brothers, sweating and watching with bated breath.

"…May I ask a question?" Lyu asked, looking at the gathering of men, all far taller than her, all staring straight ahead. "You clearly have some affection for Cecille. So why did you treat her so harshly?"

Cecille's father was silent for a moment and then suddenly smiled.

"We didn't want her ending up like us," he answered simply, as if he knew full well that they had been troublesome. "Since you're the one, let me ask you: Which place's weapons are the most famous in the mortal realm?"

"Orario?"

"Guh…! H-hah, well, I can't deny that. But their weapons never leave the city walls. Their gear is pretty much only for people going into the Dungeon. Nothing more, nothing less."

He groaned a little at that, but as if to counter, he got a bit more loose-lipped. Lyu had no interest in a fight for the top, so she listened without emotion as he declared, "The best-selling weapons are the ones made here in Zolingam."

"…"

"The empire, Dizara, even the Kaios Desert…basically, bulk orders are the norm. This city became what it is because every workshop was short on hands when the orders came flowing in, and everyone

in the family had to pitch in." At first he was speaking with pride, but then a self-deprecating smile crept in. "And somewhere along the way…we all began to forget why we made weapons."

Looking closely, Lyu could see there were deep, deep wrinkles carved into his face.

"We make weapons for wealth and fame. That's fine. It's a perfectly good reason to work. But with mass production becoming the standard, we just can't picture the face of the person actually using 'em. Who is going to use it? How? Who or what are they hurting, killing…We were raised never bein' able to imagine that… and we'll never be able to complete what the smithing gods call a masterpiece."

Lyu felt like she could vaguely understand what he was getting at.

Making a standardized weapon. That was the underlying premise of their work orders, and raising the quality of that standardized product was their ultimate challenge. Simply improving the quality of a single sword would not satisfy their customers would not be satisfied, creating a twisted relationship.

Making a large number of weapons that were all solid 80s or 90s was the strength of Zolingam, but they could not produce a singular great weapon that surpassed 100 points.

"That's fine for a Zolingam maker. But as a blacksmith…isn't that a miserable fate?" He felt the discord underlying Zolingam, a city known throughout the world as a sword-smithing city. "We're Zolingam smiths to the bone. Optimized to raise the baseline weapon quality. That's what this city does. There's no breakin' free from that for me in this life. But it is a certain type of skill. I've come to terms with that and made my peace with it. My boys, too."

"…But Cecille is different?"

"Yeah. She's the real deal." His eyes softened in pride, and also a little envy. "She's got the most talent. She's got a good head on those shoulders, and she has a quick wit. When I heard she ground magic stones into a powder and sank that into the branch of a sacred elven tree and then soaked it in holy spring water, there wasn't nothin' I could say except that I've still got a lot to learn.

She's a monster inventor, even studying with a nasty mage to learn about staffs. And she's a hard worker who ain't content to just rely on her natural talent, either. I'm proud of her… I don't wanna see her married off to anyone either, damn it all…"

Lyu felt a little awkward as he slipped into the stereotypically foolish concerns of a doting father, but he quickly pulled himself together and started speaking seriously again.

"If she joined our shop and signed on with our patron god, who doesn't care about anything other than fun, she'd get pulled to our side. We didn't want that talent wasting away. That's why we pushed her away from us. Lady Hephaistos woulda been fine, too, but…I wanted her to go to Lady Astrea, someone who had nothing to do with smithing."

"Why didn't not tell her that?"

"Wouldn't have mattered." His grimace conveyed bitter experiences. "I was like that when I was a brat, and so were my sons. No matter how many times Dad or Gramps tried to tell me something, I'd shout back that I could do it. They were the same. We all had the determination to change this place from the ground up, but somewhere along the way we got sucked in. There's no fighting your blood. Cecille would have been no different."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Even if she's got talent, it doesn't change the fact she's still mighty green. At the moment, we're far more skilled than she is. You could feel her immaturity, too, couldn't you?"

"…"

The Cecille up to yesterday was undoubtedly immature. She could not deny that.

"Her pride would be broken, and she'd end up getting *influenced* by us. And when a greenhorn gets twisted around, it's damn hard to straighten that kink out…I didn't wanna rob her of that talent…was scared to rob her of it."

That was the truth. While he loved her as a father, he had to push her away as a blacksmith. Cecille's father was an awkward craftsman. "Before you met her, Cecille was naive. She didn't lose her way, thanks to Lady Astrea, but she was never really pushed to

the edge in any real sense. If you don't experience any failure, you can't turn it into growth…Ain't no heft to something made by a smith that's never tasted blood or tears."

"…And now?"

"As you can see, she's figured out how to put her heart into it."

The hammer sounds stopped, and the spirit forge gate opened. A wave of magic-imbued heat poured out, and everyone covered their faces…a shadow staggered step by step out of the forge.

She was sweaty, and her body was covered in light burns. But even so, she smiled as she walked out with a single wooden sword.

"This is your doing…Thanks."

Watching his beloved daughter hugged by her friends who rushed over to her, Cecille's father turned away. His sons did the same to hide the tears in their eyes.

"Though it isn't my place…you really should come clean with her, just once. Repairing blades that have clashed is a test of a smith's skill too, isn't it?"

After watching the men turn and leave, Lyu returned her gaze to the girls.

"—You ain't wrong."

Lyu thought she might have heard a murmur as she went over to Cecille.

"Check it out! It's finished!"

A masterpiece!

Holding the weapon in both hands, Cecille presented it to Lyu. It was a dark green wooden sword, longer than Alvs Lumina. The sacred tree branch that made up the blade had taken on a deep green color, perhaps from the effects of the spirit forge, creating a stunningly beautiful effect as if it were studded with emeralds.

"The sword and grip were originally two different parts, but I connected them with this star spirit stone that I made by combining the wood you gave me with Yufie's tear! It is usable as a sword or as a staff! Here, try holding it!"

As Cecille said, the large jade crystal in the center of the guard

was worthy of special mention. Perhaps because of the fusion of a piece of a sacred tree with crystal that had come from a spirit, the star spirit stone had a color that evoked images of high elf royalty and looked like an extraordinarily large jewel.

Following Cecille's encouragement, she picked up the dark green sword.

"It rests perfectly in my palm…"

"Of course! I memorized the shape of your grip, after all!"

"…But more than anything…even with just this one weapon, I have tremendous magic power."

Holding it up to the sky and examining the blade, Lyu was impressed. Iselina and the others were awestruck by the gleam of the sword that seemed like it could cut the rays of the sun.

"Satisfied?"

"Yes, this is a magnificent sword."

"Think you can win now?"

"I will. Thank you, Cecille."

"My pleasure!"

Meeting Lyu's eyes, Cecille flashed a smile.

Five years of dogged perseverance. Having experienced flight and failure, she had finished her journey. With this, she would surely succeed. Like her father, Lyu was also sure of that.

"Hey, hey, what's its name?!" Schau's eyes were gleaming as if she wanted one for herself.

"I've already decided the name!" Cecille puffed her chest out in pride. "The stardust sword is Alvs Iustitia!"

The girls *ooh*ed and *aah*ed.

Iustitia was the justice over which Astrea presided, and also a title. Taking a page from the goddess, Cecille had given the blessing of the stars to the fairy's sword.

Lyu liked it, too.

"Looks like everything made it in time."

Suddenly, there was tremendous wind that sounded almost like hooves. Looking in the direction of the sound, Lyu saw Astrea racing through the town atop a mare.

"Lady Astrea!"

"Wait, Yufie?! Why are you out of the forest!"

"Nghhh…"

"I asked her for her help, Cecille. *I am going with Lyu to Orario*."

Astrea's words brought an even larger shock than seeing Yufie in town. Iselina and the others stared in disbelief, too.

"Wh-what do you mean, Lady Astrea?!"

"It's a long story, but in order for Lyu to take part in the War Game, I also have to be there, it seems."

Lyu alone remained calm while the younger girls stared in slack-jawed surprise. She had already heard the explanation when she received the letter from Hermes earlier.

The War Game would be decided with a grand match of hide-and-seek where patron deities and their followers both participated. There would absolutely be arguments if Lyu tried to participate without her patron goddess present.

After Lyu spoke with Astrea about it, their decision was a forced march. Considering Lady Astrea only had the physical abilities of an average person and Lyu had to preserve her strength in order to face *Freya Familia* in peak condition, they would set out for Orario riding the spirit mare. The luggage that Astrea had packed was already hanging on either side of the saddle.

After Lyu expressed her gratitude to Yufie, the spirit neighed, as if to say that Lyu owed her for this.

"I-I'm going with you!"

"Me too! At least let me carry your luggage!"

"I want to go, too! I might hold you back as just Level One, but if I can't keep up, you can go on without me! I swear I'll still make it to Orario!"

"Disrespectful elf, riding alongside Lady Astrea, I'll follow you to the ends of the world, to the depths of hell…!"

Cecille and Iselina both volunteered, and even Schau and Uranda were saying crazy things, too.

Lyu grimaced as she glanced at Astrea. Not wanting to waste any time arguing even, they met with the followers still watching the home, and then immediately set out from Zolingam.

"I got Dad and them to watch the house, so don't worry about

the rest!”

“Schau, Uranda, you ride with Lady Astrea first. I’ll go on foot for the first half. I can rest my body during the second half of the trip.”

“Eh, are you sure?! Yay!”

“To be saved by an enemy…but I am happy…”

As boisterous as ever, *Astrea Familia* set out under the eyes of the craftsmen.

Carrying the luggage and serving as the goddess’s guards, they ran in formation around the spirit mare, desperately doing their best to keep up with the spirit’s swift legs.

Lyu followed at the tail end of the group.

“Hah, hah…! Hey, Lyu!”

“Don’t talk more than necessary, Cecille!”

Cecille smiled as she made a point of running alongside her.

“Make a contract with me!”

“!”

“I don’t know if you’ll come back with Lady Astrea or stay in Orario…but…let me be the one to make your weapons!”

The uniform she’d changed back into was already stained with sweat as Lyu looked at her in surprise.

“Even if you go far away! I’ll forgive you even if you fool around with your secondary weapons!”

“Please don’t put it like that.”

Ignoring Lyu’s words, Cecille broke into a grin, and her eyes gleamed beneath her blue hair.

“So let me take care of your first choice! Your favorites! Making weapons for the person I like is my justice!”

Cecille’s stubborn, cheerful, and forthright smile… *I really am weak to that.*

“Very well,” Lyu smiled. “I’ll entrust my main weapon to you.”

“Really? Yay!”

Bursting with joy, Cecille picked up her speed.

Lyu smiled, watching her move up ahead.

I’ve been blessed with good juniors.

This trip that had at first felt like a detour had not been a waste. It was another locus. One that had helped Lyu remember many

things, and it gave birth to a returning justice.

All that remained was the coming battle.

"Wait for me, Syr… I'm coming to give you a good slap!"

Lyu let out a determined shout aimed at the end of the continent, far to the west, and raced like the wind.

Together with the star maidens past and present.

GIRL IN TWILIGHT

Familia Chronicle
Episode LYU



GIRL IN TWILIGHT

"Leooon! Wanna read *Argonaut* together?"

Adi Varma was an odd girl.

A Level 3 adventurer in *Ganesha Familia*, she was one year older than Lyu. Her older sister, Shakti, was strict and stern, but Adi was surprisingly warm, kind, and open with everyone. She was also innocent and childlike and had a somewhat troubling habit of hugging people without warning. When they first met, she had even excitedly tried to hug Lyu.

"…I'm Leon. Nice to meet you."

"Ooooh, so pretty! Even with the mask, you're obviously really cute! Can I give you a hug? So nice! I'm Adi Varma! Nice to meet you, too, yay!"

"Don't touch me!!!"

"Argh?!"

Lyu had sent her reeling with a sonic slap.

It was not just Lyu, though. Any elf who had someone they just met try to latch onto them like that would likely do the same. After that, Lyu was always on guard when she ran into Adi, but as she got to know her and her open personality and respectable character, she relaxed around her and stopped the violent reactions. Which meant the moment she left an opening, Adi would end up wrapped around her.

Lyu would get red-faced and warn her not to go around randomly hugging people, but the response was always "You're the only one I hug, so it's fine!"

Or so she claimed. In the end that did not change the embarrassment Lyu suffered, though, so she was certain it was decidedly not fine.

Were it not for the hugging incident, Adi would probably have been the second person to be able to take Lyu's hand on their first meeting.

"Adi…you don't have to read a book here, there are plenty of other places…" Lyu grumbled, approaching as if drawn to Adi.

"You can read anywhere if you have a book!" Adi innocently answered from her seat on the ground. "But it's dangerous to read while walking around, so maybe not there!"

Adi was lovely in the twilight and refreshing breeze, and now she looked even more beautiful. Her swaying, pale blue hair was tied up short, and at a glance she looked almost boyish, but she had a much more feminine body shape than the slender Lyu.

If the ever-boisterous Alize was the sun, then Adi was like a gentle spring breeze.

She was always a refuge for Lyu.

"C'mon, sit next to me?"

"I suppose…"

It was always Lyu who caved in, in the end.

Sighing just for appearances, Lyu sat down where the girl had been patting the ground. She was a little embarrassed by her soft and warm body, but Adi just cheerfully started flipping the pages.

"I love this scene! Seeing a girl in town who was looking down, he grabs her hand and starts dancing with her in the middle of the street!"

"If that actually happened, the girl would scream, and we'd probably rush over to help…"

"A-ha-ha! Probably! But you know, Argonaut takes her hand, and as her eyes widen, he says 'Let us dance, lovely lady. A cheerful dance, so that I can see your pretty smile!'"

"I know. You've told me that line before. While grabbing my hand and forcing me to dance…"

"Really? Is that what happened?"

Adi smiled delightedly as she pointed to an illustrated page and explained the scene.

Even as Lyu grumbled a bit at that pure smile, she was lighthearted. It was so warm next to Adi that she would have liked

the moment to continue forever.

The people around her smiled. So long as she was there, Lyu was sure she could believe in the good in people and face forward without losing sight of justice.

"You too, Leon. Smile!"

"Huh?"

"Like Argonaut! Everyone will be happy seeing your smiling face, and it will make other people smile, too! Like this!"

Adi seemed to see right through her.

Putting her a finger on either cheek, she turned up the corners of her mouth in a smile. Lyu's eyes widened, and finding the sight silly, she smiled despite herself.

"Yeah, that's the spirit! A bit bigger though!"

"W-wait, Adi! Don't force it…agh?!"

Adi reached out to shape Lyu's face into a smile, but she resisted in a panic, and they both fell over into a sea of wheat.

Adi was lying on top of her, holding her close in a hug, and, apparently finding something funny, she burst into laughter, drawing Lyu into a laugh with her. The book had landed on Lyu's stomach as she lay on her back, and it seemed to smile, too, hearing their joyful laughter.

"Adi…thank you. For always sharing your smile with me."

Finally, Lyu slowly sat up, returning the book, whose pages were rippling in the wind.

"I'm always being saved by you. When I was in doubt, you guided me and gave me faith in justice. I am truly grateful to you."

She put her feelings into words, though she could not say why. The overflowing memories, Adi's cheerful, ringing voice, all the smiles, for some reason it brought a tear to her sky-blue eyes.

"You…were my hope."

Had she not met Adi, Lyu would not have figured out what her justice was. Lyu had been able to complete her journey because she had met the traveler Adi.

"…?"

And that was when Lyu realized it.

It would be many years in the future when she'd finish her

journey. Well after Adi had passed from her sight, much like Alize and the others. When in deep grief and despair, she would finally realize what they all had left for her.

"No. You would have found your answer, even without me."

As if their minds were linking, Adi responded again to the thoughts deep in her heart.

Adi stood up. Picking up the book, basking in the beautiful, awe-inspiring, tender twilight.

Lyu realized again. The place they were standing was an amber field of wheat bathed in twilight. An impossibly large sea of grain. And a sky the same color as the wheat. A golden space where the line between heaven and earth became blurred.

"Thank you, Leon. For carrying on their justice and mine, too."

A miraculous dream scene where she could share a good-bye with her.

"I was so happy that there was a place for me inside your heart."

The smile that was so close just moments ago, but in the dazzling sunset, Lyu could hardly see it anymore. No matter how much she tried, the tears welling in her eyes got in the way, and she couldn't properly see her anymore.

"But, Leon, don't try to carry too much all alone." Adi turned away and started walking into the twilight. "Don't burden yourself with justice. No matter how much you hide it, there's a limit."

Even though Lyu didn't want her to leave, she could not stop it.

"So, when the time comes, share it with others."

Her shadow extended and grew distant. The wind was cool and the scent in the air was nostalgic. To Lyu, it was the scent of tears.

"Don't force it, just share it. I'm sure that will become a seed for someone else and bloom into a different flower." The girl stopped finally and turned around. "That will also return, too! Together with our feelings!"

—Justice will go on.

With a smile just like that day, Adi hugged the book to her breast.

"Don't forget, Leon! Smile!"

That is why, to reassure her, Lyu's lips…

"You're so pretty and I love you, but…your smile can bring

everyone joy!”

…blossomed into a smile like a small, white flower.



When Lyu felt the drop trickling down her cheek, her eyelashes quivered.

The tranquil smell of the forest and the quiet surrounded her like a gently hummed lullaby.

It felt like she had seen a dream. A beautiful, tender, warm twilight that held her close.

Lyu was not sad that she could not remember even a fragment of the dream anymore. Because the tear that had dripped down her cheek was so warm. She was sure she had seen a happy dream. The reverie washed away the slight doubt left in her heart, and smiled at her. And knowing that was enough.

Sitting up in bed, she prepared herself for the day.

It was early morning on her fourth day in Zolingam. She had to work hard again today to adapt to her status so she could rush back to the boy and his friends. Slipping on her short swords and picking up the girl’s wooden sword that she ended up using out of convenience, she stepped out into the hallway of Stars’ Rest.

“Ah, good morning, Lyu. Did you just wake up?…Wait, you’re smiling?! Huh? Why?! I mean, I’ve seen the barest little smile before, but you look incredible, like crazy beautiful, just blowing away the cold impression you always give off—ugh, never mind, just pretend you didn’t hear any of that! Anyway, why are you smiling?! Did something good happen?! What do you mean, ‘let’s go’?…W-wait up! C’mon, please tell me!”

The girl she ran into in the hall chased after her excitedly for some reason.

Even with Lyu’s warning that it was inconsiderate to cause a ruckus early in the morning, the girl did not dwindle in her excitement. Even after they went outside and met up with the other

two wide-eyed girls.

It was an odd thing. Lyu did not really know what had happened. But the way her juniors were smiling so happily at her did not feel bad.

So she decided to be a bit more honest with the feelings lingering on her lips.

Just like the dream she could not remember anymore seemed to have been telling her…

A SIMPLE MOMENT FROM FIVE YEARS AGO

Familia Chronicle
Episode LYU



A SIMPLE MOMENT FROM FIVE YEARS AGO

A starry night sky hung over Orario.

The sort of night where the starlight was brighter than the moonlight.

"It's quiet…"

Alize was staring up at the sky from a window in the home.

If the starlight was tranquil, then that meant they would not hear the cries of people and the laughter of villains today. Maybe they had been pulled into the clear night sky.

Sensing on a gut level that the city was at peace for the moment, she left the window and went to the center of the sitting room where the two of them were waiting for her.

"It's been a while since just the three of us had a drink."

Lyra had plunked down on the sofa and was already drinking. She had what looked like a cheap ale, while Kaguya, sitting in the chair across from her, had a small cup of cold sake. Alize sat on a different sofa, while a glass of fruit wine—one she had made together with Astrea—rested on the low table.

"You know why. Practically everyone is out on quests. Even that no-good elf."

Most of the familia members were in the Dungeon. Astrea was meeting with other deities, and Lyana and Noin were accompanying her as guards. Today, the captain, Alize, the second-in-command, Kaguya, and the strategist, Lyra, were focusing on their tasks. Lyana and the older members of the familia told them to take a break at the end of the day.

"You say that, but something's gonna happen and we'll get called

out for it," Lyra had joked, but to their surprise, for once Orario was actually a bit peaceful.

Ever since the battle two years ago, order had been improving in the city. *Astrea Familia*'s home, Stardust Garden, was tranquil enough tonight that they could even feel like today was a sort of advance payment of the lasting peace that would come someday.

"It's like going back to when the familia first started! I was there, then Kaguya joined, and then Lyra tagged along, too…" Alize smiled as she thought back to the familia's formation.

And with a bright smile, she innocently delved into the history better left forgotten that was always a part of old memories.

"It was rough then! You were both way sulkier than even Leon was!"

"Cut it out already. At the time, I…"

"Me and Kaguya were both pretty twisted…"

Kaguya gazed awkwardly and Lyra grimaced. And Alize, who lived every day of her life brimming with confidence, cocked her head peerlessly.

"What do you mean, 'were'? You both still are, right?"

"Who asked you!" Lyra shot back.

"It took forever before the two of you bowed down to my pure and righteous persuasion!" Alize smirked. "Hmhmph, but of course, I'm known for my perseverance!"

"It was not you," Kaguya said with a glare. "Lady Astrea's hand melted my heart."

But the three of them broke into smiles again after a moment. They shared a different sort of ease compared to when they interacted with Lyu and the others. They enjoyed a lack of restraint born from long acquaintance and many shared hardships.

Declaring their gathering a sweets party, Alize laid out the pumpkin cake that Maryu had made, the raspberry cookies Celty had made, the bottle of crystal drop candies that Asta had hidden.

"I want something salty."

"Me too."

Answering Kaguya and Lyra, and still overflowing with confidence, she took out a salty Jyaga Maru Kun, but immediately…

"Not that!"

"It's too heavy!"

After a bit of squabbling, the three of them freely picked their own preferred refreshments to enjoy.

"So? What's the best topic to go with the drinks?" Lyra asked as she downed the contents of her wooden cup.

"Leon, of course!" Alize lifted her fruit wine.

"Is that really 'of course'…?" Lyra was exasperated. "Though I suppose the baby of the familia is still the dodgiest at the moment."

Setting aside the question of actual strength, Lyu was undeniably head and shoulders above the others in *Astrea Familia* when it came to being a topic for conversation.

"She made it through the battle two years ago, but she is still a rookie. She came at me the other day, so I turned the tables on her."

It happened when Kaguya and Lyu were alone together.

"You have to be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the greater good." That was Kaguya's belief. And Lyu objected. When the elf had angrily asked her how she could accept a peace that assumed the sacrifice of some, Kaguya had shut her up by forcing her to face the reality of an Orario that was still not saved even though so many sacrifices had already been made.

"Ideals and reality…you were a bit nasty with that, Kaguya." Still smiling, Alize, who had caught part of the conversation, chided her a bit. "You even brought Adi into it."

"It's true."

Adi Varma, the younger sister of *Ganesha Familia*'s Shakti, had died in battle two years ago. Right in front of Lyu and Kaguya. It was because of that that Lyu had become even more sensitive to sacrifices. Adi had been quite an influence on Lyu, and really a powerful anchor. Alize herself had thought before about just how big a shock it must have been for Lyu when she watched her pass away before her eyes.

Justice will go on. Even having understood and accepted the truth of those words that Adi had left behind, that the stars that had faded had not been in vain, Lyu refused to accept that they were a necessary sacrifice and struggle toward a future without sacrifices.

Even when hit with harsh realities.

Alize would call that Lyu's good point, while Kaguya resolutely declared it Lyu's flaw. And listening idly while propping up her head, Lyra's conclusion was they were both right.

"And you and Lyra both spoil her, so what I'm doing is just about right," Kaguya chided back, sipping her sake and declaring that she believed in a merciless whip. "I hate that naive little elf."

"Agh, agh, what a pain. Keep it up and you'll have the gods and goddesses talking about that tsundere thing again."

Lyra thought Lyu's fastidiousness was annoying, but Kaguya's hatred of ideals was not any better. As far as she was concerned, the two balanced each other out.

"…I talked to her about the difference between knowledge and wisdom, but I wonder…"

In addition to arguing with Kaguya about ideals and reality, Lyu had also come to Lyra to talk. Her lesson was the middle way. The path of both carefully observing and discerning reality while also constructing it for herself. Having continued fighting for so long as a weak prum, Lyra turned knowledge into wisdom as a tool for dealing with the unknown.

"I wonder if she'll grow like this…or will she get hit with Kaguya's reality and fester…" Lyra murmured to herself.

"She'll fester, of course. Over and over," Kaguya responded with the exact same attitude as before. "So long as she remains that high-minded."

Before Lyra could sigh, Alize chuckled.

"But you and Lyra are both teaching her all sorts of things for when that time comes."

Ideals and reality. Knowledge and wisdom. In the end, that was all it was. They were coming at it from different angles, but Kaguya and Lyra were both advising Lyu, the greenest of them all, so she would be able to stand and face the difficulties that would block her way in the not-too-distant future.

Whether she realized it or not, Lyu was always being guided.

"Just like Adi said…justice will go on."

"…Hmph…"

"Same goes for you, doesn't it, Captain?"

Kaguya stubbornly looked away, refusing to admit it, and Lyra held out her empty cup with a smile. And then, as if she had thought of something funny…

"Hey, what if…what if we got another new member of the familia?"

"As the captain, I would love to see another pure, beautiful, righteous, and passionate person like me join the familia!"

"The thought of another you is a waking nightmare…" Kaguya's voice sounded exhausted as Alize's chest swelled in some misplaced pride.

"Don't change the topic," Lyra smirked. "If the familia got even bigger, can you imagine Lyu teaching a junior something? Pretty funny, right?"

"…Heh-heh." Kaguya stifled the laughter that thought brought. "That is perhaps the best thing anyone has said tonight." With her fastidiousness, she would be a demonic instructor. She would end up spinning her wheels because she did not know how to compromise. At least so long as she remained like she was now. That would make her juniors dejected and their reaction would only make her angry. But also, she had weak defenses, so one of her juniors might catch her on something, too. What would she do then? Maybe stand out under a waterfall and swing her sword all day.

All in all, it was a funny idea.

"But I think that's fine."

And, for once, Alize had a sisterly sort of smile.

"Leon would definitely be awkward, and it wouldn't work out well at first, and I'm sure they would clash, but…I'm sure she would get closer than anyone and guide all the new kids."

"…Well, probably. There's no way she'd give up halfway."

"If anything, she would stick herself into things that did not need to be touched and take on pointless extra baggage. The pinnacle of foolishness."

Three people and three reactions. But what they all had in common was that they believed while Lyu would make mistakes, she would still try to do the right thing. Though they kept talking more,

on that one point at least, neither Kaguya nor Lyra disagreed. They all knew it would be pointless to deny it.

Lyra rested her hands behind her head.

"It's just a wild fantasy, so why are we getting so fired up over it?"

"That's just the appeal of Leon!…That's also why we're worried about what'll happen to her, too."

Alize's voice was cheerful at first, but partway through, her smile drifted into something quieter.

Lyu's fastidiousness and precariousness were two sides of the same coin. Though it was surely unconscious, she was always dreaming of ideals, even in these dark times. The fate that awaited those who sought after ideals was a broken sword. That Lyu still chased after her ideals, even after experiencing that fate once when she had to face her friend's death, was foolish, and it meant that her future was a scorched plain.

Kaguya did not hesitate to say that, and Lyra did not deny it. Though they hoped that moment would not have to come, there was no proof it would not. And what would happen to Lyu when her ideals shattered was something the three of them did not know, and maybe even the goddess they loved could not say.

Alize's comment caused Kaguya and Lyra to fall silent.

The first to break the silence was, of course, Alize. She was, of course, the one to say what all three of them were thinking.

"Hey, what do you think'll happen to Leon after this?"

""…!""

With a serious look, but a smile in her eyes, she asked, "What sort of justice do you think Leon will find?"

There was a shooting star.

Outside the room, where they could not know, it traced a beautiful arc across the dark night sky. But people looked up, following the track of the shooting star, and made their wishes.

"I'm sure…no matter where she ends up, she'll be saying something hardheaded as ever."

"Yes. I can see her stupid face now, immature as ever, brandishing a foolish justice."

Lyra's and Kaguya's answers were the same. Whether a new member joined the familia or not, Lyu would still be Lyu. No matter what complaints anyone might have, no matter how anyone tried to reason with her, her wish upon a star would never change.

"Yeah…" Alize closed her eyes. "I'm sure Leon will hold fast to a beautiful justice that's a fantastic pipe dream…"

She could see an image on the back of her eyelids. Lyu was surrounded by people Alize did not know. Perhaps they were workers at a tavern who always drove her mad. Or maybe they were a different familia who had been helped by her and were helping her in return. Or perhaps they really were juniors who adored and looked up to her.

And, as if watching over Lyu smiling there, Alize and the others were there at her back.

"…Together with our hopes and dreams…"

As she slowly opened her eyes, her red hair rustled. And as Kaguya and Lyra watched, she smiled like the sun shining down on everyone.

"All right, a toast!"

Taking the glass of fruit wine, she looked at them.

Lyra grumbled about what that had to do with anything as she poured herself another cup of ale. Kaguya smiled and held up her cold sake.

"To the sword and wings of justice?"

"No." Alize winked as the two of them moved closer. "To the hope that Leon finds!"

There was a clink of glasses.

It was a simple, ordinary moment that the fairy would never know.

SKILL

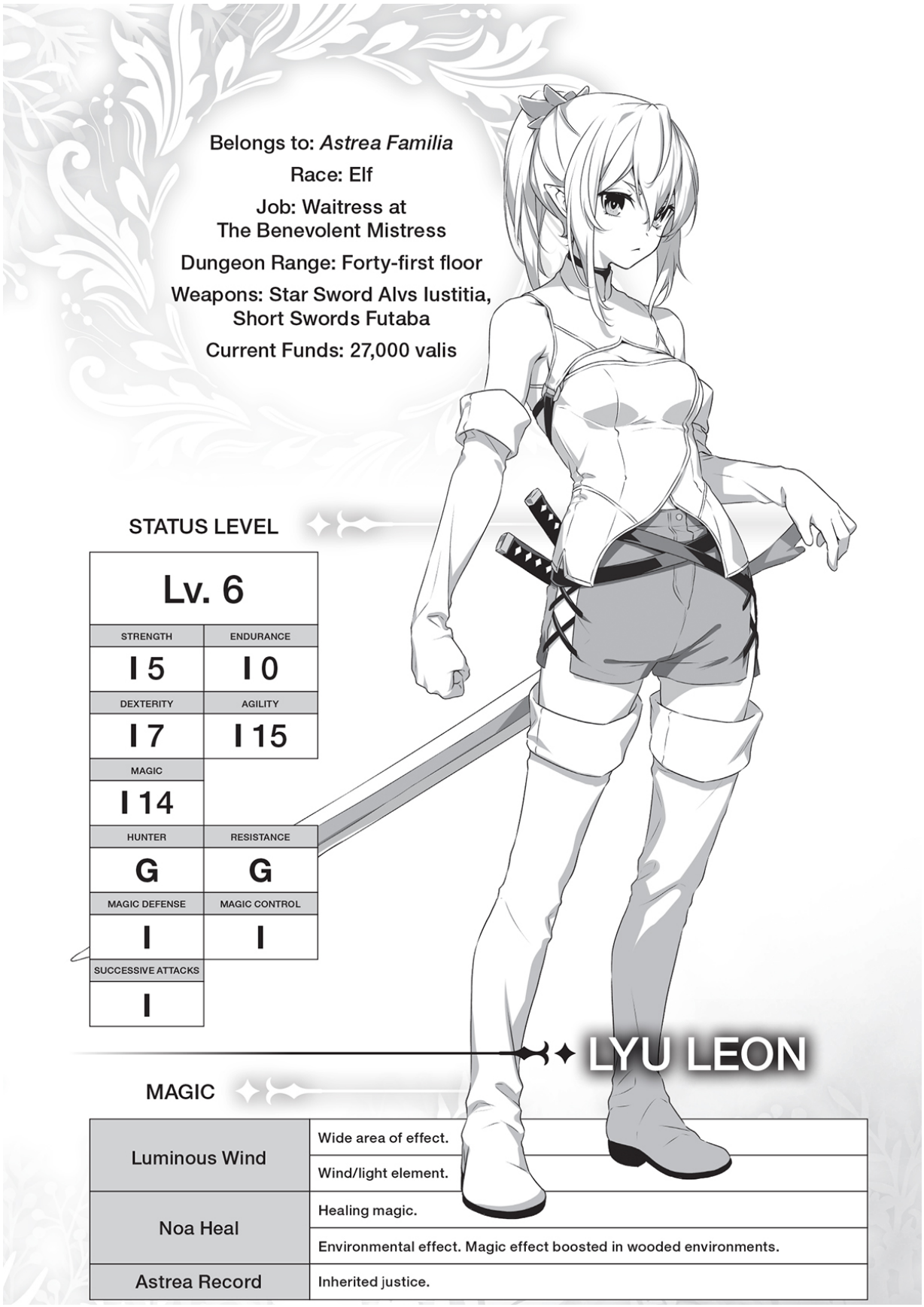
Fairy Serenade	Amplify magic effect.
	At night, magnitude of enhancement increases.
Mind Load	When attacking, consume Mind to increase Strength.
	Active trigger ability, including the amount of consumed Mind.
Aero Mana	When running, attack strength increases as speed increases.
Astrae Varmas	Falna effect.
	Amplifies skills of followers who share the same god and ichor as the user and are in range.
	Enhances the Mind and magic of followers who share the same god and ichor as the user and are in range.
	Provides moderate resistance to psychological corruption to all followers of any deity who are in range.
	Passive effect.
	Degree, magnitude, and scale of enhancement and range increase with Level.

WEAPON
Alvs Lustitia

Cecille's masterpiece, combining a branch from the sacred tree of Wishe Forest, magic stones, Star Cavern holy spring water, a spirit's tear, and a fragment of Alvs Lumina.
Based just on value of the materials used, worth an estimated 120,000,000 valis.
Other than the spring water from Star Cavern collected with Astrea, all of the materials were *gifts* that Cecille plundered from the Blackliza workshop in retaliation for their family spat.
Has a Superior aspect that strengthens it when imbued with its user's magic power. Responds especially well to an elf's magic power.
The balance between staff and sword is superb, and not something just any high smith could manage. A manifestation of Cecille's five years of anguish and failures as well as her indomitability and justice.
It is dubbed the Star Maiden of Justice.

ARMOR
Spirit's Dress Uniform

Designed as battle clothes for fighting an intermediate spirit, it was adapted into armor for Lyu.
Designed with agility in mind, it is woven with various spirit cloths, providing powerful resistance to all elements. Sized perfectly for Lyu's body.
Incidentally, Cecille made this and boasted, "Since I have a better figure than you do!"
Afterward, when she saw Astrea's body, the girl formally apologized for getting ahead of herself and swore to follow Astrea always.



Belongs to: *Astrea Familia*

Race: Elf

Job: Waitress at
The Benevolent Mistress

Dungeon Range: Forty-first floor

Weapons: Star Sword Alvs Iustitia,
Short Swords Futaba

Current Funds: 27,000 valis

STATUS LEVEL

Lv. 6	
STRENGTH	ENDURANCE
I 5	I 0
DEXTERITY	AGILITY
I 7	I 15
MAGIC	
I 14	
HUNTER	RESISTANCE
G	G
MAGIC DEFENSE	MAGIC CONTROL
I	I
SUCCESSIVE ATTACKS	
I	

LYU LEON

MAGIC

Luminous Wind	Wide area of effect.
	Wind/light element.
Noa Heal	Healing magic.
	Environmental effect. Magic effect boosted in wooded environments.
Astrea Record	Inherited justice.

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AFTERWORD

Allow me to begin with an apology.

To my editor, Usami, the illustrator, nilitsu, and everyone who put their utmost into the production of this book, I am truly sorry for putting you all through a super crunch. I am so sorry for getting cocky and suggesting tacking on a thirteenth release to what was already twelve releases in twelve months. I really did not have nearly the leeway I thought. You have my heartfelt thanks for supporting the foolish author who almost gave out after falling behind in work.

And also to the readers. In the last Familia Chronicle, I said I would be writing a story about Haruhime next, but I ended up doing a second episode for Lyu first. I humbly apologize for misleading you. Allow me to talk a bit about this book's contents, including the decision that led to it being next.

The Locus of Stars

This story was originally planned to be in the main series' eighteenth volume in abbreviated form, but due to physical constraints (page count), it was set aside. And then, in celebration of DanMachi's tenth year in 2023, it was decided to release a book every month, and I was possessed by an urge to maybe expand this episode into another book to be part of the series of releases, and so it was switched with the story of the eastern fox in the lineup.

That I had hinted at the goddess of justice and fairy's reunion in GA Bunko's anniversary short story as well as the existence of younger girls in her familia and thought it would be a waste for them to end up shelved without their story told may have played some part, too. As a result, it was decided to publish it in conjunction with the main series.

My eyes have been getting leaky lately while writing about the side of justice that is no longer around, but writing a story of the fairy who inherited their justice and her juniors who were moved by her has let me smile about it, too.

It was not wasted. It is still continuing.

The locus that let me feel that way is probably the greatest treasure this time.

Girl in Twilight

Thinking that those who have not read the main series novels or watched the anime might be wondering who Adi was, I hastily wrote this short scene.

Her name appeared so briefly in Volume 14 of the main series that most might not remember, so this story was provided as an accompaniment to The Locus of Stars.

If you are curious to know more about Adi, then please consider checking out *Astrea Record*.

I would love for more people to know about her relationship with our fairy.

A Simple Moment from Five Years Ago

This was an adaptation of a limited-release scenario for the DanMachi Memoria Freese app game produced by Wright Flyer Studios.

It was one of the things that made me consider writing The Locus of Stars, so I also included it in this book. The game's staff readily consented to allowing its inclusion in this book, for which I am truly grateful.

With this book, the thirteen consecutive months of releases are over, so I would love to be able to take a bit of a breather, but there

are still plenty more things to do, so I shall continue to be working hard.

Please believe me that the next installment of the Familia Chronicle series will be a story of the eastern fox! Seriously, not just as a joke…!

I will be looking after myself, so I hope you will take care of yourselves, too.

Thank you for reading this far.

And please excuse me.

Fujino Omori

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