
Is It WRONG to TRY to PICK UP GIRLS in a DUNGEON?
MINOR MYTHS AND LEGENDS
1
FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY
nilitsu
CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA



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

Minor Myths and Legends

1

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON? MINOR MYTHS AND LEGENDS, Volume 1
FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Jake Humphrey
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BELL CRANELL

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





HESTIA

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

AIZ WALLENSTEIN

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





LILLILUKA ERDE

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

WELF CROZZO

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





MIKOTO YAMATO

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

HARUHIME SANJOUNO

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





EINA TULLE

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

CHARACTERS & STORY

Orario, the Dungeon City: a bustling metropolis built atop a sprawling subterranean labyrinth known only as "the Dungeon." Young Bell Cranell came to this city seeking to be an adventurer, and it was within its walls where he encountered the goddess Hestia and started *Hestia Familia*.

On a foray into the Dungeon, Bell was rescued from certain death by the Sword Princess, Aiz Wallenstein. He was smitten, and he resolved to become a man she'd respect.

Through many trials and tribulations, Bell came to meet Lilly, a supporter; Welf, a blacksmith; Mikoto, a native of the Far East; and Haruhime, a foxgirl, and he invited them all into his familia. With these stalwart allies by his side, Bell forges deeper and deeper into the Dungeon, all under the loving eyes of his goddess.

But Bell advances by leaps and bounds, and before he knows it, all eyes in the city are on him, leading to no end of troubles…

MIACH

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

LOKI

She leads Orario's most powerful familia and has a mysterious western accent. Loki is particularly fond of Aiz.

TIONE HYRUTE

Elder sister of the Amazonian twins. Madly in love with the captain, Finn. A member of *Loki Familia*.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA

A very gifted creator of magical items. She belongs to *Hermes Familia*.

TAKEMIKAZUCHI

The god of *Takemikazuchi Familia*. A master of martial arts who teaches his techniques to his followers.

LYU LEON

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

FELS

A mysterious mage who does Ouranos's bidding.

CASSANDRA ILLION

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

HÖRN

The goddess's attendant who has sworn loyalty to Freya. She is known as Nameless.

HEDIN SELLAND

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

NAHZA ERSUISU

The sole member of *Miach Familia*. She gets extremely jealous of other women who approach her god.

FINN DEIMNE

Known for his cool head, he is the captain of *Loki Familia*.

TIONA HYRUTE

Amazonian adventurer who calls herself Aiz's best friend. Tione's younger twin sister. A member of *Loki Familia*.

HERMES

The patron god of *Hermes Familia*. A charming god who is quick on his feet and always in the know. He takes great care to maintain his familia's neutrality.

OUKA KASHIMA

The captain of *Takemikazuchi Familia* who stands on the front lines and shields his allies. He and Welf are on bad terms.

SYR FLOVER

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

WIENE

A vouivre girl Bell meets in the Colossal Tree Labyrinth of the Dungeon. She can talk like a human.

DAPHNE LAULOS

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

FREYA

Goddess at the head of *Freya Familia*. Her stunning allure is strong enough to enchant the gods themselves. She is a true "Goddess of Beauty."

HEITH VELVET

A capable healer who belongs to *Freya Familia*. She is known to frequently complain about Ottar's actions.

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VOLUME 1

TUTORIAL
Toranoana Store Bonus

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TUTORIAL

“Listen, Bell. You should pursue girls.”

I heard these words over and over when I was younger.

“You can’t be a real man if you don’t find yourself a nice, cute girl. In fact, I’d go so far as to say it’s the whole reason we were put on this earth.”

The gentle, rhythmic creaking of the rocking chair enveloped me in a simple warmth. As a young child, I often sat in my grandfather’s lap while he told me my favorite tale in his gentle voice. I loved hearing about the hero who charged into blasted lands and fought a dragon just to save a single girl.

“Even I want to get down and dirty with a young hottie.”

The words he spoke back then remain etched onto my heart.

“Listen, Bell. You must seek out girls. Every man needs a harem.”

“…A harem?”

I looked up from the pictures in the book and peered at the large, grizzled face that always watched over me. His wrinkles creased as he beamed at me. He wore the most heartwarming smile while spouting some of the dirtiest words imaginable.

“Yes. It’s every man’s dream to have a harem. It’s what every hero fights for deep down.”

“If I meet girls and make a harem, does that mean I can be a hero, too?”

“It does!”

That must have been where it all began.

“Repeat after me, Bell! Every man needs a harem!”

“Every man needs a harem!”

“Yes! Again! Every man needs a harem!”

“Every man needs a harem!”

Even in the faded tapestry of recollection, between the rustic echoes of the rocking chair, we must have seemed like the happiest people in the entire world.

“Grandpa?”

“Yes, my boy?”
“What’s a harem?”
“Oh, gods…”



I can’t help but stare at the massive temple. The marble walls and pillars of the Pantheon gleam back at me, and I gulp.

People are constantly coming and going through the great entryway, and a few brush past me. They’re great heroes I have no business even being seen next to, let alone rubbing shoulders with.

This building serves as the headquarters of the Guild, the colossal organization that manages the Labyrinth City. Every adventurer with dreams of exploring the Dungeon must pass through these halls.

This is where it all begins. The first step on the road to adventure. And meeting girls.

My heart is pounding, so I take a few deep, calming breaths. Then I set my jaw and stride over to the doors.

W-wow…

Inside is an enormous lobby carved out of white marble. Feeling overwhelmed by the crowds, I follow the signs to reception, where my first challenge awaits me: registering as an adventurer.

Despite the many open windows, the line is long, and I queue for quite some time, jostled about by everyone around me, until my turn comes.

I walk up to the desk, and before the receptionist can even open her mouth, I make a declaration.

“I…I want to be an adventurer!”

My overeager shout makes the receptionist flinch, and she blinks a few times in surprise before replying. I catch the reflection of my own burning eyes in her pretty, emerald irises.

“…J-just to confirm, you mean you’d like to register as a new adventurer, correct?” the receptionist asks with an awkward smile.

“That’s right!” I answer, eyes still burning.

She whispers something to the lady next to her, then stands up and smiles, indicating for me to follow her. I notice what a beauty she is for the first time and can feel my cheeks getting redder.

She leads me to an empty counter and hands me a blank registration form.

“Fill this out, if you please.”

I do as requested and enter my details, stressing out over every section—even my name. Once that’s all finished, I hand it back to the receptionist. Her pointed ears make her seem like an elf…or a half-elf. That seems more likely. When her eyes reach the section where I entered my age, she glances over at me, and her pretty eyebrows arch pensively, almost sadly. This only lasts a moment. She quickly puts on her customer-service face again and smiles at me.

“Everything seems in order, Mr. Cranell,” she says. “On behalf of the Guild, allow me to officially welcome you to Orario.”

I know she probably tells everyone that, but it makes me feel special all the same. A warm feeling wells up in my heart. As of this moment, I’m an adventurer. I have no doubt that right now, in these hallowed halls, surrounded by my new peers and their boisterous voices, my eyes are sparkling.

“The Guild is not responsible for any loss or injury suffered while inside the Dungeon,” the receptionist lady explains. “We also cannot guarantee your personal safety. The Dungeon does not give second chances. Please keep that in mind.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

“I would also like to emphasize that if you are found guilty of any serious crimes, you will be given a fitting punishment, up to and including the revocation of your adventurer status. In such an event, you will no longer be able to receive support from the Guild, and any magic stones or drop items in your possession shall be forfeit. Please be mindful of this.”

I nod eagerly, remembering all the rules adventurers are required to follow.

When the receptionist—whose name I learn is Eina Tulle—finishes giving me the orientation, she asks me one final question.

“Are you interested in enlisting the services of an adviser?”

“An adviser?”

“Yes. It’s an optional service provided by the Guild to assist

adventurers.”

She tells me that newly formed familias or familias with little experience often don’t know where to begin when it comes to exploring the Dungeon. That’s where the Guild comes in—offering to share its vast institutional knowledge in the form of an adviser.

For someone who barely knows up from down in this city, it sounds like exactly what I need, so I immediately accept.

“Very well,” says Eina. “In that case, do you have any preferences about the gender of your adviser?”

“Gender? Oh, erm…female?”

“Understood. Then please pick your preferred race from this list.”

At this point, my eyes go wide. The first question was embarrassing enough, but race as well? Is she just going to ask me to describe my ideal girl?

Apparently, the point of this question is to avoid compatibility problems. I know elves and dwarves have bad blood due to their history, but is this really necessary?

My eyes stop on the word *elf*, and I blush. I steal a glance at the long, slender ears of the woman standing across from me. For a while, I stand there agonizing over what to do. Finally, Ms. Tulle smirks and draws a circle around the word *elf* with her quill.

“Ah!” I exclaim, but she’s already filing away the paperwork.

“Please understand that we may not be able to fulfill everyone’s requests,” she says with a wink, “especially those who choose popular races. Do you happen to have plans to enter the Dungeon later today?”

“N-no…”

“In that case, please return here tomorrow at this time. I’ll introduce you to your adviser, and after that will be just a few more things to be taken care of.”

I stiffly rise from my seat. She takes a few steps, turns, and smiles sweetly while giving me a perfect bow.

My face is already on fire, so I stare at my feet and exit as fast as I can.



The next morning, Goddess accompanies me partway to the Guild while heading to her part-time job. At some point, she turns toward me.

"You've been kind of out of it these last couple of days, Bell."

"H-have I?" I reply.

"Yeah. You're spacing out a lot. Are you really that excited about becoming an adventurer?"

That could be part of it, but there's something else on my mind right now. Namely, I'm nervous about what my adviser will be like.

Goddess smiles at me, and I scratch my cheek nervously, hoping to change the subject.

"You're the only one I can depend on in our familia right now," she says. "So try to keep it together, Bell!"

"Of course!"

Goddess does her best to cheer me up, and I nod enthusiastically.

After parting ways, I sprint to the Guild building, the warm feeling in my chest spurring me on. When I arrive and head to reception, I am told to go to a booth and await an interview, so I do.

I sit in my seat, growing increasingly tense as time goes by, until the door opens at last.

"…Oh!" I practically yell when I see who walks in.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Cranell. My name is Eina Tulle, and I shall be your adviser as of today."

There's no mistaking it—the brown-haired lady who enters the room is the very same person who took my application yesterday. She looks at me from behind her glasses with warm emerald eyes as she breaks into a sunny smile.

I can't say I didn't consider the possibility of her being my adviser. But it was more of a wish than an expectation. I try to hide the elation welling up inside me as I hastily stammer, "P-pleased to meet you, too!"


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“Well then,” she says, “there are some matters we need to see to, but before that, Mr. Cranell, I have a question.”

“Y-yes?”

“We can keep things formal if you’d like, but…would you mind if I called you Bell?”

She squeezes the papers in her arms, bringing her face closer and closer to mine, wearing a friendly smile. I stand there like a trapped animal, and after a moment, I rapidly shake my head to show my agreement.

“Heh-heh. Thank you. We’ll be working together from now on, so it’ll be nice to keep things casual. It’s a pleasure to be working with you, Bell.”

“The pleasure’s all mine! E-erm…should I call you Ms. Tulle?”

“Eina’s fine.”

She extends a hand, which I timidly shake as we exchange smiles.

“Here is your provided shortsword and a set of light armor,” Eina says as she presents a cloth bag. “I think the size should be right, but let me know if it feels too big or too small, okay? We can still exchange it for you free of charge if we do it before you start using it.”

“Th-thank you.”

I requested these items yesterday on my application. I only just founded *Hestia Familia* with my goddess the other day, and I don’t have the money to buy my own set. Luckily for penniless adventurers like me, the Guild provides starting equipment. Since the equipment has to be paid off eventually, I decided to go with the cheapest set.

This sack contains my livelihood from now on. I take it from Eina’s hands and hold on to it tightly.

“Take this as well. A backpack and a leg holster.”

“Erm…do I have to pay these off as well?”

“Well…to be honest, they’re not technically part of the set you ordered, but…your familia is new, and these odds and ends were just gathering dust in the warehouse. Consider them a gift from me, okay?”

She puts a finger to her lips and smiles.

It seems like she’s looking out for me. Part of me wants to

refuse, but I can't turn down anything that will give me an edge in the Dungeon. Not to mention, Miss Eina did this out of consideration for me. I graciously accept.

With all these adventurer's necessities now in my possession, I start to get a little excited. What a kind and generous person Miss Eina is! I can't help but feel indebted to her for everything she's doing for me.

"That's everything I wanted to give you," she says. "Now it's time for my Dungeon lessons."

"Lessons?"

I stare at her across the table. Eina readjusts her spectacles.

"That's right. You'll be risking your life out there, so you'll need to learn all about the Dungeon and the monsters you'll encounter there. And by the way, this part *isn't* optional."

When she says that, Eina's voice takes on a firm edge. I already know why. The Dungeon is a dangerous place where all kinds of vicious creatures roam. To go in there without the proper knowledge would be asking to get myself killed. What I learn from Miss Eina might very well spell the difference between life and death.

"Does the Guild do this for all new adventurers?"

"Not exactly. It's just something I choose to do for those in my care. You never know when a piece of knowledge will save your life."

I can tell how much she cares. She wants to do everything she can to make sure adventurers like me don't die out there. It's a good thing she's the one looking after me.

"Okay. Teach me your ways, Miss Eina!"

"Thank you, Bell. Let's begin."

Seemingly pleased by my response, Eina opens her bag. She pulls out three books and drops them on the table. Each one is thicker than any book I've ever seen in my life.

"For today, you only have to go through these."

"…Huh?"

"Don't worry. We should be able to finish by midnight."

"…Huh?"

"Let's get started, shall we?"

I'll only realize this later, but Miss Eina is notorious in the

Guild for being incredibly demanding. She cares so much about her adventurers' well-being that she'll do whatever it takes to increase their odds of survival.

That's why she ever so kindly drills her vast knowledge into her students until they shed tears of gratitude. As a result, adventurers affectionately call this half-elf's coursework the Fairy's Break—mostly because of what it does to people's spirits.

"Pop quiz. What are the combat capabilities of a war shadow?"

"Erm…high attack, high speed…?"

"You forgot defense, which is roughly comparable to that of a goblin or a kobold. Once again, from the top."

"Uuungh…"

My life as an adventurer has only just begun…



VOLUME 2

ACE SUPPORTER
Toranoana Store Bonus

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ACE SUPPORTER

“Hey, Bell. Have you had any luck hiring a supporter?”

“…Whuh?”

I lift my bleary eyes from the thick book I’m reading. Miss Eina sits across from me, her head in her hands, looking worried.

“You know how I was saying earlier I don’t like the idea of you going into the Dungeon by yourself? …Oh, and you just wrote the wrong answer. When fighting purple moths, the most important thing is to pay close attention to your positioning. Start over.”

“Yes, ma’am…”

We’re in the Guild library, where countless rows of bookshelves hold all of the Guild’s collective knowledge on the Dungeon. I am studying hard in hopes of surviving my excursion tomorrow.

It’s been a week and change since I first became an adventurer. In that time, Miss Eina has been running her, uh, immensely helpful Dungeon lessons, and I’ve been diligently attending them without fail. Even when the Dungeon has left me weary and tired, or when the mountain of textbooks and encyclopedias makes me want to cry, I crack the whip, pick up my quill, and push on.

And while I am meticulously jotting down on parchment paper how best to tackle different monsters in a variety of combat conditions under Miss Eina’s watchful eye, other Guild employees giggle as they pass us by.

“Anyway, going back to what I was saying,” she says, “are you having any trouble hiring a supporter?”

“Erm…”

Putting down my pen, I scratch the side of my head nervously. A supporter is a noncombatant who aids adventurers by gathering magic stones and drop items. They’re basically a requirement to maximize your time in the Dungeon, or so I’ve been told.

The only problem is *Hestia Familia* has no members besides

me, and we don't have enough money to hire a freelancer.

"I really think you ought to hire one, even if it's temporary, just so you're not going solo," Miss Eina explains. "They may not fight monsters, but there are many other ways supporters can save your life."

"I know," I say with a sigh. "B-by the way, if I did hire one, how much do you think it would cost?"

"Hmm, well, at the end of the day, you're asking someone to risk their life for you. Prices can vary, especially if you negotiate, but I'd say you're looking at about a thousand valis up front, plus a share of the day's earnings."

Eina's quick calculation already totals more than half the money I earned today in the Dungeon. If I do hire a supporter, there's almost no doubt that I won't have enough cash for weapon maintenance and purchasing items.

"I…I don't think I can afford that right now," I reply meekly.

"Really…? Well, I suppose making do with what you have is a common challenge for new familias like yours."

"I'm sorry…"

"There's no need to be sorry," says Eina, shaking her head. "But at least talk it over with your goddess, okay? Maybe she has some ideas."

She gives me a smile. I peer into her calm, emerald eyes and nod.

"Okay."



"A supporter, you say…"

Once Eina's lesson ends, I pick a time after supper to broach the subject with Goddess.

"Hmm, I'm not sure we have the money for it…" she says.

"That's what I thought…"

"Believe me, if we had the money, I would pay up in a heartbeat! Anything to help you stay safe out there, Bell."

Goddess crosses her arms and frowns. I hate to see her so troubled. It looks like I'll be going solo for the time being. Thinking back to all the times I've escaped danger on my own, I

tell myself I can handle it.

"It's okay, Goddess. I'll just keep on doing what I'm doing."

Goddess stares at my slightly forced smile. I suppose I'm bluffing, just a little. She curls a finger around her chin and ponders for a moment. Then she seems to have decided on something and beams at me.

"I guess I'll help you out, then!"

"You will? How?"

As I stand there in shock, Goddess puffs out her large chest and speaks proudly.

"I'll be your supporter!"

At first, I don't believe my ears. I just stay there in frozen silence, staring at her oddly smug face. When time finally restarts, I practically leap out of my seat.

"Wh-what are you thinking?! You can't do that!!!"

"Oh, it'll be fine! Tomorrow's my day off anyway! I'm totally free!"

That's not what I mean! I want to say, "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is down there?!" But my mouth still doesn't work. I try to communicate it with just my eyes instead.

"The job's just carrying your bags, right? I don't mind. I'm your goddess!" she beams. "Besides, if anything happens, you'll protect me, won't you?"

There's a sly look in her eyes and a big grin on her lips. The sheer amount of trust in her statement forces me to simply respond with a weak, "Well…yeah…"

"Then it's settled!" she says. "I can't wait to go Dungeon-diving with you!"

There's not even a hint of worry in her voice. She might as well have announced we're going on a picnic. Meanwhile, I'm only getting more nervous, but there's something else on my mind.

"Erm, Goddess? Are you even allowed in the Dungeon? I know I'm new to the city and all, but I've never seen a god adventuring alongside their familia…"

My naive question causes Goddess to freeze in her tracks. She gazes up at the ceiling for a moment before she answers.

"…Well, as long as we stick to the first floor, who'll know?"

I feel like that answers my question and doesn't answer it at the same time. I tilt my head in concern, but Goddess seems to

have made up her mind, and I don't want to tell her *no* when she's so eager to help.

It looks like we'll be adventuring together tomorrow…



"So this is the Dungeon…"

When we reach the first floor, Goddess looks around curiously. At my insistence, she's wearing a tattered cloak and hood. I'd never live it down if my fellow adventurers knew I'd brought my goddess into the Dungeon, but so long as she's dressed like that, nobody will be able to tell…I hope.

"I've heard stories about the place, but I never knew the paths were so well-maintained. It really is like a labyrinth."

"It's not like that farther down, apparently…"

In addition to the cloak, Goddess is also wearing an adorable backpack. As the two of us venture deeper and deeper into the Dungeon, she waltzes down the main path, blissfully ignorant of the danger, while I follow along in a cold sweat.

Suddenly, a monstrous cry marks the beginning of our first encounter.

"Gii!!!"

A plump, green-skinned creature lifts its eyes to us and glares in open hostility.

"Huh, so this is a goblin? I've never seen one before…"

"…?!"

I swiftly draw my weapon, but in complete contrast to my combat readiness, Goddess walks right up to the beast, *oohing* and *ahhing*. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

"What are you doing, Goddess?! That's a monster! Get away from it!"

"Huh? It's just a little goblin. What's the worst it could do?"

Okay, goblins may be the weakest creatures in the Dungeon, but it's only because of our Falnas that they don't pose a threat!

I watch in horror as Goddess taunts the goblin, going, "Hey, you! Get over here!" and beckoning it closer. I think I'm feeling faint…

"Bugii!"

“Guh!”

“G-Goddeeeeess!!!”

The goblin punches her hard in the face, sending her rolling across the ground at high speed. I run over to her, screaming like the world is ending. She sits up, rubs her swollen cheek, and shivers, staring at the creature.

“B-Bell, this guy’s crazy strong!”

“I think you were just being way too careless!” I scream as I swiftly dispatch the goblin. This is the very first battle of the day, and I’m already sweating and panting.

“I thought goblins were the weakest of the weak…” Goddess mutters. “What’s going on? This isn’t what I expected at all…”

“They’re weak compared to adventurers, not you! A-anyway, let’s try to be a little bit more cautious from now on, Goddess. Please stay behind me.”

“O-okay.”

Goddess nods, a tense look on her face. Perhaps she finally understands what a dangerous place this is. With a distinct sense of relief, I press forward.

As Goddess quickly noticed, the first floor of the Dungeon is neatly carved out of its stone like a man-made labyrinth. Pale blue walls stretch as far as the eye can see, and I proceed down the halls in a state of constant vigilance.

Sudden turns in the passageways, like the one we’re coming up on now, make me especially tense. There could be monsters lurking around the corner—just out of sight—waiting for the perfect chance to jump out and ambush us!

“Whoa! Look over there, Bell! There’s a magic stone just waiting to be looted!”

“…?!”

Unfortunately, Goddess does not share my caution. She springs out of our cover and runs toward a magic stone lying on the floor—most likely left behind by another adventurer—like a child spotting a piece of candy.

“All right! That’s the second find of the—”

“Gruooogh!!!”

“Hwaaaaaaaah!!!”

“Waaaaaah!!!”

Goddess and I both let out ear-piercing screams as a kobold

pops out from around the corner. Still screaming, I run over and deliver a flying kick to the creature's jaw, sending it flying away.

"Th-this place is so dangerous!" Goddess says between pants as the two of us crouch on all fours, catching our breath. "Is this really what you have to deal with every day?!"

"……"

I don't have the energy to speak. It hasn't even been that long since we set out, and I feel ready to pass out already.

This goes on for a while, with Goddess getting in my way—er, I mean, *having learning experiences*—at every turn, and me constantly rescuing her from trouble.

"Ugh. I'm sorry, Bell. It seems all I do is slow you down…"

"Th-that's not true, Goddess…" I say to cheer her up.

The two of us are resting in an empty, square room. We've learned that being a supporter is not as easy as it looks. Anyone who does it as their job must have developed a wealth of skills and knowledge.

As I ponder this, Goddess raises her head.

"Oh! Bell, there's a monster over there! It kind of looks like a chicken…"

"What…?"

I don't remember a monster like that on the first floor, but I look over to where Goddess is pointing, and sure enough, there it is. It has pea-green plumage and trots across the room, clucking loudly without a care in the world. Confused, I stare at it, but then my face slowly warps in terror as I realize what it is.

"Th-th-that's a jackbird!" I cry.

I've seen it before. I know I have. It was in one of the lessons Miss Eina drilled into me; a rare monster that seldom appears in the Dungeon. A creature that even the most veteran adventurer would stop at nothing to take down…!

"Is it really that strong?" says Goddess, noticing my flustered look.

"No, Goddess… It's not strong at all…!"

This hen-like creature is next to useless in a fight. All it can do is run. but there's something far more important to know about this monster. When its killed, you can extract an item from its belly known as the jackbird's golden egg, which sells for at least a million valis!

When I explain this to Goddess, she goes as pale as me.

“Imagine what I could buy with one million valis…a hundred thousand Jyaga Maru Kun…a beautiful home sweet home… everything I ever dreamed of! I wouldn’t have to work another day in my life!!”

Oh no! Mortal desires are consuming my goddess’s mind!

“Cluck Cluck!!”

““Wah!!””

As if sensing our greedy thoughts, the jackbird spreads its wings and dashes out of the room at top speed.

“Get back here, you!!”

“G-Goddess?!”

Desperate to capture the bird, Goddess sprints after it with both arms raised. I feel a slight sense of déjà vu, eclipsed by a much greater sense of worry, and hurry after her.

But before I even reach the door, Goddess comes running back through it.

Behind her is a horde of goblins and kobolds.

“Bell, I’m sorry.”

“What have you doooooooone?!”

How did she even attract this many monsters in such a short time?! I immediately turn tail and flee alongside her.

For the rest of the day, all we do is try to get them off our tail, and by the time we finally reach the surface, we’re both exhausted. I have no desire to go back, even after I realize that Goddess dropped her backpack and the entire day’s haul with it.

After that, Goddess never accompanied me into the Dungeon again, and I started taking the whole “hiring a supporter” matter a little more seriously.



VOLUME 3

DIVINE ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS
Animate Store Bonus

EPISODE HEPHAISTOS
GAMERS Store Bonus

SWORD GIRL
Toranoana Store Bonus

EPISODE MIACH
First published in the 5th Anniversary Special Story Collection

FAMILIA PANACEA
Volume 3 Limited Edition Booklet

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DIVINE ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS

Hestia grumbled to herself.

She was sitting at home shortly before bedtime, boring a hole through the back of the young boy's head with her glare.

I want him to lie in my lap…

Bell noticed her gaze, turned, and cocked his head, but Hestia didn't stop staring. The only thing commanding her mind was the growing realization she was losing the battle for Bell's affections. Bell had been sneaking off daily to meet with the Sword Princess, and who knew what they got up to together under the guise of their "training"?

Hestia was steadily becoming more and more concerned she was being left behind. As for why she thought making Bell lie in her lap would solve the issue, well, that was anyone's guess. But a goddess's hunches were not to be dismissed lightly.

Hmm, but how can I make it happen?

Hestia's cheeks reddened, and she cast furtive glances in his direction. Simply asking Bell directly was out of the question. A goddess had their appearances to consider, and more than anything else, it was just plain embarrassing. If only she had some excuse…

Hestia furrowed her brow for a moment, deep in thought, then her twin ponytails suddenly twitched as it hit her.

"Bell, have you heard of the game rock-paper-scissors?" she asked.

"No, I haven't."

"It's very popular up in heaven. It's simple, too. You'll see!"

The goddess enlightened the young rabbit on the finer points of the game. In the mortal realm, disputes were often settled by tossing a coin, so Bell had never heard of anything like this before. He nodded enthusiastically as the rules were explained.

"So rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, and paper beats rock? That's interesting…"

"Right? I only just learned about it myself recently. Want to try

a round?”

“Sure!” said Bell, and thus, the trap was set for the poor rabbit. Hestia’s eyes gleamed.

“By the way,” she said, already raising her fist. “There’s a special rule when a god plays this game with a mortal. Whoever loses has to lie down on the winner’s lap!”

“What?!”

“Okay, let’s go! Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

“A-actually, this isn’t bad…”

Lying sidelong across the sofa, Hestia looked up at the ceiling, a relaxed smile on her face. Under Bell’s awkward gaze, she snuggled into his lap like a kitten.

In the daily rematches that followed, the goddess managed to pull off a probability-defying string of sixteen consecutive losses.

EPISODE HEPHAISTOS

Hephaistos. Goddess of the forge. Heaven's craftswoman. The red-haired, red-eyed metallurgist. The fiery forgemistress.

She went by many names, but all of them spoke to her excellent skill or her fiery temperament—and not a single one touched on her more feminine side.

"What feminine side?" the gods would joke, and it seemed this impression of her had spread to the mortal world as well, for Hephaistos's children all saw her the same way.

"It's not like I care what other people think of me," she said to herself, hand on her hip, examining her reflection in her office mirror.

"You should try acting a little cuter, Hephaistos! You're wasting your good looks!"

She thought back to what Demeter told her at a party a few days prior. Even Hephaistos could see that Demeter was brimming with womanly charm. And once Demeter said those words aloud, Hestia and Miach loudly—and drunkenly—agreed.

"Acting cuter…"

She didn't mean to make a big deal of it. She was just curious—that was all. Perhaps she should indulge her inner woman more. And so with the words of her friends swirling around in her head, she stared at her own reflection, pondered the matter for some time, and then struck a pose. Placing a finger to her own cheek, she smiled the biggest smile she could muster.

"Heya, guys! Heffy here! Tee-hee!"

Suddenly, the door opened.

"Sorry to disturb you, Lady Hephaistos. I just wondered if—"

The man stopped when he saw her, frozen mid-pose in front of the mirror, and all the blood slowly drained from his face. He closed the door gently, like rolling a stone over the entrance of a disturbed tomb.

"I'll come back later…"

"Wait, Welf! I can explain! Don't go! Please!!!"

Hephaistos sprinted out into the hallway after her fleeing follower.

However, had any gods seen her posing, they would have no doubt unanimously agreed that it was cute.

SWORD GIRL

“Huh?”

It was after returning from the Dungeon and stopping off at the Guild, while Bell was running down Northwest Main Street on his way home, that he spotted an unusual sight out of the corner of his eye.

He stopped, backtracked a few steps, and gazed down a side road, where his eyes fell on a familiar head of long, blond hair that glimmered like spun gold.

Aiz? What’s she doing here?

His heart did cartwheels in his chest, and Bell took a closer look. Aiz was bent over a shop front, hands on her knees, eyeing the goods on offer.

She seems really interested in whatever they’re selling.

Bell gleaned that from the look in her eyes. It hadn’t been long since they began training together, but Bell felt like he had already gotten a lot better at knowing what the taciturn girl was thinking.

The street was long, narrow, and mostly in the shadow of the neighboring buildings. Several street vendors had set up shop along one edge, with rugs laid out to display their goods. There were bracelets, earrings, and jewelry of all kinds. At the stall Aiz had stopped at, an Amazonian woman loudly boasted of her wares.

So even Aiz is into those girly things…

Bell smiled as he watched Aiz engrossed in her shopping, happy to discover a side of her that people didn’t usually get to see. Wondering what exactly had gotten her so hooked, he leaned around the corner and strained his eyes and ears to cut through the shadows and clamor of the alleyway, hoping to find out what had caught Aiz’s interest.

“You’ve got a keen eye, girl. That sword’s called Dáinsleif, and there’s a hell of a story behind it.”

“Does it cut well?”

“Does it ever?! That thing’ll slice a minotaur clean in two, head to foot!”

Aiz looked back down at the sword, which constantly emitted a black, noxious miasma. Behind her emotionless facade, her eyes were sparkling like a little girl’s.

Bell slipped back to the main street without a word.

I’ll pretend I didn’t see that.

In an effort to shield his heart, he quickly decided to forget what he just witnessed.

Aiz Wallenstein, the Sword Princess.

Favorite Thing: Swords.

EPISODE MIACH

“This must be fate. Please take this.”

A charming smile bloomed on the perfectly sculpted face of the god Miach. The human girl he was speaking to turned red in an instant.

“B-but…”

“Please don’t be shy. Consider it a bonus. A sign of my goodwill…And if you fancy another visit, you are always welcome back at my store. It would make me very happy to see you again.”

Miach gently affixed a blue flower to the girl’s hair and beamed a radiant smile. The girl blushed from head to toe, and her eyes welled with tears.

“I…I will come again! I promise! I promise I’ll come back and see you!”

“I’d love that.”

He watched the girl depart beneath the azure sky when, all of a sudden, he heard a voice from behind him.

“Lord Miach, you’re terrible.”

“Why, Nahza…Whatever do you mean by that?”

At the roadside stall where Miach had come to sell his familia’s potions to adventurers, his chienthrope follower was staring icy daggers at him.

“Those women are definitely getting the wrong idea from the way you chat them up all the time.”

“I do nothing of the sort. This is simply building a good relationship with our customers. It’s an important skill, both in business and in life.”

“…For a god, you can be really dense sometimes,” said Nahza, pouting.

Miach looked at her and sighed. With a defeated smile, he came closer and suddenly began stroking the girl’s head.

“It’s true I am ignorant in matters of the heart, particularly when it comes to ladies,” he admitted. “I am grateful for your advice on that front, Nahza.”

“…You really *are* dense…I didn’t say stop.”

Nahza’s tail swung from side to side, and she blushed as she spoke. Miach smiled and continued stroking the hair of his one and only follower.

Eventually, the sun set, and the pair began to wind their way home.

“I must say,” said Miach, “our shop is not unpopular by any means, and yet we don’t seem to get many repeat customers aside from young Bell. I wonder why.”

“It’s because I find all the women and make sure they don’t come back.”

“What…?”

FAMILIA PANACEA

“ACHOO!!!”

A tremendous sneeze causes Goddess to jerk up in bed, casting off the covers and making her twin ponytails fly up. I pile up her many blankets again and replace the hand towel that’s fallen off her forehead.

“Urgh…” she groans.

“A-are you okay, Goddess?”

“Ha-ha, Yeah, I’ll be fine…probably…” she answers, failing to inspire much confidence.

I’ve been running around trying to take care of her. Her round cheeks and slender neck have turned an angry shade of red, and her eyes are distant and unfocused. She’s shivering constantly as if she’s freezing, curled up underneath a mountain of blankets.

There’s no getting around it—she’s definitely come down with something.

“I didn’t even know goddesses could get sick,” I remark.

“We usually can’t. But when we came down from the heavens, we made it so that we could.”

I have been looking after Goddess all day, attending her bedside in the church basement that we call home.

It all began this morning, just after I woke up. I was getting ready to head to the Dungeon when I heard her cough like she had been trying to hide it.

I may not be good at understanding women, but I knew what she was trying to do. When I was a child, I would always hide under my covers and try not to sneeze so my grandfather wouldn’t have to look after me.

But now that the cat’s out of the bag, I can’t just leave her alone, so I spend the morning checking her temperature and making sure she has enough blankets to stay warm.

“I understand there are rules,” I say, “but did you really have to go and make life difficult for yourselves?”

“H-hey! Come on, Bell. Don’t look at me like that! You should

be proud of us! There's no greater way to understand our children than to experience the pain and suffering they have to go through on a daily—*HAUGH!! HAOUGH!!*"

"Goddess?!"

It almost sounds like she's going to tear her throat coughing, but there's nothing I can do for her except pitifully call her name. I can tell she must be heating up since her whole face is red even though she's shivering madly.

It does seem to be just a common cold, though…

"Ugh…"

"Goddess?"

She tries to speak, so I lean closer. Her eyes are closed, and she's shaking hard.

"…I'm cold. Snuggle up with me, Bell. We need to huddle together for warmth…"

She must be delirious. Probably has a fever, too.

I check the wet towel on her forehead, and it's already lukewarm. I remove it and refresh it with some cold water from a pitcher. Then I wring it until it's damp and use it to wipe the sweat off Goddess's brow.

When I gently brush her cheek with my finger, it feels unbelievably warm, and after a moment's hesitation, I place the back of my hand to her head. It feels like a furnace.

"That feels good…" Goddess mumbles, her eyes still closed, placing her hand over mine. As I listen to her shallow breathing, my worry grows. I want to help her somehow—anything to alleviate her suffering, even a little.

I rack my brain. What did Grandpa always do for me when I was sick? He would wipe my sweat, give me hot food to eat, make me medicine…

Medicine…

Of course! I should get her something to soothe the pain! It might help her recover quicker, too. But does our medicine even work on deusdea? There's a chance it might even be harmful to them.

Besides, if I go out and buy some, I'd be leaving Goddess alone…

Unable to come to a decision, I simply let time pass. And as I am wondering what to do, I hear a voice.

“Mr. Bell! Are you in?”

There’s a dainty knock at the front door, and I turn to see Lilly poking her head inside.

“Lilly!” I exclaim.

“You didn’t come to the Dungeon, so I came to see what was keeping you,” she explains. “Has something come up?”

Lilly and I always meet at the same time and place before heading into the Dungeon. She must have been confused when I didn’t show. But right now, my little Dungeon partner is like my shining angel. I stand up and beckon her inside.

“Could you help me, Lilly?! Goddess is sick, and I need to go out! Can you look after her?! I’ll pay you back. I promise!”

“M-Mr. Bell?!”

Immediately upon entering, Lilly has to weather my barrage of questions. Before she has a chance to reply, I’ve scraped together what money I have and am out the door.

“I’m just going to get medicine!” I shout. “I’ll be back soon!”

“He’s gone…”

“Ughh… Bell, hold my hand…”

“You’ll have to make do with Lilly’s, I’m afraid. I don’t mind, though.”

“…Whaaa?!”



I run down the crowded streets of West Main Street and dip down a side road. My panic causes me to take the wrong turn a few times, but eventually, I reach my destination: a single house built in a spot with very little sunlight. I open the wooden door and rush inside, screaming, “Excuse me, is Lord Miach here?!”

This is the home of *Miach Familia*. The interior is lined with shelves and cupboards, and standing there are Miach and Nahza. They seem to be in the middle of cleaning up, carrying wooden boxes around the shop. They turn to look at me as I enter.

“What’s the matter, Bell?” Miach asks. “Did something happen?”

“Goddess is bedridden!” I blurt out.

Under the soft gaze of his ultramarine eyes, the same color as

his hair, I explain the situation.

Miach Familia is a group dedicated to brewing and selling potions and other healing items. It's the best place to come for anyone seeking medical advice, and as a fellow deity, Lord Miach may have some insight into my goddess's condition as well.

When I am finished explaining and out of breath, Nahza says, "Here…" and hands me a glass of water, which I accept with a thank-you. While I calm down, Miach places his chin in his hands and mulls over the problem. Then he looks at me and smiles.

"Don't worry, Bell," he said. "I've got just what you're looking for—a wonder cure to treat any god's ailment!"

"R-really?!"

"Yes."

But before I can ask more, Lord Miach begins to explain.

"It costs nothing to prepare. The procedure, however, is paramount, and of course, it shall require a bit of legwork. To that end, Bell, I'm afraid I must ask for your cooperation."

"I-I'll help! Whatever it is, I'll do it!"

"Very good."

Miach gives me a satisfied smile, then turns to Nahza.

"Get everything ready for us, will you?" he asks her. "Bell and I are going to go for a walk."

"I understand," Nahza replies. Then she turns her sleepy gaze on me. "Good luck, Bell…"

I nod, and the girl heads toward the back rooms of the shop.

"Erm, Lord Miach? What exactly is it we have to do?" I ask, feeling a little left out of the loop.

Miach raises his hood and smiles. "Oh, just gather a few things, that's all."



"Are you here, Demeter?"

Tucked around the back of an idyllic wooden house is a snug garden—a farm, really—surrounded by a handmade fence. As a helpful lady from the familia leads us around the side of the building, I catch the scent of earth and leaves. It reminds me of my childhood.

There we find the goddess, sowing seeds. She turns at the sound of Miach's voice.

"Ah, Miach. What is it today?"

The goddess—Demeter—wears a loose kirtle and a straw hat and smiles at the god's approach. A tuft of her fluffy, honey-colored hair peeks out from under the brim and glimmers in the sunlight.

"Oh," she says, noticing me. "You are…Bell, if I'm not mistaken. Hestia's follower? I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your *special time* the other day."

When she calls out to me, my shoulders stiffen, and all I can say is, "Th-that's okay!"

Some time ago, when I tried to go out for dinner with Lady Hestia, Demeter and a few other goddesses…ambushed us, I guess? Even just thinking back on it makes my whole face go red. My face, buried in Lady Demeter's chest…I shake my head and do my best not to look at the impossible-to-miss curves that her clothes aren't hiding at all.

"Well, it's actually because of Hestia that I'm here. Bell here tells me she's fallen ill."

"Hestia's sick?"

"That's what I hear. And so I was wondering if you might share some herbs with me."

According to Miach, Demeter's familia is a commerce-focused group that grows and sells fruits, vegetables, and other produce. This small field we're standing in is only the tip of the iceberg. *Demeter Familia* apparently owns large tracts of land beyond the city walls, and they supply a good portion of Orario's food.

There's also another aspect to their business unique to the Labyrinth City. *Demeter Familia* buys strange fruits and seeds that adventurers find in the depths of the Dungeon and attempts to cultivate them up on the surface. They've apparently introduced many new crops to the people of Orario already, which are always very popular among civilians and adventurers alike. I couldn't believe it when I first heard it.

Fruits found in the Dungeon also tend to be more nutritious than their aboveground counterparts, and herbs found there are far more effective, so they're very useful ingredients for making items that can help adventurers.

So this is what Lord Miach came here for...

One of those plants must be the ingredients for Goddess's cure. Perhaps he intends to gather everything we need from places around the city.

Lady Demeter seems to pick up on something, too. She turns to me and smiles.

"I see. Well, why didn't you say so? I'll give you some that we picked today. Oh, Persephone! Bring me some rinne herbs, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

After she calls over to her follower, Lady Demeter turns and smiles at Lord Miach, and I reflexively smile as well.

That's the first ingredient obtained.



"W-we're going *here*?"

When I see the walls of the next location before me, I suddenly get cold feet. We are on Northwest Main Street, the avenue known as Adventurers Way, looking up at an impressive red shop front.

The sign hanging above the door reads *Ηφαιστος*.

"Excuse me. Is anyone in?"

In stark contrast to my timidness, Lord Miach strides right through the front door, leaving me to hurry in after him.

"Come in!"

Beyond the thick door, we spot a clerk, smartly dressed in a crimson uniform, who immediately greets us. She shoots us a puzzled look, no doubt because we are dressed nowhere nearly finely enough to be patrons, but Lord Miach raises a hand to head off any questions.

"Don't worry," he says, with a gallant smile, and the clerk immediately goes red. Wh-what is this power?

Lord Miach seems to know exactly where he's going and heads straight to the back of the shop, causing the clerk to cry out, "Erm, I'm sorry, sir—I mean, my lord, that area is not for customers!"

"Oh, we aren't customers," Lord Miach replies, unruffled. "I just need to have a few words with your goddess. Don't worry. I

promise I won't get up to anything shady."

I quickly follow him in silence like a baby duck, trotting across the lavish hall decorated with all kinds of expensive-looking arms and armor. Unfortunately, Lord Miach doesn't stand still long enough for me to take a closer look.

"What's with all the noise out there?!"

Just as we are about to cross the counter and enter the door behind it, we hear somebody coming down the stairs on the other side, and the door opens, revealing a crimson-haired goddess with a patch over her right eye.

L-Lady Hephaistos…

All the muscles in my body tense up. Standing before me is the leader of the most famous smithing familia in the entire world.

"Oh, it's you, Miach. Been a while. And this is…?"

"Oh, have you two not met? Allow me to introduce you. This young fellow is Bell of *Hestia Familia*."

"P-pleased to meet you!" I yell, bowing deeply. Hephaistos appraises me with her uncovered eye. I stand still, nervous until she smiles.

"I see. So you're the one Hestia's always talking about."

"She is…?"

"Heh, you didn't hear that from me. I'm Hephaistos. Good to meet you, Bell Cranell."

"L-likewise…"

She extends a hand, and feeling obliged, I take it and receive a firm handshake. She is much taller than me, though not as tall as Lord Miach, and stunningly beautiful. I'm not sure what it is. She just seems…impressive, in a way.

"I'd like to ask about that knife I forged…but I assume you have business with me first, Miach."

"Indeed. You see, Hestia's in a bit of a pickle…"

As the flustered clerk returns to her post, Lord Miach explains the situation, causing Lady Hephaistos to furrow her brow.

"Hestia, a cold? Are you sure she's not faking it to get out of work?"

"N-no! You've got to believe me! She's really sick!"

"Believe me, I know what you mean," says Lord Miach. "But you mustn't doubt this child. He's come all the way here to ask for your help, and he wouldn't do that lightly."

“…Fine. I’ll believe you for now. So what do you need?”

“A pot.”

“A *what*?”

Hephaistos raises an eyebrow in disbelief. I’m just as shocked.

“We need it to mix Hestia’s medicine,” Lord Miach explains. “As embarrassing as it is to admit, all of mine are worn out, and it’s about time to get a replacement.”

“That’s what you want? A pot?”

I mean, sure, blacksmiths generally work with more than just weapons and armor, but I can’t shake the feeling that commissioning the world-renowned *Hephaistos Familia* for a piece of kitchenware is somewhat overkill…

“My good friend is suffering, and I shall spare no effort,” Lord Miach replies. “But more than anything, Bell here is working admirably for his goddess’s sake, and I find that truly inspiring.”

He places a hand on my head, causing me to look up at him in confusion. He smiles and gives Hephaistos a look. After a moment, she smiles, too.

“Heh. Fine. I’ll do it,” she says.

“And will you require payment?”

“Nah, you’ve got me interested now. But if I decide it’s not worth my time, I’ll send Hestia the bill.”

Hephaistos leaves in a good mood, telling us the pot will be ready if we come back later. It seems she’s going to make it herself right here, using the store’s workshop.

We exit onto the street, my mind still reeling with incredulity, but my ears prick up when Miach says, “On to the next place, then.” I hurry on after him.



“Right, that should be all for now.”

After gathering several other items, and with pot in hand, we returned to the home of *Miach Familia*, where Nahza was waiting. I was led into a back room, which contained a large table overflowing with test tubes, mortars, and other alchemical equipment.

“Erm, Lord Miach? What kind of medicine is this exactly?”

I've been wondering about it all day. A miracle cure that could heal any god's ailment? Was it really something that could be brewed so easily—and for free?

"Hmm, well, I suppose it's about time to come clean. The truth is, the medicine we're about to brew is nothing special. It doesn't need to be to treat a god."

"What?!"

This revelation strikes me dumb, and before I can get out another word, Lord Miach smiles at me and continues.

"That said, this medicine will be more effective on Hestia's ills than any common tonic. That is because it contains your love and hard efforts, Bell. There is no better cure for a god than their follower's devotion."

Lord Miach turns his kind eyes on me, and I can think of nothing else to say. Is this what he meant by *"the procedure is paramount"*?

"Wouldn't you feel better if Hestia made something for you when you were sick?" Nahza says to me in her usual drawl, clapping me on the shoulder. "Now let's get started."

I look at her, and then to Lord Miach, who's still beaming. I can feel myself smiling as well and nod.

And so, under Ms. Nahza's careful guidance, I clumsily brew the concoction that will hasten Goddess's recovery.



"Bell…! Hurry up and come home…! Supporter girl's not good enough…!" wailed Hestia between coughing fits. Lilly wet a towel with water and trotted over.

"I'm right here, you know," she said, a reproachful look in her eyes. "Now sit up, please. You've gotten all sweaty again. Do you want to change your clothes before Mr. Bell comes back?"

"Yes, please…" said Hestia, raising her arms.

"…You've gotten quite demanding while Mr. Bell's been gone, haven't you?"

Hestia seemed to be leaning on the "helpless patient" excuse a little too heavily for Lilly's taste. The girl sighed and helped the goddess disrobe. Then she diligently wiped off Hestia's sweat,

glaring daggers at her impressive chest that jiggled at the slightest touch.

Suddenly, the door flew open.

“I’ve brought your medicine, Goddess!”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEK!!!”

Bell’s sudden return threw the two young girls into a panic. Lilly covered for Hestia, panting with exertion, while the goddess hastily pulled her clothes back on.

“B-Bell, you’re back sooner than I expected,” said Hestia with a strained smile. “Did you find some medicine already?”

“W-well, you see, the thing is…” said Bell, blithely ignoring the girls’ flustered state and dropping his gaze to the large pot in his arms. Just then, Miach came into the home behind him and finished what the young boy was finding so difficult to say.

“Bell here made it for you himself,” he said. “All because he couldn’t bear to see his dear goddess suffer.”

“B-Bell…you made this…for me?”

“E-everyone else did all the hard work,” Bell humbly protested. “B-but…yeah.”

While his face became redder and redder, Bell brought the pot over to Hestia. Lilly made some space, and the boy poured its light blue contents into a glass, which he handed to his goddess.

“H-here you go.”

“Th-thanks…”

Hestia scrutinized the concoction for a moment, then downed it in a single gulp. As soon as she did, her ponytails leaped up like they had been possessed, and she began to shake. Bell and Lilly looked on in horror, but Miach only smiled.

Eventually, when Hestia looked up, there were tears in her eyes. “Thank you, Bell,” she said, beaming. Bell was overjoyed—the miracle cure had done its work.

“Isn’t that nice, Lady Hestia?” said Lilly. “Mr. Bell takes just as good care of you as I do!”

“Heh-heh. That just goes to show how strong the bond is between me and Bell! I guess you probably wouldn’t understand, supporter girl. It’s just one of the many perks of being a literal goddess!”

“Whatever you say. Oh, Mr. Bell. Shall we go somewhere private to discuss my usual *compensation*?”

“What?!”

Bell was relieved to see his goddess full of energy again, a far cry from her poor state that morning. He gave an appreciative bow to Miach, who was watching over the boisterous duo with a smile on his face.

At that moment, the door to the church’s secret basement opened, and three more figures stepped in.

“Hestia, are you okay?” asked Demeter, carrying a basket piled high with fruit. “We brought some things to help you recover.”

“Or so we figured, but it looks like you’re almost more energetic than usual,” added Hephaistos, holding a bottle of some refreshment.

“Yoo-hoo, Bell…” said Nahza, at the head of the party.

Hestia’s eyes went wide when she saw who had shown up. “Demeter! Hephaistos!” she cried. “Why are you guys here?”

“I just came on a whim,” said Hephaistos. “If you want to thank anyone, thank your follower.”

“Tee-hee! Consider us a bonus to go along with your cure,” Demeter said coyly. “But since we’re all in one place, shall we have a little party?”

“Oh, sounds great!” exclaimed Hestia.

“You’re sick, so you need to stay put and get some rest.”

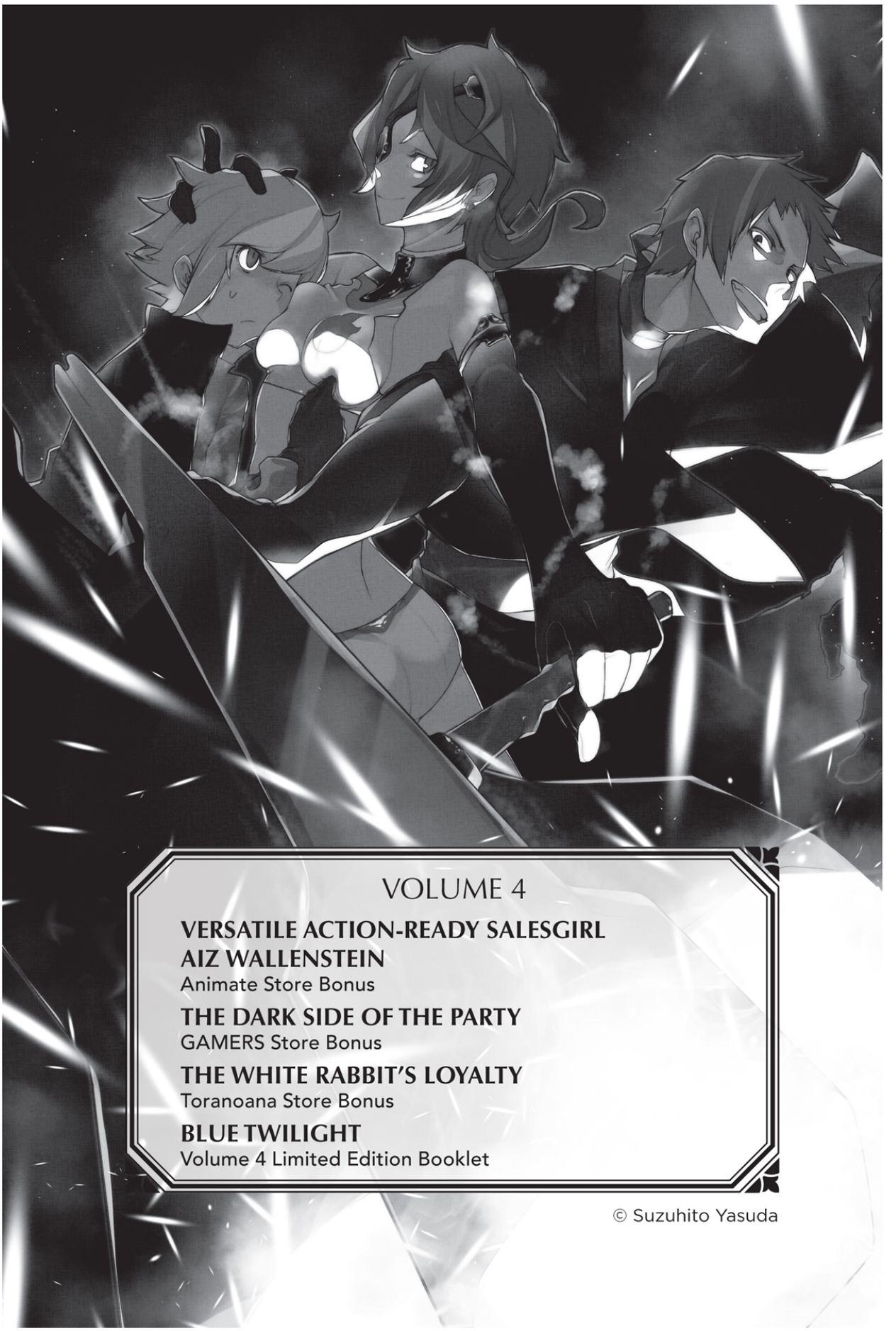
“H-Hephaistos?!”

“Heh-heh. Seems like everyone is getting along nicely,” said Miach with a smile, watching the goddesses bicker while the mortals simply watched from the sidelines. Bell, Lilly, and Nahza looked to one another and shared a grin before taking charge of the cooking, pouring out the juice Hephaistos brought into glasses, and cutting up Demeter’s basketful of fruit into bite-size portions.

Once the table was set, everyone raised their glasses, and Hestia spoke.

“A toast, then! To Bell’s hard work today and to our enduring friendship!”

With great big smiles on their faces, the god, goddesses, and their loyal followers clinked their glasses together.



VOLUME 4

VERSATILE ACTION-READY SALESGIRL AIZ WALLENSTEIN
Animate Store Bonus

THE DARK SIDE OF THE PARTY
GAMERS Store Bonus

THE WHITE RABBIT'S LOYALTY
Toranoana Store Bonus

BLUE TWILIGHT
Volume 4 Limited Edition Booklet

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VERSATILE ACTION-READY SALESGIRL AIZ WALLENSTEIN

“Good day. One Jyaga Maru Kun, please.”

At the Jyaga Maru Kun stall on North Main Street, Hestia glared daggers at the golden-haired girl across the counter. This wasn’t the first time the Sword Princess had shown up at Hestia’s stand, and it would surely not be the last. Ever since she came with Bell that one time, Aiz had quickly become a regular.

“…Of course. What flavor?” Hestia asked curtly with open hostility in her voice.

Aiz responded immediately. “Red beans and cream, please.”

Why can’t she at least have bad taste?!

Cursing her foe’s excellent choice, Hestia promptly picked out the girl’s order and handed it over. Aiz swiftly unwrapped it and took a bite, nibbling sweetly on the treat in the middle of the road. Various demi-human men stopped and stared, entranced by her adorable beauty, causing Hestia to think, *This doesn’t seem fair…*

Suddenly, somebody came running, calling Hestia’s name.

“Hestia! Terrible news!”

The goddess turned to see the older animal woman who owned the stall. “What’s the matter? What’s happened?” she asked her.

“The store over on East Main Street misheard one of their orders and made over a thousand extra Jyaga Maru Kun we don’t need!” the owner cried. “If we don’t help move all that product by the end of the day, the business will be in the red!”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

The situation was as dire as it was absurd. While Hestia was still taking it in, a cart piled high with excess potato snacks rolled up to the stand. The goddess stared at the unsteady mountain in shock. Then she suddenly had an idea and spun to face Aiz.

“You’ll have to help me, Ms. Wallensomething!”

“Thank you. Please come again.”

“I’ll take ten! No—twenty!!!”

“I’ll take fifty!!!”

“Is this where we can buy a Jyaga Maru Kun touched by Aiz herself?! I came as fast as I could!!!”

“Give us a smile!”

A long line stretched down the street and even included some gods. As soon as word spread that Aiz Wallenstein herself was running the stall, people flocked from all over the city to admire the sight.

Hestia stood off to one side, watching the commotion unfold with the owner. While they had completely resolved the supply issue, Hestia couldn’t help but feel like she had somehow lost.

“That girl’s making a killing out there!” the owner exclaimed. “She should come and work for us full-time!”

“Please don’t hire her!” Hestia wailed.

THE DARK SIDE OF THE PARTY

"…I know you may not be able to forgive me, but I've turned over a new leaf. I hope we can be friends from now on."

As the skies turned red outside, Lilly gave a short bow to Syr and Lyu. These two girls had invited her here—The Benevolent Mistress—to celebrate Bell going up a level. The man of the hour was not due until later, and the three girls were waiting for him to arrive.

Seeing the two waitresses again reminded Lilly of the uproar she had caused when she was caught stealing. It wasn't easy to stomach the feelings that dredged up, but out of respect for Bell's relationship with these two, she decided to come clean and lay her heart bare.

"So let me see if I'm understanding this correctly," said Syr, grinning. "You're saying your love for Bell has made you change your ways, is that it?"

"S-something like that," muttered Lilly, turning red.

Syr clasped her hands together. "That's wonderful! Bell must love you, too! I'm sure you must be *like a little sister to him*!"

"Guh!"

Lilly doubled over like she'd been punched in the gut. Meanwhile, Syr just kept grinning. It wasn't so much a jab as it was a straight punch. Sure, Lilly understood that forgiveness wasn't an easy thing to earn, but to think such a sweet-faced young girl could deal such devastating damage…

"…Heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh. I must thank you, too, Ms. Syr, for always making Mr. Bell your wonderful lunches. I don't know what you put in them, but they must be delicious indeed because when I see him eating them, he's always crying and shaking with emotion!"

"Khuh!"

Lilly's comeback hit like an invisible uppercut to Syr's chin.

"Syr, get a hold of yourself!" said Lyu, attempting to keep the peace. "And Ms. Erde, could I ask you not to be so hard on Syr?

Her creations may qualify as strange new forms of cooking no one has ever tasted before, but she has improved leaps and bounds compared to when she first began!”

This unexpected blow came from out of nowhere and nearly flattened Syr, leaving the refined city girl down for the count. Lyu didn’t seem to realize what she’d done, and Lilly wasn’t sure which of the two waitresses she should consider more fearsome.

After a short silence, Syr staggered to her feet as Lyu continued, saying, “In any case, this is meant to be a night of celebration. Let’s put aside our differences and come together in support of Mr. Cranell’s efforts.”

“Y-yeah…” Syr agreed.

“…That’s how it should be,” said Lilly, nodding.

And so, until Bell arrived, Lilly put down her barbs and got to know the other two girls a little better.

THE WHITE RABBIT'S LOYALTY

It should be quite apparent by now, but Bell respected his goddess a great deal. If Hestia mentioned she wanted this or that, Bell would immediately rush out and get it. If she mentioned the finances were looking a little tight, he would immediately head into the Dungeon to earn some money. Although she never ordered him to, Bell always went above and beyond to serve his deity.

And so he always listened to what Hestia had to say, even if her requests got a little ridiculous.

"B-Bell? This is hard to admit, but the truth is…I can't sleep without a body pillow!"

"A…a body pillow?"

"Yes. I had one up in heaven, and it was paradise! I've been making do down here, but I can't take it any longer! I need something to hug! Something soft and warm and about human-sized…"

Hestia blushed a little as she spoke—or perhaps *rambled* was a better word. Bell stopped to consider her request. The familia's financial situation was a little more manageable lately thanks to Bell's recent level-up, so perhaps they could afford to splurge on themselves a little.

It had clearly taken the goddess a lot of courage to speak up about this, and Bell wanted nothing more than to make her happy, despite the odd request.

Hestia peered into Bell's eyes expectantly, and the last thing Bell wanted to do was let her down. If she wanted it, he would move heaven and earth to make it happen.

And so Bell steeled his nerves and decided to help however he could.

"Would you mind explaining how this happened, Lady Hestia?"

"……"

In the pitch-black darkness of the bedroom, a young voice spoke up. It was Lilly, sounding more than a little displeased to be sharing a bed with the goddess. She had transformed herself using magic into a very huggable human, exactly as Hestia had requested.

It was Bell who had begged and convinced her to do it after coming to her late at night and getting on his knees. As for the young boy, he was on his usual sofa, sound asleep.

Hestia and Lilly lay side by side, staring up at the ceiling in silence.

“You idiot, Bell…”

The next morning, Bell awoke with a scream upon discovering the two girls lying next to him on the sofa.

BLUE TWILIGHT

“Oh, I forgot to say, well done on reaching Level Two, Bell…”

Nahza congratulates me as she’s counting up my purchases. I look up in surprise to see her relaxed gaze directed right at me.

I’m at Blue Pharmacy, the building that serves as both the home of *Miach Familia* and their main place of business. This is where I like to stock up on items before heading to the Dungeon.

The crate I’ve placed on the counter contains the potions I’d like to buy. There are multiple vials filled with colorful concoctions.

“Where’d the time go?” Nahza muses. “I feel like we just met, and you’re already Level Two. Well done, Bell. There’s a good boy…”

She reaches out a hand and strokes my head, ignoring my reddening cheeks. All I can think to say is, “Th-thank you…”

“And if you’re moving up in the world, that’s good for business, too…So I got you something.”

“Huh? Wh-what is it?”

“A gift box. No need to pay. It’s on the house…”

She pulls a few test tubes out of a wooden box and hands them to me. Before I can possibly refuse, the chienthrope girl flicks her tail and grins.

“But don’t get the wrong idea, Bell. This is an investment, understand?”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“If everyone sees an upper-class adventurer using our products, they’ll come to our store. It’s basically free advertising.”

Due to their power and fame, upper-class adventurers attract a lot of attention around the city. Even though I only just ranked up, Nahza must be keen to use my status as a third-tier adventurer to attract more customers.

Her droopy eyelids conceal a determined glint in her eye. I freeze for a moment, then melt into a defeated smile.

“I find I must agree with Nahza on this one. Please take them,

Bell.”

“Lord Miach…”

Nahza’s god emerges from the shelves, where he seems to be doing some cleaning. His smile is pleasant as always.

“It all happened so fast that we never had the chance to celebrate properly,” he goes on. “Perhaps Nahza’s rather mercenary statements have dampened that sentiment somewhat…but I would very much like for you to consider these a gift all the same. Congratulations.”

At this point, it would be rude to refuse, so I humbly accept the unwieldy pile on the counter.

“Thank you,” I say, gathering up everything in my arms before I bow and leave the store.

“Potions, antidotes…There are even high potions in here.”

As I walk down the street, I sort through the items and pick out whatever I might need quick access to in the Dungeon. Slipping them into my leg holster, I quickly fill the pocket to capacity and place the rest in a bag for Lilly to hold on to.

Not long ago, having this many items at my disposal would have been unthinkable…

I also thought this when I was getting my new armor, but I’m spoiled for choice compared to when I first started out. It still doesn’t feel real. And I should be happy about that, but…I don’t know…

I’m not sure how to explain why I feel this way, so I scratch my cheek and then hurry to meet up with Lilly outside the Dungeon.



Today’s party consists of me plus Lilly, my supporter, and Welf, the blacksmith.

Although we only assembled this party for the first time a few days ago, we can already handle the first eleven floors of the Dungeon, and now we’re regularly on the twelfth, the last of what’s commonly known as the upper floors.

Welf is good on the front lines, and his addition to the party dramatically reduces the burden I previously had to bear alone, allowing us to advance deeper with less risk. At least, that’s how

Lilly explained it to me.

Once again, we finish exploring the twelfth floor for the day and begin our trip back to Babel, the skyscraping tower built atop the Dungeon. Once there, we trade in our magic stones and drop items, then head over to the diner to find a table and divvy up today's earnings according to our usual rules.

"Well then, let's tally up the totals," says Lilly, taking charge of the distribution. "Today's earnings add up to seventy-two thousand valis. That means thirty-six thousand goes to Mr. Bell and eighteen thousand each to me and Mr. Welf."

"Sounds good to me."

"…Erm. Can we change this ratio?" I object. "It feels unfairly in my favor…"

The way we usually divide payment is that I receive half, then Lilly and Welf split the remainder—in other words, they each get a quarter of the total haul. They justify this by saying I always have to work the hardest, but…Well, it makes me feel a bit guilty.

I suggest making it an even split instead, but that idea is quickly vetoed.

"If anything, we're still not paying you enough, Mr. Bell," Lilly says. "And I receive far too much for a mere supporter."

"Upper-class adventurers make a lot of money," Welf chimes in. "Anywhere else, and we'd be treated like bottom-feeders compared to you."

They explain that just because a split is equal doesn't mean it's fair. I don't know how other parties do things, so I can't really argue.

"……"

Welf smiles and just urges me to take it, pushing the bag of gold coins into my hands.

"A promotion?"

"That's right. *Hestia Familia* is now officially rank H. Congratulations, Bell."

The walls of Guild HQ take on an orange glow in the evening light. After parting ways with Lilly and Welf outside Babel, I came straight here to check in with Miss Eina.

"Erm, but I'm still the only member. Are you sure that's right?"

"Mm-hmm, that's true," says Eina with a conflicted look, "but

we have your recent level-up to consider as well, so we can't really leave things as is…"

The Guild ranks familias based on their combat strength and other abilities on a scale from *I* up to *S*, just like with stats. Higher-ranked familias generally get better treatment and earn more recognition from the Guild…or so I hear.

Eina carefully explains that keeping the familia at rank I simply isn't an option—even though Lady Hestia only has a single follower—because I'm now an upper-class adventurer.

"And here, this is for you," she says, handing me a rolled-up parchment. "It contains all the details of your promotion. Your taxes have gone up accordingly, so make sure you give it a careful look and let Lady Hestia know too, okay?"

I unfurl the parchment and take a quick glance at the contents, and sure enough, my tithes to the Guild have increased. I reflexively mutter a groan upon reading the number written there. Eina offers me an awkward smile.

"…Erm, if that's all, then I'd better head home," I say.

"Yep, that's all. See you later, Bell."

I half-bow and leave as Miss Eina waves me off.

So this is how much I'll be paying at the end of this month…

I have a lot to think about as I make my way down Northwest Main Street, the road known as Adventurers Way. My eyes remain fixed on the scroll in my hands as adventurers with weapons, big and small, pass by either side of me.

Lately, the sums of money I've been dealing with just keep growing larger, both in earnings and spending. That came up in my conversation with Lilly and Welf earlier, too. Just thinking about it makes me shudder.

I wonder why I feel that way…? It's almost like…

For some reason, I can't seem to figure out how I'm feeling and why, so I scratch the back of my neck, put the scroll away, and begin walking down the madder-red streets.

"Maybe I should get my weapon looked at. It's been a while."

I stop in the middle of the road and quickly come to a decision. After spinning around, I head toward my new destination. A smile leaps onto my face, and my footsteps feel lighter. It'll be nice to have a change of pace after everything that's happened today!

“Hey, what kind of game d’you think you’re playin’, punk?”

This was supposed to be a *nice* change of pace!

The gravelly voice’s threat has me trembling like a frightened rabbit. The thug and his friends have me trapped and alone. As soon as I stepped off Main Street, this group of human and animal-person adventurers huddled me into a shadowy back alley, and now they’re glaring daggers down at me. All I can do is give my best prize-winning smile in an attempt to smooth things over.

Wh-what do they want with me?

“There’s no way a skinny little brat like you took down a minotaur. Just how dumb do you think we are?”

“Bet you made the whole thing up, didn’cha? Think we don’t see what you’re tryin’ to pull?”

“You expect us to stay quiet and kiss your ass like the rest of the damn city?”

Goddess’s words from a few days ago surface in my head.

Word is spreading about what you did, and some people aren’t happy about it. Keep a low profile for a while, okay?

I can see that now!

I’m sorry to say this whole situation has me utterly petrified. I can’t move a muscle.

“We’ve been all over that piece-of-shit Dungeon for years now with nothin’ to show for it. You tellin’ me some stupid white rabbit came up and swiped the big prize from right under our noses? Don’t make me laugh.”

This angry guy is claiming I made everything up, including defeating the minotaur and maybe even my level-up. Unfortunately, I’m way too scared to say anything, and my silence seems just to aggravate him further. Right as he steps forward to lay a hand on me, a figure slips out from the shadows and steps between us.

“Can I help you, gents?”

“W-Welf!”

I don’t know how he knew where I was, but I’m grateful for Welf’s backup. While I’m about as intimidating as a bunny, his ferocious glare has the street toughs on the back foot. Welf draws his longsword and steps between us.

“Wh-who’s this punk?!”

“Who cares? Get ’em both!”

Welf’s sudden appearance doesn’t faze them long, though, and after seeing they still vastly outnumber us, they draw their blades.

Suddenly, a cordial voice cuts through the heavy gloom. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

The thugs, Welf, and I all spin to face the newcomer. Standing there is a blond-haired young man with calm blue eyes like the surface of a lake—a prum, based on his childlike height. There isn’t a single person in all of Orario who doesn’t know who he is.

“Finn Deimne?!”

The captain of *Loki Familia*, said to be one of the strongest familias in the city.

One of the thugs manages to choke out, “B-but we heard Loki’s crew was still away on an expedition…” Welf and I are unable to say anything at all. Only Finn is unruffled as he flashes a warm smile.

“I wouldn’t fancy your chances against me, even as a group,” he says to the thugs. “Besides, I won’t go easy on anyone causing trouble for my friend here.”

Welf shoots me a glance as if to say, *“You know him?!”* I rapidly shake my head. The thugs all look at one another, then their nerves fail them one by one, and they flee into the night.

Once their footsteps fade, it’s only the three of us standing in the silent dusk-lit street. It’s only then that the prum’s grin turns into an altogether more familiar smirk.

“Stroke of midnight’s bell.”

I suddenly realize what’s happening as “Finn” is wrapped in ashen light. A few seconds later, the one standing there is Lilly.

“Li’l E! Th-that was you the whole time…?”

“It’s a transformation spell,” Lilly explains. “Please don’t tell anyone else about it.”

Cinder Ella. A rare spell that allows Lilly to take the form of anyone she pleases. Even a seasoned adventurer can’t tell the difference between her disguise and the real thing.

“D-does that mean you know Finn—I mean, Mr. Finn, Lilly?”

“As if. You think a lowly little prum like me could ever be introduced to our race’s savior?”

I know that appearances aren’t everything—Lilly needs to

know a person's mannerisms and speech patterns to mimic them effectively. I thought perhaps they were more well acquainted than I realized, but Lilly quickly corrected me.

"I've just met him once or twice. He's a fellow supporter of Mr. Bell. Not quite as literally as me perhaps…but enough about that. Let's talk about you, Mr. Bell, because I'm sure that won't be the last time something like this happens. You need to learn how to stand up for yourself."

"Yeah, you were lucky Li'l E and I were around this time. We're not always gonna be there to pull you out of a tight scrape."

"I-I know…"

I apologize, and shortly after, the three of us go our separate ways. Welf and Lilly disappear into the shadows, leaving me alone. I stand there for a while before deciding to get a move on, tracing a familiar path to an old, worn-out building.

"Come on in—oh, if it ain't Bell! Been a while, boyo!"

"Sorry… I know I haven't been here for so long…Is it okay if I come in?"

It's a shop located in the backstreets of the main road called the Baby Bird's Anvil. The proprietor, a dwarf named Dald, is dressed in overalls and a blacksmith's apron. He greets me warmly, placing the book he's reading down on the counter and letting me into the shop.

Mr. Dald makes a living honing adventurers' weapons after they've been worn down in the Dungeon. Miss Eina introduced me to him when I was just starting out because his services are very affordable and well-suited to novice adventurers.

"Could I ask you to sharpen this knife for me?" I ask.

"No problem, boyo," says Dald, taking the weapon that Welf made for me. "Well, well. Isn't this a pretty thing? You're moving up in the world, lad."

"Ha-ha, yeah…"

Mr. Dald was very kind to me when I was new, even going so far as allowing me to pay on credit whenever I came back empty-handed. He's one of the few people who knows just how pathetic I used to be. While I stand there red-faced, he goes into the workshop and begins pedaling the whetstone.

"I was thinking I haven't seen you lately," he says. "Have you found a smith you can trust?"

“S-sorry. I did meet somebody, yeah…”

“Hoh-hoh, that’s quite all right, boyo. This place is for baby birds. All that means is you’ve finally flown the nest.”

Welf usually handles my weapons repairs, too, which means I normally didn’t need to come back here anymore. That makes me feel a little guilty, but Mr. Dald seems to find it welcome news.

“Listen, Bell. I actually have a favor to ask. Do you think you could sell me your old weapon? Only if you’re not using it anymore, that is.”

“What?”

He explains that he always tries to buy old equipment from promising-looking newbies. That way, he can hang them up in his shop and say to the next generation, “Look! The great names of the city were once in your shoes.”

That reminds me of Nahza. Do all businesses work the same way? I think wryly, and I pull out my old knife to offer as a donation. Mr. Dald takes it eagerly and leads me into a back room.

“Wow…” I gasp as I enter. The stone wall on the west side is completely packed with weapons. Knives, one-handed swords, short spears, and hand axes are all hung up in velvet-backed picture frames like prized paintings. As I stare in shock, Mr. Dald fixes my knife to an empty frame and hangs it on the wall.

For a moment, I feel a sense of pride, seeing a weapon bearing my name up on the wall of a place like this.

“So all these people are upper-class adventurers now,” I say, staring in wonder at all the others on display.

“Not anymore.”

“…Huh?”

Mr. Dald gives a solemn sigh. “Adventurers don’t tend to stick around long. Most of the names up on that wall died a while back. I think there’s only a dozen or so of them left alive…”

I’m unable to speak. Mr. Dald looks up at the wall, but it’s like he’s gazing at something far beyond it.

“Stay alive out there, boyo,” he says with a smile. “Make a name for yourself…so I can tell all my customers you were once a baby bird in my care.”

He turns and gives a splendid, eye-creasing smile that I can see even through his thick beard, his face lit up by the light of dusk

streaming through the window.

"I will," I reply.



The sun has already set over the western walls by the time I exit the shop, leaving only a faint glow in that half of the sky. As night approaches, I silently make my way home, my route illuminated by the soft light of the magic-stone lamps and the last vestiges of the evening's rays.

"Bell! Yoo-hoo!"

"…Goddess?"

I hear a voice behind me and turn to see Goddess chasing after me, a big smile on her face, her long twin ponytails bouncing with each step.

"Oh, work was exhausting as usual! But walking home with you makes it all worthwhile!"

She bounds over to me, full of energy, then notices my somber look.

"Is something the matter?" she asks.

"Huh…?"

"You look unhappy, like a lost kid. What's up?"

I didn't mean to show it, but Goddess notices my peculiar mood in an instant. I briefly consider denying it, but I close my lips before I even get the words out. Instead, I look back into her bluish eyes and admit how I'm feeling.

"I can't really explain it," I say. "But it feels like everything's changing so fast, and I'm scared."

What I've taken is only the first step on my journey to be just like the one I look up to, and yet it already feels like I'm living in a totally different world. I get anxious just thinking about it. I haven't changed—at least I don't think I have—but everything around me is so different now. The things I own, the amounts of money I make and spend, and even how other people treat me. I feel like I'm being swept away on a wave I can't control.

"I've come so far, so fast, and I'm still only a beginner…I'm just feeling anxious about that, I guess…"

I pour my uncertain feelings into those words and present

them to Goddess. I've been running for so long that when I finally stop and look back over my shoulder, I'm stunned by just how far I've come. The place I started from is nowhere in sight, and the place I ended up is completely unrecognizable.

It's only been two months since I came to this city and already a year since Grandpa passed. At Mr. Dald's place, I saw the fate that awaits the vast majority of novice adventurers, and it made me think of everything I left behind to come here. It makes me uneasy about the future and a little bit homesick to boot. Add it all together, and I'm not really sure how I should be feeling anymore.

"…I'm sorry," I say. "I'm worrying about nothing, aren't I?"

As soon as I unpack my troubles, I start feeling guilty for it. Goddess has no one besides me to rely on. I need to stay strong and suck it up so that I can be there for her. I force a smile and try to change the subject, but then Goddess says something I don't expect.

"What are you talking about, Bell? That's a perfectly valid reason to be worried."

"Huh?"

My eyes go wide. Goddess is wearing a big smile.

"When I first came down from heaven, I was so nervous about it! It was such a big change, and I didn't know what to expect… kind of like what you're feeling now."

"……"

"So there you have it! If even a goddess can be worried, then it's nothing to be ashamed of, right?"

Goddess's words are like a magic spell. They seep into my chest, thawing my hard, frozen heart.

No matter how unreliable or pathetic I'm feeling, she accepts me as I am.

"Besides," she says, grinning broadly. "No matter how much everything else changes, I'll always stay the same. So whenever you feel lost or lonely, you can always come home to me. I'll be waiting."

Her words warm my heart like the fires of a hearth. A place to call home, no matter how hard it gets…It makes me so happy.

"…Bell, are you crying?"

"N-no…"

I wipe a single tear from the corner of my eye. Goddess doesn't press the issue further. I expect she already knows how she made me feel. Instead, she smiles.

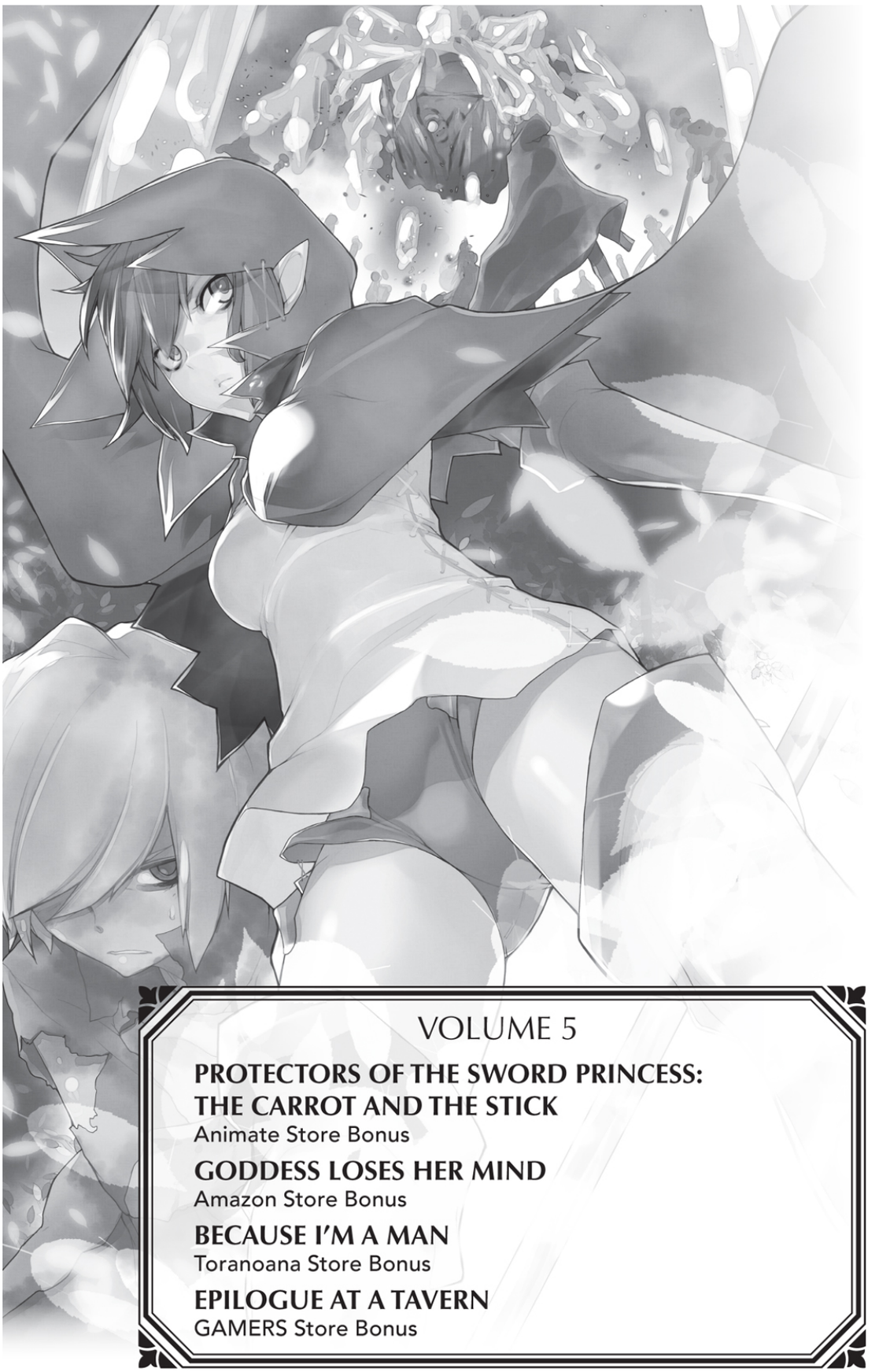
"You know, for all that's changed, you're still the same crybaby you always were!" she teases.

"Th-that's not true!" I protest, blushing.

We both grin from ear to ear and decide to head home together.

The sky overhead is half red, half blue. We both reach out and hold hands like it's the natural thing to do.


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VOLUME 5

PROTECTORS OF THE SWORD PRINCESS: THE CARROT AND THE STICK
Animate Store Bonus

GODDESS LOSES HER MIND
Amazon Store Bonus

BECAUSE I'M A MAN
Toranoana Store Bonus

EPILOGUE AT A TAVERN
GAMERS Store Bonus

© Suzuhito Yasuda

PROTECTORS OF THE SWORD PRINCESS: THE CARROT AND THE STICK

“You’re telling me Little Rookie got to see Aiz bathing?!”

“That little twerp!!!”

On the eighteenth floor of the Dungeon, the camp of *Loki Familia* was in an uproar, having just learned about Bell’s little misadventure in the women’s bath. The air was filled with the angry voices of those who considered themselves Aiz’s defenders, men and women alike.

“He mustn’t be allowed to get away with this!! How dare he taint Ms. Aiz’s perfect body with his filthy, brutish gaze! I’ll use my magic to burn him to a crisp!”

“Somebody stop Lefiya before she goes on the warpath!!”

Aiz stood and stared at the chaos unfolding before her. It was the middle of the night on the eighteenth floor, when any right-minded people should have been asleep in their beds, but half of the camp had their swords and other weapons drawn, seeking violence. Aiz had never seen such a crazed look in their eyes before. One particularly enraged mage wanted to blow away the tent Bell was sleeping in, along with everyone else inside it, and it took several people to hold her back.

Suddenly, a group of men burst from Bell’s tent, throwing the captured rabbit at Aiz’s feet.

“Ms. Aiz! We’ve apprehended the perpetrator! Please hand down your judgment!”

The young boy was pressing his forehead so hard into the ground it seemed likely to bleed, but Aiz’s fellow familia members still cried out for more. Bell himself seemed resigned to pay the ultimate price for his misdeeds and silently awaited Aiz’s sentence.

The offended adventurers formed a circle around him. “Off with his head! Off with his head!!” they chanted. None of the other girls were around to help her talk them down. Aiz was

puzzled over what she should do when suddenly an idea struck.

When Aiz was young and made mistakes, Finn and the others always employed a technique he called “the carrot and the stick.” Aiz could use that. She could make sure that Bell learned his lesson, without hurting him any more than was strictly necessary.

And so, with a determined look, Aiz raised her right hand. The crowd cheered. A slap from the Sword Princess was sure to blow the white rabbit’s head clean off his shoulders.

Bell squeezed his eyes shut. Aiz did the same and swung her arm.

Pompf…

The sound was disappointingly brief. Bell looked up in shock, rubbing his cheek. With the punishment over, Aiz moved quickly to follow it up with the carrot.

“You mustn’t do things like that, okay?”

“Y-yes, I’m sorry…”

Bell flushed scarlet as the Sword Princess tousled his hair.

“”””””That’s just a reward!!””””””” the crowd screamed.

In the end, nothing could be done to pacify their bloodlust.

GODDESS LOSES HER MIND

“Bell, sit down.”

“Yes, Goddess…”

Bell followed Hestia’s instruction and kneeled on the floor opposite her. It was night on the eighteenth floor, and the two of them were in the campground of *Loki Familia*.

“Peeking on the girl’s baths? Really? Do you know what Artemis thinks about people like you?”

“Yes…”

“If I were more like her, you’d be chased out of the familia with an arrow in your butt.”

“I’m sorry…!”

Outside the tent in full view of everybody, Bell was getting a stern talking-to. Hestia’s ferocious scowl and the anger in her voice made it clear this was no laughing matter.

Bell didn’t try to make excuses. Even though it was Hermes who had dragged him into it (and the god had already received his punishment), Bell had seen what he’d seen, and a real man needed to face the consequences of his actions. More to the point, though, he had a feeling that trying to explain away the situation would only make matters worse.

“I’m disappointed, Bell. To think my own follower is a Peeping Tom…I just can’t believe it.”

In a word, it was excruciating. Bell had to sit there, racked by guilt, as the goddess let him know exactly how unhappy she was.

“It’s so sad, so mortifying…so wrong! You’ve never tried to peek at me, so why now, dammit?!”

“Huh?!”

Hestia was screaming.

“Is it because of that Wallen-what’s-her-face girl?! You really want to see her naked that badly?! What’s the matter? Is a literal goddess not good enough for you?!”

“Wh-what are you talking about, Goddess?!”

“Shut up! I’m talking! And from now on, you’ll have to come

into the bathroom every day and scrub my back!!”

“Lilly? Welf? Come quick. Goddess has gone mad! She’s spouting nonsense!”

“Hey! Come back here. I’m talking to you! Eyes off other girls!!”

“Goddess, what are you—Waaagh?!”

“Hey, don’t look now, but Lady Hestia’s climbed on top of Little Rookie.”

“I figure Li’l E’ll show up soon to put a stop to it.”

Just as Ouka and Welf expected, that was exactly what happened.

BECAUSE I'M A MAN

"I heard about what you did, Bell. Peeping on the women's baths? How come you didn't invite me?"

Those words from Welf's mouth made the breath catch in Bell's throat. It was after Bell had apologized for his transgressions and was on his way back to his tent. Standing behind him was Ouka, his massive arms folded and nodding in agreement.

"Wh-what do you mean, Welf?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I'm saying we wanted to get a piece of the action, too. Ain't that right, Ouka?"

"That's right. Damn, what I wouldn't give…"

Bell never saw the two men getting along that well, but for once, they seemed to agree. Bell wasn't sure how to handle it, but all of a sudden, there came a voice from the shadows, and somebody else stepped out.

"It's nice to see someone around here understands!"

It was Hermes, his face still black and blue from Asfi's beating.

"Of course we do," said Welf. "What kind of red-blooded man wouldn't want to sneak a peek at those beauties?"

"Agreed."

"Hm-hm. Well said. If I may be so bold, which of the girls is your favorite?"

"For me," said Ouka, "it has to be that Amazonian girl, Tiona Hyrute. There is not a shred of indecency to be found on her dazzling frame."

"Urgh, you're into flatties, are you? I'm more of a mountain climber, and I wouldn't miss a chance to scale Tione's twin peaks!"

"I'm awfully fond of little Ms. Mikoto!" chirped Hermes. "The Sword Princess is amazing and all, but I just can't get enough of that beautiful raven-black hair! A shapely bosom and a tight waist I can fit my fingers around…Not like our Asfi at all! What a truly remarkable specimen only the Far East can produce!!!"

Bell wanted to run. The trio's conversation was making his cheeks burn, but before he could flee, the other three spun toward him.

"And who might *your* favorite be, Bell?" Hermes interrogated him. "You like them young, like Hestia and Lilly?"

"Out with it, Bell, and this'll go a lot easier. Don't forget to tell us about everything you saw, too."

"Every. Last. Detail," added Ouka, lowering his rugged brow.

Bell was overwhelmed, his eyes spinning, when suddenly a voice made him freeze in place.

"I'm not sensing a great deal of shame over what you've done, Lord Hermes."

Upon hearing it, the other three went stiff as boards. The source of the ice-cold voice was none other than Hermes's follower, Asfi Al Andromeda.

"I'm sorry," she screamed, "that I'm just a fat, chubby pig who's not worth your time!!"

"I didn't say anything like—AAAAAAGHHH?!!"

Deserting the god to his fate, Bell, Welf, and Ouka decided to hoof it. However, they ran directly into Hestia and the others, who proceeded to give them the beating of a lifetime.

EPILOGUE AT A TAVERN

The day after rescuing Bell on the eighteenth floor and returning to the surface, Lyu went back to The Benevolent Mistress. It was early morning, before opening, and she was chatting with Runoa and Ahnya while the three of them prepared for the day shift.

“Straight back from the Dungeon *and* you have work the next day,” Runoa said. “Unlucky, Lyu.”

“Not at all,” Lyu replied. “This is my job, and I intend to take it seriously.”

“You’re too serious for your own good, meow,” Ahnya said. “Oh, Mama turned real grumpy the day after you left, so give her some space, okay?”

Lyu gulped as she thought about how best to make it up to the bar’s proprietress. It wasn’t just her she’d wronged, either. Lyu’s rash action had left the other waitresses in the lurch. But the first thing she did when she got back was inform Syr that Bell was alive, and the happiness she saw on her face made her feel like she had repaid the debt somewhat.

“Mrowl!”

Suddenly, appearing out of nowhere with a strange sound was the tavern’s other catgirl waitress, Chloe.

“So did you get anywhere with him, meow?” she asked.

“With whom?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, meow! You went all that way to save Bell, right? What did you do, seeing him all weak and vulnerable? Was it mouth-to-mouth? Huddling for warmth, meow?”

The crafty catgirl flicked her slender tail, slapping Lyu suggestively on the buttocks. Then she smiled a lecherous grin that put the gods themselves to shame.

“Or did you let him see the goods, meow?”

“H-how did you know about that?!”

Lyu spun around, her cheeks bright red. Everyone just stopped what they were doing and stared at her in shock.

“W-wait…you really did, meow?”

Lyu suddenly realized she had dug her own grave. Then, when she turned to look over at Runoa and Ahnya, she yelped upon seeing who else was standing there.

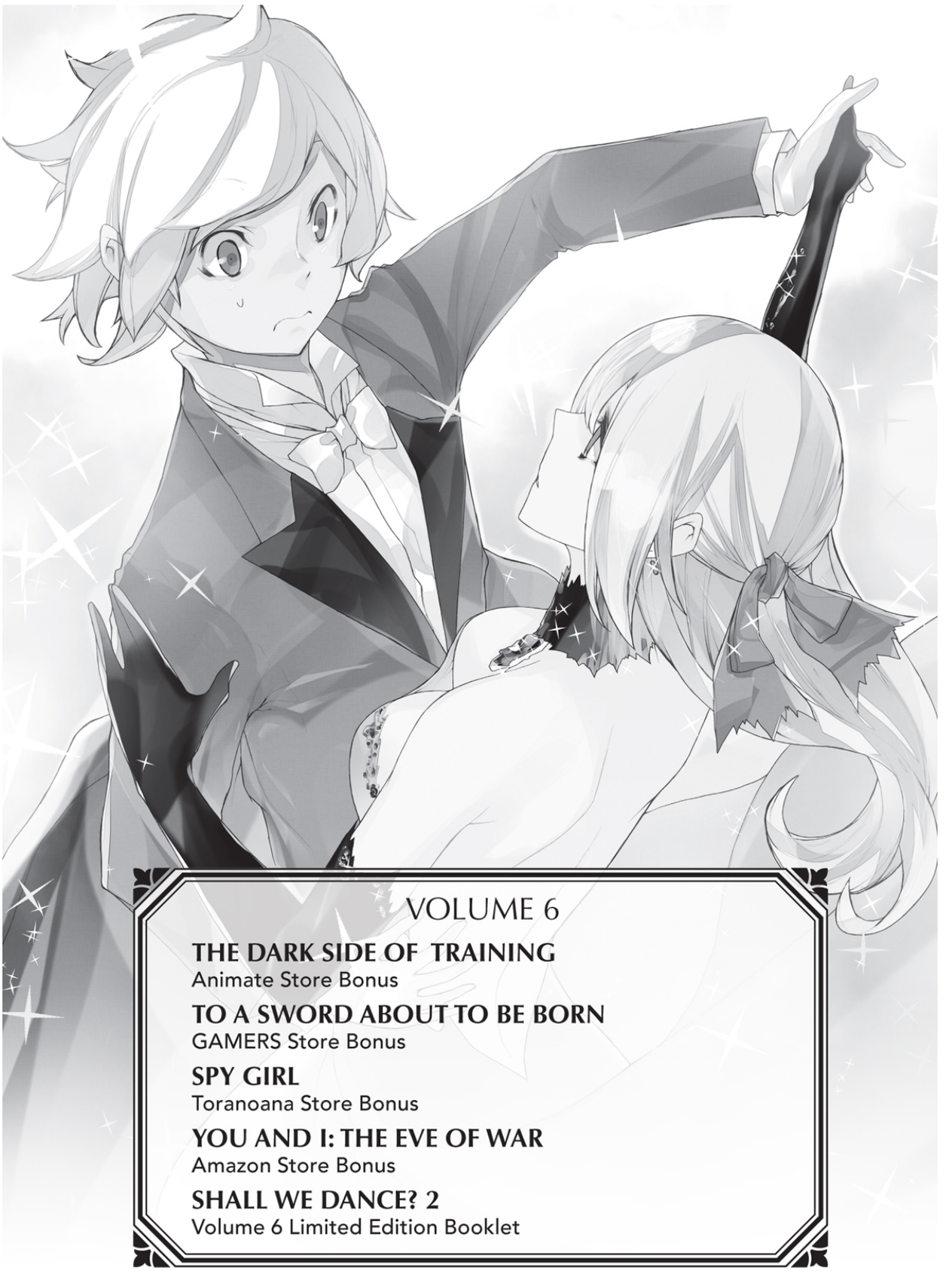
“Huh…So Bell’s seen Lyu naked…”

It was Syr, holding the lunch she always made for Bell. Lyu knew the smile on her lips was anything but kind, and before she could think what to do, someone informed them that Bell had entered the building.

“Oh, Bell!” said Syr, wandering over toward the entrance. “I have something I’d like to ask you!”

“No, Syr, please! Don’t do anything rash!”

Lyu hastened after her, desperate to talk her down, but before she could make it, she heard Bell’s scream and realized she was too late.



VOLUME 6

THE DARK SIDE OF TRAINING
Animate Store Bonus

TO A SWORD ABOUT TO BE BORN
GAMERS Store Bonus

SPY GIRL
Toranoana Store Bonus

YOU AND I: THE EVE OF WAR
Amazon Store Bonus

SHALL WE DANCE? 2
Volume 6 Limited Edition Booklet

© Suzuhito Yasuda

THE DARK SIDE OF TRAINING

“Making dinner, making dinner!”

The red glow of the fire, the pot steadily bubbling away atop it, and Tiona’s merry voice. She dips a wooden ladle into the broth and heaps out two potions of stew.

“Here, Argonaut! And you too, Aiz!”

“Th-thanks…”

“Thank you, Tiona.”

We are atop the walls that surround Orario, having just finished our daily training for the upcoming War Game, and are now eating supper beneath the starry sky. The stew is mostly meat and fish that Tiona went down to the city to buy, with a handful of vegetables thrown in for good measure, and it’s not half bad. The succulent meat and warm broth of this hearty, handmade Amazonian meal is just what my worn and battered body needs right now.

“Phew! That’s a wrap for today! I need a wash and some shut-eye, fast! Tomorrow’s another early day, isn’t that right, Aiz?”

“Mm-hmm. There’s not much time left after all…”

I didn’t know this, but apparently there’s a living space hidden inside the walls, equipped with a shower and beds. Maybe that means someone once lived here in secret, kind of like how I live beneath the old church with Goddess. Aiz calls it a “secret base.”

After we finish our meals and take turns using the facilities, I point to a deserted corner of the room. “I guess I’ll go sleep over there,” I say.

Honestly, I’ll welcome the solace. Shacking up with two pretty girls all night is more than I can handle, especially when we’ve already been training together all day. It’ll only be a few hours before we start at it again, so I think I need to give myself some space.

“No!” the two of them shout, and a pair of hands land on each of my shoulders.

“Huh?” I spin around, and Tiona is grinning while Aiz has a

serious look on her face.

“Sleep with us,” she says.

I lie between the two girls, feeling their warm bodies on either side. My eyes are closed, but obviously, I can’t sleep a wink.

Suddenly, I sense the sharp gleam of a blade, and leap out of bed—or fall, in any case—to fend off whatever attacker may be trying to ambush us in our sleep.

However, when I get to my feet, the only one there is Aiz, looking unimpressed, while Tiona stands off to one side, nodding. I guess this was another one of their training exercises.

“Pretty good,” says Tiona. “But Aiz, isn’t this training for monsters? People aren’t going to be attacking us in our sleep in the War Game.”

“…Oh.”

Their unsettling conversation just amps up my anxiety. I knew this was going to be difficult for me—in more ways than one—but now I’m wondering if my mind and body will last.

Am I going to be okay…?

It was still only the first day of our training.

TO A SWORD ABOUT TO BE BORN

The hammer struck again and again.

Each time, it returned the cries of the metal beneath. Each note a different story. As he listened to them, Welf wondered how long it had been since he first picked up the hammer. He stared at the lump of metal in his hands, which his diligent efforts were slowly working into the shape of a longsword.

He was working at one of the forges owned by his familia, a small solo workshop nestled amid the backstreets of Orario. This was his silent battle—a one-man war waged against the metal in his hands all through the long night.

Here, the War Game had already begun. To keep Bell safe and lead his team to victory, Welf needed to work faster and harder than he'd ever worked in his life. Off to one side were the items he'd already completed for Bell—the knife Ushiwakamaru-Nishiki and a new and improved set of Rabbit Armor, created at astonishing speed thanks to Welf's talent. What he was working on now was something Lady Hestia had asked him for and something Welf himself was determined to create—a magic sword.

Despite his bandana, the lethal heat of the forge drew dribbles of sweat from Welf's brow, and the sparks that flew with each hammer swing either scorched his clothes or seared his flesh. The scowl on his face was something no monster or living opponent had ever seen.

I know it's too late for you to forgive me. All I ask is that you save my friend.

Crozzo magic swords were world-famous for being mighty weapons. As Welf used his family's techniques to create one, he battled the inner turmoil in his mind.

The light of the forge was not the only illumination in the workshop. The lump of metal sitting atop the anvil was shrouded in a maelstrom of faint lights, all of which seemed to sink into the blade like it was a whirlpool. This always happened whenever

Welf activated his skill. The weapon itself was calling to him, thirsty for his blood, conjuring spirits out of thin air that swirled around Welf's hammer to be hammered into his work. Welf's hands were also cloaked in a crimson glow now due to the Blacksmith ability he had recently acquired.

Eventually, the hammer's song came to an end, and Welf looked down at his creation, which was glowing with light.

"Your name…is Shirahime," he said.

Welf put very little effort into the names of his magic swords. He didn't want to grow too attached to something fated to be shattered in battle, and so he considered it nothing more than a parting gift.

He placed the finished sword next to the other one he had made that night. It hadn't been his intent, but due to the fast pace, the two swords had turned out to be sisters.

Hokage, the fiery shadow, and Shirahime, the princess of lightning. Their blades glowed crimson and purple, respectively, in the predawn gloom.

SPY GIRL

“Dammit, why do I always get stuck with the busywork?!”

A member of *Apollo Familia*, a prum by the name of Luan Espel, cursed the mountain of memos he was being forced to carry. The War Game was fast approaching, with only five days left before it began, and yet Luan had to work first thing in the morning, ferrying messages to and from the castle. He was still a lower-class adventurer, and this, along with his race’s reputation for being little help in a fight, often led the others in his familia to view him as perfectly suited to being a runner instead.

“Just you wait…None of you will be laughing when I’m as powerful as Finn!”

It was Luan’s greatest wish to be just like Braver Finn Deimne. It was an ambition that had gone unfulfilled for some years now and probably would for many more.

Luan dived down an empty side street, crying about his woes to nobody in particular.

“Argh, this is such a pain! Can’t somebody switch with me?”

“Sure thing. Why don’t you let me take over?”

All of a sudden, Luan Espel came face-to-face with his own doppelgänger—identical to him in every way, even down to the clothes and voice. Unable to believe his eyes, he froze, then a few seconds later, a blow to the back of the head knocked him out cold.

“Are you done, supporter girl?” asked Hestia as Lilly exited a secluded warehouse.

“Yes,” Lilly replied. “He’s told me everything I need to know.”

Here, the War Game had already begun, and Lilly and Nahza had worked together to kidnap Luan so that Lilly could infiltrate the castle using her transformation spell. Lilly had been interrogating the prum to find out his standing within the faction, along with his relationship with the other familia members and how he addressed them, all so she could carry out her

impersonation perfectly.

“He sure opened up quick,” said Hestia, terror forming in her eyes. “Y-you didn’t torture him, did you?”

“Sort of. I held this stink pouch to his face, and he spilled everything.”

“I’m just glad it came in handy…” said Nahza, a faint grin on her lips. Behind her was the dry smile of Miach, who had aided in its manufacture.

Now that the deterrent had served its dual purpose as a torture device, Lilly put it back in her pocket and closed her eyes.

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

In the blink of an eye, Lilly’s spell transformed her into the spitting image of her captive.

“Right, I’m off to the castle, then,” said Luan Espel.

Lilly remained disguised behind enemy lines for many days, and nobody suspected a thing.

YOU AND I: THE EVE OF WAR

Level 2
Strength: SS 1088 Defense: SS 1029
Dexterity: SS 1094 Agility: SSS 1302
Magic: A 883

They've really shot up…

Straddled atop Bell's back as he lay face down on the bed, Hestia looked down at her follower's updated stats with a troubled frown. It was two days before the War Game, and considering that he would be traveling tomorrow, Bell had completed his training and returned to Hestia at the home of *Miach Familia*. While leaving Apollo's mansion, Lord Miach had informed them they could use it as a base of operations.

He hadn't told her yet, but looking at Bell's new stats, Hestia could guess he'd been training with Aiz again. It was just like a month ago during Bell's last update as a Level 1 before fighting the minotaur. Bell's agility, in particular, had become so absurd that Hestia found herself wondering if there was a rank beyond SSS that they would soon see. However, she decided all this was too much to explain to Bell, so she decided not to.

"…All right, Bell. This is our bed. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay, then—wait, *our* bed?!"

"Yeah. They said this is the only one they've got."

That wasn't even close to the truth. It was only because Bell had been spending every night with Aiz lately that Hestia felt she had to do something drastic. Bell suggested that he would sleep on the floor, but Hestia insisted he needed to get some decent rest for the War Game. Miach and Nahza tactfully said nothing.

And so the two lay side by side in a bed really only designed for one, the soft glow of the magic-stone torches illuminating the room.

"…Do you hate me for this, Bell?"

The exhilaration only lasted a moment. After a while, Hestia turned onto her side and asked Bell that question. It was she who had decided to accept the terms of the War Game after all, without securing Bell's agreement first. It's not like she planned to lose, but everyone, Lilly and Welf included, had pinned their hopes on Bell, and if things went badly, this might be their last night together.

After a moment's silence, Bell answered. "No," he said, lying on his back. "I don't want to let that person win, either."

Hestia looked over at the boy's firm, determined expression as he stared up at the ceiling, and after a moment of surprise, she smiled.

"You know, you've gotten a lot cooler lately."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," said Hestia, nuzzling the boy's shoulder to hide her blushing cheeks. "Good luck."

"Thank you."

When the two of them fell asleep, their fingers were softly intertwined.

SHALL WE DANCE? 2

All around me, people are dressed in flowery dresses and stylish suits. Extravagant dishes line the tables of the hall. Beneath the chandelier-shaped magic-stone torch arrangement, waiters pour out bottles of wine, and their human and demi-human recipients engage in pleasant conversation.

The streets outside are lit only by the moon, but here, a spectacular ball is taking place. Lady Hestia places both hands on her hips and proudly looks out over the floor.

“Heh-heh-heh! I’m back, high society! Did ya miss me?”

She is dressed in a fancy costume and as pleased as punch. Standing behind her, I try to keep my nerves under control.

“D-did we really have to come back here…?”

We are in the north of Orario, in a building that could easily be mistaken for a royal palace. It is the very same place where Lord Apollo’s party was hosted, a venue owned and operated by the Guild. It is only the second time that I am experiencing this kind of nightlife, and I can’t help but express my worry.

Behind me enter Lilly, Welf, and Mikoto, each voicing their displeasure as they arrive.

“Why did we have to come along?!”

“Goddess’s orders. Can’t do anything about it.”

“Grrr…I can’t believe I’m back here…Wearing clothes like this again…”

Of course, they are all dressed smartly as well. It’s four days after the War Game, and the goddess of *Hestia Familia* has encouraged her members to accompany her to another fancy party.

“What’s the meaning of this, Lady Hestia?! Why are we here at this ball?!”

“Why, to dance, of course!” Goddess replies. “The last party ended before I could get a single song in! This is a do-over!”

That’s what she says, apparently. It seems that Goddess was fairly upset that Apollo’s gathering ended in the sudden and

dramatic fashion it did after she went through so much effort to dress up neatly for the occasion. I can hear in her voice how much she's looking forward to it. She probably brought us along because she wanted to share that joy with us.

I figure we can't just stand around in the doorway any longer and start to make my way down the stairs. Just as I pass Goddess, I feel the gaze of a predator, and a chill works its way up my spine.

"Plus, I can't just let Ms. Wallensomething steal my Bell like that!" she growls. "This time, for sure…!"

Meanwhile, Welf and Lilly are chatting.

"I think I heard this was organized by some commerce familia."

"Yes, I think they put on events like this regularly…that explains all the merchants…"

As they say, it's not just familia members like us at this ball. There are city businesspeople in attendance as well.

The only Dungeon in the world is an invaluable resource. Some people would stop at nothing to get their hands on rare materials and drop items from the lower or the deep floors. Today's party is an opportunity for merchants to make connections with powerful familias that can obtain those items for them. The familias also benefit from having a wealthy sponsor to share their expenses with.

We had to pull a few strings, but given our recently increased rank, not to mention our victory in the War Game, we were able to secure an invitation for *Hestia Familia*.

"Oh? I didn't expect to see you here."

"Hermes!"

It's a little while after mingling that we run into Hermes and Asfi. Asfi gives me a curt greeting, which I return with a nod.

"I have to be honest, Hestia. I wouldn't think all this money-and-connections business was your thing," says Hermes.

"And you'd be right!" replies Goddess, striking a proud pose. "I don't care at all for all that stuffy mercenary talk! I'm here to dance, and nothing else!"

Goddess's response elicits a bemused reaction from Hermes, but she goes on beaming an indefatigable smile. Hermes grins, amused by her blatant disregard for the "rules" of this event, and

as if on cue, the band begins to play.

"It's finally time, Bell! Come dance with me now!!"

As the merry tones of waltz music fill the air, Hestia shows more excitement than ever before. Her eyes sparkle and gleam, and she offers me her hand. Lilly frowns, Welf laughs, and Mikoto is still off in her own world, face blushing and eyes spinning wildly. A bead of sweat dribbles down the side of my face as I timidly reach out to accept, when…

"Did she say Bell?" "Little Rookie? …Is that *Hestia Familia*?" "Look over there…it's the Loli Goddess!"

All of a sudden, I feel all eyes on me, and the next moment, a crowd of people swarms around Goddess.

"Lady Hestia, might I humbly ask you to consider a business partnership?"

"Allow me to present some of the offerings my company produces, Loli Goddess!"

"I can offer you a prime golden Jyaga Maru Kun in return for your services, Lady Hestia!"

"Wh-what's gotten into you guys?! L-leave me alo—Waaaagh!!"

In an instant, and right under my very eyes, Goddess is washed away by a tidal wave of clamoring merchants. Lilly, Welf, and I look on in abject shock, but Lord Hermes only shrugs.

"A powerful familia is no different from royalty," he says. "Their patron deity lives like a king or queen, and there's no shortage of merchants who want to be the providers of that cushy life."

To read between the lines, they all see the debutant *Hestia Familia* as an easy mark. I watch as Goddess is ferried farther and farther away by the crowds until her already small frame is completely out of sight. All I can hear is her futilely screaming my name.

"Nothing you can do for her now," advises Welf. "I'm getting hungry. How about we grab some food?"

"I think Lilly will join you. At least that way, this night won't be a *total* waste."

"Ahh! Sir Welf! Lady Lilly! Please don't leave me behind…!"

"W-wait, where's everyone going…?"

As my friends all leave, I scratch the back of my head, unsure what to do.

In the end, I find no luck attempting to free Goddess from the horde of rabid merchants and reluctantly give up trying. I feel sorry for Goddess, but there's nothing I can do alone, and so I head off to find the others and regroup.

…Or so I'd like, but it's impossible to find anyone in this crowd…

"…Oh, Ms. Asfi!"

"Bell. It's you again."

After fighting my way through seas of people, far denser than at Apollo's celebration, I eventually bump into Asfi again. She's wearing a blue dress, and I ask her where my friends are, only to hear that she hasn't seen them either since we parted ways.

"What brings you here?" I ask. Then, noticing Hermes's absence, I add, "…And where's your god?"

Asfi sighs. "He's just gone and left me alone."

I turn to where she looks and spot Lord Hermes chatting with several merchants. They must be talking business, but Hermes wears a pleasant smile and deftly works his way through several negotiations before seeing them all off with a handshake. The merchants all leave happy, so they must have come to some sort of agreement.

"…Argh! I can't stand around here, doing nothing, any longer! You'll have to keep me company, Little Rookie!"

"Huh?" I say, my face freezing, but Asfi swiftly pulls on my arm. I go red in a flash as the girl leads me over to the center of the dance floor. Before I can even get a word out, the two of us are dancing.

"He's always dragging me around from place to place, but then he completely ignores me once we're there! I wish he'd think about how I feel for once!"

"Ha-ha-ha…"

As we dance, I'm forced to listen to her complain. Our hips and shoulders are touching, and while the sudden and unexpected contact makes the blood rush to my head, Ms. Asfi is as relaxed and cool as ever. Even I can tell she's an amazing dancer. She corrects my awkward movements, urging me to take the lead, gracefully performing the steps even as she continues to grumble in my ear. It's as if dancing is second nature to her…Did she use to do it a lot?

“I know those negotiations are important for the future of the familia. I just wish it wasn’t all he thought about!”

“E-erm…Does this sort of thing happen often?” I ask, somehow able to splutter out the words despite Ms. Asfi’s soft, pink lips right under my nose.

“Ever since we met. He’s constantly dragging me all over, even if I say I don’t want to go, but…”

“Hmm?”

“…He spirited me away from that castle, and for that, I’ll always be grateful.”

As our dance carves a path through the crowds, Asfi smiles, a distant look on her face. She normally looks very tired and worn beyond her years, but right now, wearing a big smile, she looks young and pretty. Is she Miss Eina’s age? I wonder. Maybe a bit older?

“Thank you for letting me get that off my chest,” she says. “It made me feel a lot better.”

“N-no problem…”

The dance ends, and Ms. Asfi and I separate. She gives me one final look, smiles, and heads back to find her god.

“She could be royalty, that Perseus.”

“Oh, Welf…”

As I leave the floor, I spot him standing by a table, sampling the food. I guess he was watching the whole thing. He hands me a glass of fruit juice as I come over.

“You could tell?”

“Her posture, the way she moves…More than anything, she just smacks of it. I saw a lot of those royal types when I was young. I know the smell.”

That’s right…Welf’s family is made up of aristocrats in the kingdom of Rakia…That might all be in the past now, but it makes sense he would have a lot of experience with nobles.

I’m not sure if I want to poke my nose into it too deeply, but I just have to ask.

“Did you go to parties like this when you were younger?”

“Pretty much. Mom and Nan figured it’d make me ‘cultured’ or whatever. They made me go to dinners, taught me all these rules, made even me learn random instruments…but I was a blacksmith through and through. I preferred it when I was alone

in the forge."

Being a wealthy Crozzo is not all it was cracked up to be, it seems.

"I don't want to be rude to Lady Hestia, but truth be told, I can't bring myself to care about events like this."

Welf seems a little suffocated in his suit, and he wears a sullen look as he grabs at the lapels. Whether that's regret at dredging up old memories or distaste for the superficial politeness going on all around him, I can't tell.

"How about the two of us blow this joint, Bell? We can go grab a drink or something instead."

I'm not sure if he means it as a joke or not. The corners of my mouth cramp up a little.

"Ha-ha-ha…I'm not sure I can leave Goddess here by herself…" I say, trailing off.

Besides, what would it look like if a couple of adventurers dressed in suits waltzed into a tavern downtown? I'd be too embarrassed.

But at that moment, something seems to catch Welf's eye.

"Hmm?"

He looks over my shoulder, and I follow his gaze to see that an excited crowd has formed around one woman in particular…

"W-wait! That's Ms. Mikoto!" I say, horrified.

"I thought they were giving her trouble, but it doesn't look like it," says Welf, spotting the crowd of men offering her their hands. "Are they…asking her to dance?"

They do all seem quite taken by Ms. Mikoto. Unfortunately, the feeling doesn't look mutual. The flurry of invitations causes her to freeze…she's red-faced and seems about to cry. I can see the panic in her eyes from here.

"Guess someone ought to step in," Welf says.

"I-I'll do it!"

I hand Welf my glass and run over as fast as I can. I can't stop myself, seeing a familia member in danger and certainly not seeing a woman in tears. I know it's rude to run at a party like this, but I don't care. I make my way across the crowded floor like a rabbit.

And as I make my way through the crowd, Ms. Mikoto notices me, too. A flash of light returns to her eyes. She pulls up the hem

of her dress, marches over to me, grabs my hands, and cries…

“I-I’m sorry, but I already promised to dance with this gentleman here!!”

“Huh?!”

“Whaaat?!” the men all yell, but before they can voice their complaints, Ms. Mikoto leads me back onto the dance floor.

“Urgh…I am sorry to force this on you, Sir Bell, but I was truly at a loss!”

“I-it’s okay. I know how you feel…”

According to Ms. Mikoto, word of her exotic beauty got around during the last Denatus, and now men of all kinds are flocking to her. Apparently, it all started when a few of the foreign dignitaries at this party spotted her, and things spiraled out of control from there. I can’t help but feel the gods had something to do with it, though. I know they often find the reactions of us mortals amusing and get carried away…

Ms. Mikoto seems truly shell-shocked, though. I wonder if she’s not used to being around that many men. She seems even more self-conscious now about her revealing dress, and her bare shoulders and the back of her neck are starting to become a little red. I feel myself going red in the face, too…

“I-in any case, could I ask you to dance with me until they go away? Please, I beg of you…!”

“Y-yes, yes. I will, Ms. Mikoto. Just…try to calm down…”

We find an empty spot, and out of the corner of my eye, I spy Welf grinning at me. I take Ms. Mikoto’s hands, but—out of sheer bashful panic—she steps hard on my toe. We haven’t even started dancing yet!

Oww!!

Her long, hard heels feel like a spike in my foot. The misstep causes her to lose balance, and she cries out in shock. I step in to catch her, only to be overpowered and knocked to the floor instead.

“Ahh!”

“Grhh!”

I catch a stray elbow to the gut—Wait, an elbow?! Is this martial arts? I can feel the impact deep in my stomach, and I double over. In a few more seconds, I am out cold.

…It seems I was unconscious for quite some time, and the party is now nearing its climax. Ms. Mikoto apologizes to me profusely, and I head off to try and find Lilly.

“Ah, there she is…Lilly!”

After Ms. Mikoto’s predicament, I was worried something might have happened to Lilly, too, so I am relieved to see her leaning against a wall by herself. I call out to her, but something about the way she looks makes me stop in my tracks. She’s gazing at the dancers as if staring at a world of dreams from the other side of a thin pane of glass.

“…Aren’t you going to dance, Lilly?”

Before I realize it, I walk over and ask her that question. Lilly peers up at me and cracks a playful smile.

“I doubt any of those bigwigs would want to dance with a tiny little street girl like me. I don’t belong here.”

That last sentence strikes a chord in my heart. Lilly squints as though the whole room is too bright for her.

“I can’t believe Lady Hestia wasted her money on buying me a dress like this…but to tell you the truth, I’m a little grateful to her, too. It wasn’t long ago when I couldn’t even dream of attending this sort of event.”

She looks down at her dress, custom-made to fit her prum size, and sighs.

“…But at the end of the day, this just isn’t me.”

Lilly was forced by her familia into all sorts of shady business. She never learned proper manners or etiquette and seems ashamed that a soot-covered girl like her is even allowed anywhere near this place. Because of that, she’s resigned to being a wallflower, even while the longing in her gaze is plain to see.

I wasn’t sure what to say at first, but once I see that look in her eyes, my mind is made up.

“Then why not dance with me?” I ask.

“Oh, come on. A prum can’t dance with a human,” she quips, frowning. “You’re twice my size!”

“Ah, yeah…Sorry.”

Lilly is even shorter than Goddess, so I see what she means. It would look like I was giving dance lessons to a child.

I feel embarrassed for even suggesting it now, but for some reason, Lilly looks embarrassed, too. She looks down at her feet,

her cheeks reddening.

“B-but…” she says, “There is one thing I would like to try…Mr. Bell! Ask me to dance with you! Just to see what it’s like!”

She leans in and whispers, adding, “As fancily as you can, just like a fairy-tale prince!”

I feel a little daunted by the challenge ahead of me, but eager to fulfill Lilly’s request, I decide to give it a try. A fairy-tale prince…I think back to how Lord Miach acted at the ball. I turn my shoulders, face Lilly head-on, and kneel, taking her slender hand in mine.

“Would you give me the pleasure of a dance, my lady?” I say.

I imitate Lord Miach as best I can, even doing my utmost to recreate the gentle smile that I saw on his lips. Lilly’s eyes go wide, and she freezes in place. After a while with no reaction, I ask, “Was that no good?” and give an awkward smile, tipping my head.

“…S-six out of ten!”

Harsh. I feel even more awkward now. I guess I have a long way to go before I can begin to approach Lord Miach’s level. As I rise to my feet, I catch Lilly’s gaze on me. Her reddening cheeks and the way she’s still clutching my hand make me think I must have satisfied her request, at least in some small part. As long as she’s happy, I’m happy.

We stand there for a while, hand in hand, until we hear the announcer signal the end of the party.

“…It sounds like this is it, then,” she says.

As the guests begin to leave, Welf and Ms. Mikoto find us and come over.

“Sir Bell, where is Lady Hestia?”

“Erm…I think she’s still busy…”

I cast my eyes over to the other side of the hall, where I see Goddess remains besieged.

“Looks like she’s going to be there a while,” says Welf.

“She never got her wish in the end,” adds Lilly.

The two of them look over at the tuft of black hair we can see poking over the crowd and groan in pity. I also feel a little bad that I couldn’t help her in the end, even if that was because I spent most of the party asleep on the floor.

At that moment, Ms. Asfi and Lord Hermes walk by. “Are you

not leaving yet?" Ms. Asfi asks, noticing we haven't moved. Wondering if I should, I end up telling her the whole story and ask if she knows how we can help.

Lord Hermes grins at me like a shepherd leading his lost lamb. "Leave it to me," he says. "I know just what to do."



"Urgh…I *still* didn't get to dance…"

Hestia moped as she shuffled back over to Bell, her head hanging in disappointment. The merchants and investors had finally let her go, and yet the party was already over, and all the lights were off. Even the band must have packed up their instruments and left because the hall was dark, empty, and silent. Standing there alone in her special dress, illuminated only by a single moonbeam filtering through the window, the goddess felt unbearably lonely.

Her dreams in tatters, she was trying to find her way back to Bell's side when a figure stepped out of the shadows before her.

"Bell…?"

"Come with me, Goddess."

Dressed in a tailcoat, Bell took Hestia's hand and led her to the balcony. Before she could even ask what was happening, the two of them walked past the glass windows and down the staircase and were standing on the lawn outside.

"B-Bell, what's gotten into you?"

The waters of the nearby fountain twinkled like stars in the moonlight. That was when Bell turned to face her.

"Look, Goddess."

Bell cast his gaze over her shoulder, and when Hestia turned to look, she noticed many people, all standing atop the roof of the building. And there, on a conductor's podium with his orange hair billowing in the wind, was Hermes.

"All right, everybody! Pick your favorite instrument!" he shouted. "Tonight, we have a very special encore for a very special goddess!"

The others began to move, picking up instruments from the floor.

“I-I didn’t know you could play violin, Mr. Welf.”

“I can’t. I just know how it works from my time as a Crozzo. Don’t worry, though. I’m not any good.”

“I-I wonder if there is even anything here that I can play…”

“This lyre should suit you well, Ms. Mikoto. It’s enchanted so that anyone can play it. As for me, I think I’ll go with this flute.”

Lilly, Welf, Mikoto, and Asfi raised bows or hands to their strings and flutes to their lips. Then, as Hermes swung his arms, the impromptu band began to play.

Despite the varied sounds coming from the array of instruments, they somehow combined into a beautiful waltz, and soon the melodies of this five-instrument band filled the garden with the strains of music.

Hestia stared in wonder at the gentle sounds coming from the rooftop, then turned back to Bell. He looked somewhat tense. That was because Hermes had ordered his next line be delivered in as theatrical a manner as possible. He steeled his nerves, looked up into his goddess’s eyes, and kneeled at her feet.

“Might I most humbly request the delight of your company on this fine night, *Dea Ange*?”

Calling upon his memories of sleepless nights spent absorbed in his favorite tale, Bell constructed his most dashing invitation yet. Immediately after he said it, Bell went red-faced with embarrassment. Hestia’s eyes twinkled like the soft, blue waters of a lake, and then she beamed a stunning smile.

“Yes, please!”

Her gaze enraptured by his rubellite eyes, Hestia took Bell’s hand and, guided by the beautiful melodies of their friends on the rooftop, embarked upon a dance just for two.

And behind those palatial stones, surrounded by lush greenery, as the fountain babbled away in the background, a goddess and her follower intertwined their steps. Smiles decorated their faces as Bell and Hestia danced beneath the moon until the very last note played.



VOLUME 7

CONGRATULATIONS?
Animate Store Bonus

ELEGY
GAMERS Store Bonus

FAMILIA CONTRACT
Toranoana Store Bonus

MIKAZUCHI
Amazon Store Bonus

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CONGRATULATIONS?

“Hmm? What’s up, Aiz?”

Tiona noticed Aiz brooding in the reception room of their home and called out to her.

“Hmm, thinking about how Bell won the War Game and grew his familia…”

“Oh! You want to get Argonaut a gift to congratulate him?” Tiona quickly picked up on what the taciturn girl struggled to say. “Good idea,” she said, smiling. “It’s all thanks to our training that he won, so we should do something to celebrate! Oh, but what would be good? He’s an adventurer, so a weapon? Or maybe something tasty?”

Tiona stood next to Aiz and tried to come up with something. Both girls were first-tier adventurers, but neither had ever bought somebody a celebratory gift before.

“Hmm? What’s eatin’ you two?”

“Oh, Loki!” said Tiona, lifting her face as her goddess entered the room. She explained the situation, and Loki immediately got a fierce look in her eyes. She didn’t much like the idea of sending a gift to anyone—let alone Hestia, her sworn enemy. But just as she opened her mouth to tell the two girls to forget all about it, a crafty, malicious grin spread across her lips.

“Listen here, Aiz. You know what you gotta buy somebody a time like this…”

“Flowers? W-wow, Ms. Aiz, you shouldn’t have!”

The next day, Bell found Aiz on his doorstep, presenting a wonderful bouquet of flowers to him. They were white, the same color as the boy’s hair.

“Well done in the War Game,” Aiz said, “and on getting more members, too. I’m really happy for you.”

Seeing the girl’s gentle smile, Bell could only bow his head repeatedly to hide his burning cheeks. Aiz said her farewells and returned home, and Bell merrily carried the bouquet into the

living room.

“Come and look at this, everyone!” he squealed with joy. “Ms. Aiz stopped by, and she brought us these beautiful—”

But as soon as Hestia laid eyes on the offering, sheer panic gripped her voice.

“B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-Bell?! Are those…snowdrops?!”

“In the language of flowers, they mean ‘wishing for your death,’” added Welf. “Did the Sword Princess really bring us *these*?”

“This is effectively…a declaration of war from *Loki Familia*!!” screamed Mikoto.

“What are we going to do?! We’re all dead!!” cried Lilly.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

The white flowers, symbols of the grim reaper, fell from Bell’s hands and onto the floor.

The next day, after finding out what had happened from the terrified Bell, Aiz went to her goddess in tears and soundly beat her to a pulp.

ELEGY

“Hmm, hmm, hmm!”

Humming a tune, Syr happily toiled away in the kitchen of The Benevolent Mistress. She was on break and was using the time to improve her cooking ability. She made Bell a packed lunch every day, and yet because she wanted to showcase her very best efforts, she often went a little outside her comfort zone and usually ended up crafting dishes with slightly eccentric flavors that tended to bring Bell to tears. She had to admit that there was still much for her to learn.

But she found herself enjoying the routine more and more. As she merrily mixed some green eggs in a frying pan, Chloe, Ahnya, and Lyu watched from the doorway, unsure about whether they should speak up. Finally, the elf girl gulped and stepped forward.

“…Syr. This is really hard for me to say, but…”

“Oh! Lyu! What is it?”

“I just think…I’m not really sure you need to make those lunches for Mr. Cranell anymore…”

The light left Syr’s eyes, and she spun around in shock. Lyu faltered with her words as she went on.

“H-he has a new familia now and friends to make those lunches for him…”

“I hear that Far Eastern chick, Mikoto Yamato, is a good cook, meow. The gods say she’ll make a great wife someday,” added Chloe.

Syr looked at her in horror. A pretty girl in his own familia who could cook meals for him…It did sound awfully like Syr’s services were no longer required.

“Come to think of it, we haven’t seen adventurer boy around lately,” Runoa chimed in.

“Maybe Syr’s been dumped already!” added Ahnya, cackling.

It was actually because he was incredibly busy due to moving homes as well as the business in the Pleasure Quarter demanding all of Bell’s time, but Syr was horrified by the suggestion all the

same.

She stared at her feet—shaking and unable to say a word—as smoke rose off her pan, and the scrambled mess within slowly went from green to brown. Finally, she leveled a determined glare at the other girls.

“Th-that just means I’ll have to get even better at cooking!!” she yelled. “That way he’ll have to pick me! And I know just how you girls can help!!”

“M-Mr. Cranell…Urgh…”

“M-Ms. Lyu?! What happened?! You look ready to faint!!”

It was a few days later that Bell opened his front door to find that Lyu and the other waitresses had turned up unannounced on his doorstep. Lyu was as white as a sheet, clutching her stomach in agony.

“You have to stop Syr…No, actually, please just eat her cooking…”

It seemed that even a former second-tier adventurer’s stomach was no match for the strange girl’s miraculous culinary creations.

FAMILIA CONTRACT

“Now let me explain how things are going to work around here.”

With both hands on her hips like a dignified patron goddess, Hestia addressed her newest recruits. It was the morning three days after the War Game, in the living room of their newly acquired home. Bell was away at the Guild making sure their affairs were in order, but all the other members were present. Before anybody had even begun unpacking, Hestia had gathered Lilly, Welf, and Mikoto to impress upon them the rules of her familia.

“I want everyone back home by ten, and it had better be a matter of life or death if you’re not. If you have a reason to be late, tell me in advance. Whenever you go to the Dungeon, let me know which floor you’re aiming for before you leave.”

“I knew about the Dungeon thing, but…do you really impose a curfew around here?” asked Lilly.

“You bet your butt I do, supporter girl. I know what this city is like after dark, and I don’t want my Bell to have any part in it. Who knows what he’d get dragged into if he stayed out all night drinking?”

“*Your* Bell?” repeated Lilly with a death stare. Hestia ignored her and moved on.

“Also, we have all our meals as a group, except for lunch. You’ll be in the Dungeon, and I have my part-time job, so we can’t really make it work. Otherwise, we eat together.”

“Works for me. In fact, that’s how I prefer it,” said Welf.

“Yes,” agreed Mikoto. “It is a fine thing to eat in good company and strengthen our bonds as comrades.”

“Well, that makes things easy,” said Hestia. Then, after finishing explaining all her rules, she pulled three sheets of paper out of seemingly thin air.

“I’ll just need your signatures here,” she said. “You all have my Falnas engraved on your backs already, but I find it helps to have a paper contract as well. After this, you will officially be members

of *Hestia Familia*."

"Th-this is more formal than I expected," uttered Mikoto, a bead of sweat dripping down her cheek. But she took the contract, and so did Welf and Lilly. The Far Eastern girl sweated as she stared down lines upon lines of Koine script, but Welf skimmed the whole thing and hastily scrawled his name at the bottom. Only Lilly seemed to be examining the parchment diligently, staring hard enough to burn holes in the paper.

And when her chestnut-colored eyes reached the end of the page, they came upon a line of text printed in imperceptibly tiny letters.

"Relationships with the opposite sex are not allowed—especially with the captain. Even holding hands is forbidden."

Without another word, Lilly ripped the contract in two.

"Aaaaghhh! Have you lost your mind, supporter girl?!"

"You're the one who's lost her mind!! What kind of fine print is this?!"

Still holding her signed contract, Mikoto began sweating bullets, and Welf simply sighed.

MIKAZUCHI

“Hiyah!”

“Oof!”

With a formidable shout, Mikoto flipped Bell onto his back.

It was early afternoon, and the two of them, plus Welf, had gathered outside on the lawn in the courtyard of their home for martial arts training.

“I never get tired of seeing these Far Eastern techniques of yours,” said Welf, admiring the sight of Bell taking a tumble while he savored a well-earned break. “You’re really something, you know that?”

“O-oh no! Not I! It is Lord Takemikazuchi who taught me everything I know! If anything I do seems impressive, it’s all because of him!”

Mikoto furiously denied Welf’s compliments, her cheeks going bright red. Bell wore an awkward smile and tactfully changed the subject by asking the girl a question.

“Erm, so what’s the most impressive move you know, Ms. Mikoto?”

“The most impressive? I suppose that would have to be *Mikazuchi*, the Full-Moon Throw.”

Bell tilted his head, puzzled. “What’s that?”

“It is a technique my lord perfected after many sessions of training,” Mikoto explained. “It builds upon foreign techniques, refining them to a lethal degree. Its power is comparable to a bolt of lightning, which is why it incorporates part of my lord’s name.”

“Th-that sure does sound impressive…”

“So can you do it?”

“I can. In fact, I am the only one of Lord Takemikazuchi’s pupils who has been able to execute it successfully…However, Lady Tsukuyomi became greatly enraged at my lord when she found out what he had been teaching us…”

Mikoto was shaking as she thought back to that terrible sight, and she explained that the technique in question was a forbidden

one.

“Now you’ve got my attention,” said Welf. “You wouldn’t mind demonstrating for us, would you? I bet you want to see it too, right, Bell?”

“Um…yeah.”

“What…?!”

Mikoto was flustered at first, but when the boys told her it was all for the betterment of their familia, she reluctantly acquiesced. However, she explained that it was highly dangerous, and so the boys piled up several mats on one end of the lawn.

“O-okay. Are you ready, Sir Bell?”

“Why do I have to be the training dummy…?”

Bell was sweating bullets as Mikoto prepared to unleash the aforementioned technique on him. The next moment, she was gone—disappearing into thin air—and the next thing he knew, both of Mikoto’s legs were wrapped around his neck.

“Huh?!”

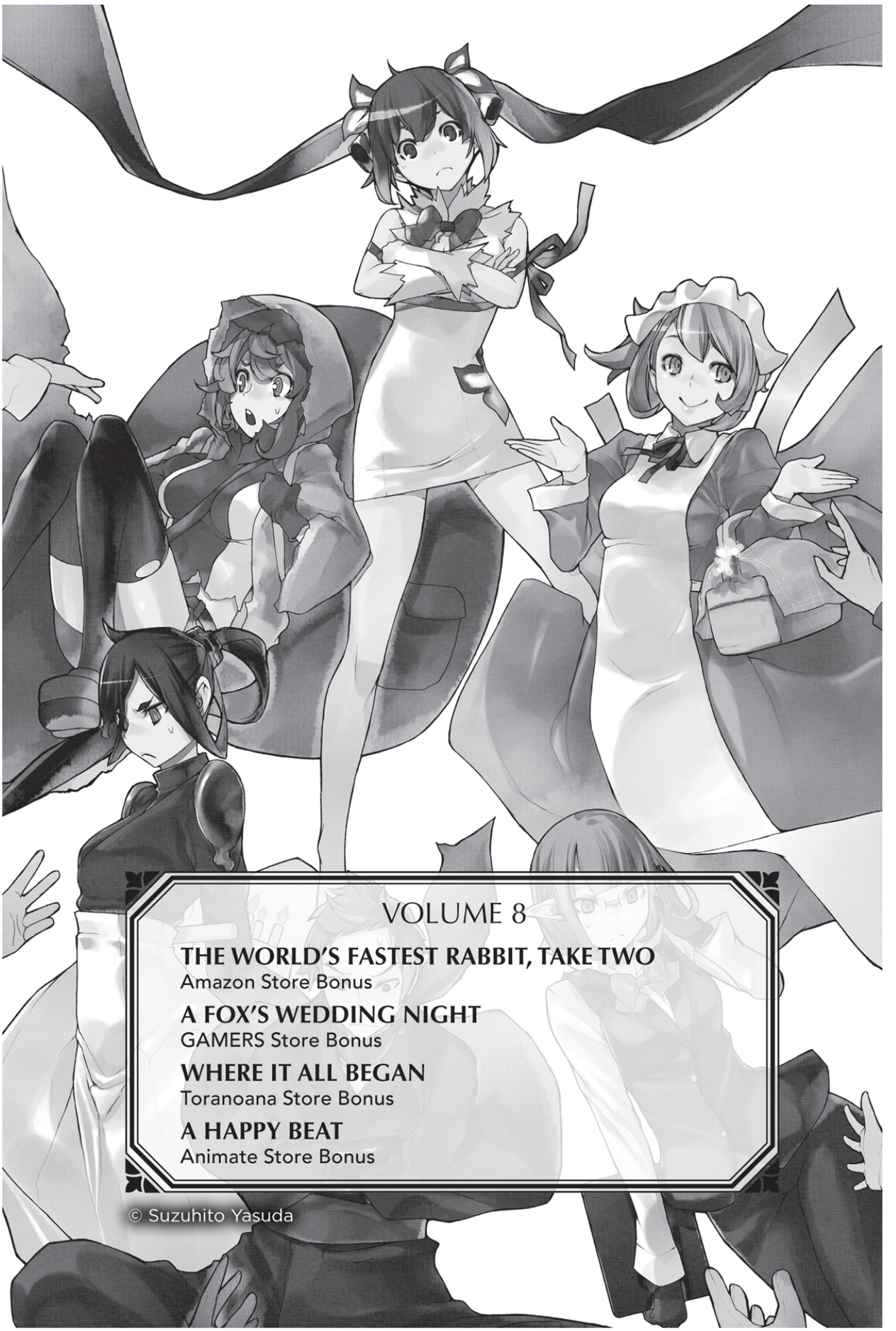
Her soft thighs squashed his cheeks, and all Bell could see was Mikoto’s crotch. However, he didn’t have long to admire the view before Mikoto let out a ferocious *hiyah* and flipped him headfirst into the mats.

“What do you think, Sir Bell? That was the *Mikazuchi*. A-a-a-a-a-are you all right?! I thought I went easy on you…”

“Geez, now I see why Takemikazuchi got in so much trouble… Who teaches this move to a woman?”

Welf sighed, watching as Mikoto ran over to help Bell, whose beet-red face was half-buried in the mats.

The “foreign technique” on which the *Mikazuchi* was based turned out to be a throw supposedly called the “Frankensteiner,” known to some as the “Throw of Pleasure.”



VOLUME 8

THE WORLD'S FASTEST RABBIT, TAKE TWO
Amazon Store Bonus

A FOX'S WEDDING NIGHT
GAMERS Store Bonus

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN
Toranoana Store Bonus

A HAPPY BEAT
Animate Store Bonus

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THE WORLD'S FASTEST RABBIT, TAKE TWO

"Eina, Eina! Everybody's talking about Little Rookie!" cried Misha, running over to her colleague's desk.

"Yeah, I heard…" came the reply.

It was after dark at Guild HQ, but Eina was still at the office. She and other Guild employees were sitting at their desks, their quill pens scribbling away—a matter that for Eina was only made more difficult by the frequent interruptions of her old schoolmate.

"He's reached Level Three in only a month!" she said. "And unlike last time, barely anyone's claiming it's a trick! No one can deny it anymore!"

"Uh-huh…"

"People don't want to believe it, but after seeing him in action during the War Game, they've got no choice! They're all saying he's the real deal, just like the gods have been saying all along! That kid you always dote on like a little brother has finally become a star!"

"Huh…"

"You're not listening to meeee!! What's got you so fascinated anyway?"

Misha puffed out her cheeks, but the sounds of Eina's pen still didn't stop.

"A log of Bell's activities as an adventurer," she said.

"Is that for the Level-Up Guidelines?" Misha asked, peering over Eina's shoulder at the parchment.

"Yeah," Eina nodded.

In the interests of fostering a collaborative spirit and bringing up the average level of all adventurers, the Guild released detailed logs on those who had recently leveled up so that others could follow in their footsteps—assuming, that is, that the familia in question chose to cooperate.

Eina put down her pen and ran her eyes over the finished document.

Within ten days of attaining Level 2, you must reach the middle floors of the Dungeon, advance to the eighteenth floor on the first day thereof, pass a hazing ceremony conducted by your peers, and fight a floor boss on two separate occasions, emerging victorious. On the surface, you must survive an attack conducted by a vastly better-equipped familia, beat overwhelming odds in a War Game, and finally, defeat a Level 3 adventurer in solo combat.

Yeah, this is impossible to follow, thought Eina, sparing a sympathetic thought for any would-be Level 3 hoping to survive the same trial by fire that Bell had endured. She might as well have written, *"If you want to beat Bell's record, then prepare to die."* Come to think of it, Eina vaguely remembered that Bell's Level 2 report read very similarly…

And so Eina diligently filed her paperwork, even though she knew full well it was pointless. Sure enough, the Guild refused to even publish it, and Bell Cranell's Level-Up Guidelines were shelved for a second time.

A FOX'S WEDDING NIGHT

"…Hmm?"

Bell sensed something amiss and rose from his slumber.

It was the middle of the night, and he was in his bed. The curtains to his room were fully drawn, lit from behind by the glow of the moon. Bell awoke because he felt a strange warmth clinging to him from one side and a hot breath tickling the back of his neck.

His bleary eyes focused until he could make out the form of a renart—a foxgirl—lying in his bed next to him as though she were his wife.

"Wh-what are…?"

"I am sorry, Master Bell…"

Haruhime had untied her sash and deposited her crimson robe on the floor, climbing into Bell's bed wearing only a single layer—basically her underwear. Bell felt a soft weight on his chest and a titillating warmth through which he could feel the girl's lonely heartbeat. When she looked up at him, her eyes glistening with tears, Bell found he couldn't even scream.

"You've worked hard today, so I…came to keep you company."

"…?!"

Haruhime suddenly sat up in bed and looked down at Bell. Her cheeks were slightly pink, but despite her shyness, she looked every bit an enchanting lady of the night. Shafts of moonlight coming through a crack in the curtains lit up her slender collar, and her long, golden hair spilled across her shoulders.

With delicate fingers, she deftly untied her garment, exposing her ample chest. The sight of her blinding milky skin was seared into Bell's eyes, making him go red from head to toe even as he found himself unable to tear his gaze away.

"I wish to pay you back for all that you have done," she said, "in the only way that I know how…"

Haruhime allowed her gaze to slide down to Bell's torso as she unfastened his shirt. Then she gently pushed him down onto his

back, her eyes those of a fox staring down at a helpless rabbit. She brought her face close to his, their lips drawing even closer…

"…And then that's when I woke up!"

"What kind of idiot girl dreams of being the man on the receiving end?" said Aisha.

The Amazon was hearing an account of Haruhime's dream in a café downtown. Seeing the foxgirl sit across the table so rose-cheeked, she couldn't help but sigh. About an hour earlier, Aisha had stopped by the foxgirl's new home to see how she was doing and invited her out for tea. Immediately upon sitting down, Haruhime had turned strangely serious and boldly spilled the beans about her nighttime adventure. Her fox ears and tail were swishing and swaying, and she trembled with embarrassment. Those wild delusions were something Aisha would have expected the pubescent *Bell* to concoct, not her.

"You horny fox," she spat, causing Haruhime to go as red as a beet and fall over the table, clutching her head and wailing.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

“Well, then to a growing familia…”

“Cheers!”

Glasses clinked, and Hestia and Hephaistos sat at the bar and enjoyed their drinks. The wine they shared was an expensive one, perfect for celebrating Hestia’s success—or that of her children, in any case. The goddess of the forge had finally found a break in her busy schedule and invited her old friend out to mark the occasion.

“Still, I’m surprised,” she said. “To think a lazybones goddess like you finally made something of yourself…I don’t believe it.”

“Ahem! Witness my true power! …Or so I’d like to say, but it was really Bell and the other children who did all the work. I didn’t really help at all.”

Hestia’s smug face turned into a gentle smile of pride as she thought about her diligent followers. Seeing her, Hephaistos couldn’t help but smile as well.

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Hestia. “Thanks for saving Welf from Rakia.”

“Don’t mistake it for kindness,” Hephaistos protested. “All I did was shove all the blame on them.”

Then the two goddesses drank long into the night, laughing like old friends should.

“…But you should have seen Bell. He was soooo cute!”

A few hours later, Hestia wore a blithe grin, and her whole face was bright red. Hephaistos looked much the same. In common parlance, they were both smashed.

“‘I never wanted to make you sad,’ he said! ‘That’s why I tried to brush it off, but the truth is, I want to be with you forever and ever! I love you!’ He’s so cute. I just adore him so muuuch! Bell!!!”

“I…I think you made up the bit where he said, ‘I love you,’ didn’t you?”

Hephaistos frowned and downed her drink, clearly unable to

stomach her friend's sappy story. Noticing her displeasure, Hestia got a crafty look on her scarlet face.

"Oh?" she said. "Jealous much? I bet nobody ever says things like that to you!"

"Th-they do too! I just never talk about it!"

"As if! I know how your children see you. You're their boss, not a woman! But don't worry. I understand how cute you really are, even if nobody else does!"

Hephaistos could take the goddess's coy smirk no longer. And as a matter of fact, there *had* been an event she was dying to get off her chest, and the wine had been just the push she needed.

"Well, listen to this!" she shouted. "Just the other day, Welf said…!!"

In the days that followed, the account that would serve as the basis for one young blacksmith's new alias spread like wildfire among the gods of Orario, all thanks to the loose lips of one childish-looking goddess.

A HAPPY BEAT

As the morning sun greeted the residents of Orario by peeking its head over the city walls, Aiz stood alone in the courtyard of her home, practicing her sword swings. The tip of her sword whistled through the air as she honed the techniques that earned her the name of Sword Princess.

It had been a few days since the Rakian army tendered their unconditional surrender. Some time had passed after the events at Edas Village in the Beor Mountains—the heartrending farewell and a goddess's love song that were both fast becoming a distant memory.

Aiz stopped and looked up at the clear blue sky overhead while scenes from the past flicked through her mind.

"The festival was fun…" she said. "I enjoyed that."

Dancing with the baby-faced goddess, wearing a village girl's clothes as the villagers sang and clapped, and everyone laughing and smiling. It was like nothing Aiz had ever experienced prior, and the memory still warmed her heart.

Bell's goddess always seemed to have it out for Aiz for some reason, but it was fun dancing with her…and yet Aiz couldn't help but feel it was a shame.

"…A shame?"

The thought came unbidden from somewhere deep inside, and Aiz cocked her head.

Why? she asked herself, but before she could find an answer, her feet began to move. Tracing the steps of that night once more, feeling the warm glow of the bonfire—only this time, the one she imagined in her arms was not Bell's goddess but a blushing white rabbit instead.

"……"

Aiz turned with a flourish and swept her feet across the lawn.

"She's smiling."

"She sure is."

“How rare.”

From the stone passage that ran between the towers of the mansion, Tiona, Tione, and Riveria looked down at the scene below. Aiz’s motions were rhythmic, almost like she was dancing a folk dance in her mind. The Hyrute twins shared an odd glance. It was faint—so faint only those close to Aiz could recognize it—but there was a smile on the young girl’s lips.

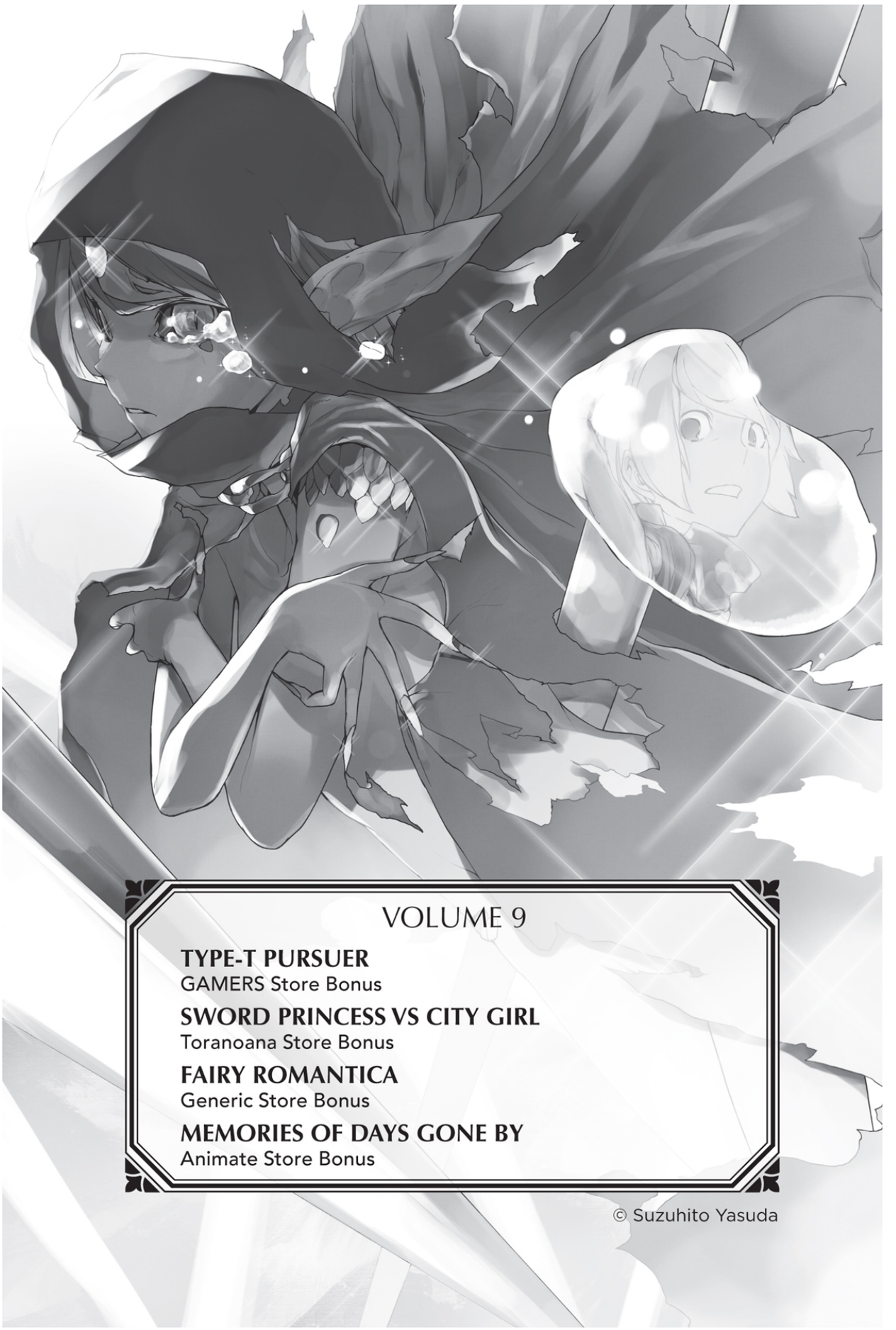
“I wonder what happened to her?” asked Tione.

“I couldn’t even begin to guess,” said Riveria.

Tiona grinned. “But it’s not every day we get to see Aiz like that. I think I like it.”

The sight brightened up all three ladies’ faces. As for the girl in the courtyard below, she went on smiling and dancing as if she were a child again.


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VOLUME 9

TYPE-T PURSUER
GAMERS Store Bonus

SWORD PRINCESS VS CITY GIRL
Toranoana Store Bonus

FAIRY ROMANTICA
Generic Store Bonus

MEMORIES OF DAYS GONE BY
Animate Store Bonus

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TYPE-T PURSUER

Not again.

She was being followed. Lilly sensed their presence as she made her way through the streets, bearing a message. It was evening in Orario, but the sun's orange rays failed to penetrate the cracks in the city that Lilly was roaming.

When had it all begun? Lilly got the feeling it was a few days after Braver's proposal. A mysterious figure had been tailing her. Lilly could never catch a glimpse of whoever was pursuing her, but she could feel their unbearable pressure. It didn't seem human. The skies above seemed the color of blood.

And then…she saw it.

She spun around and spotted someone silhouetted on a nearby rooftop—a woman with long hair that coiled like snakes.

Lilly yelped and broke into a sprint. Why had she come down these deserted streets in the first place? She realized it now, looking back—she had been led here, by someone waiting to spring a trap, and now that time had come. She was sweating all over as she ran.

Y-you've got to be kidding me!

They probably weren't anywhere near as dangerous as that crazy elf, but there was an aura of murderous rage or jealousy or anger or hatred or…*something*, but whatever it was, it was bad!

"Oof!"

Gripped by fear, Lilly tripped over her own feet, but before she even got time to curse her own clumsiness, the shadow was upon her.

"Eek!"

"Explain," they ordered. *What the hell does that mean?!* How was she supposed to answer? Lilly trembled, unable to spit out a single word. Then…

"What do you think of Finn Deimne?"

"I don't care about him at all. I already have my heart set on someone else. Mr. Bell's the one for me I love him and only him

please help me Mr. Bell can't you see I don't have feelings for anyone else especially not Mr. Finn please you've got to believe me!"

Lilly cowered in fear as the tension drained from the snakelike strands of her attacker's hair. The figure uttered only one word, "Good," before walking away. Her life miraculously intact, Lilly collapsed in exhaustion and stayed there for some time.

"Mr. Bell?!"

"Huh?! What…what's going on?!"

Lilly came running and tackled Bell full force. The traumatic event had regressed the prum girl to childhood, and all she could do was sob in the arms of the boy she loved. Bell stroked her head and tried to help her calm down, at least until Hestia and the others caught sight of it.

SWORD PRINCESS VS CITY GIRL

“Oh!”

“…Hmm?”

Aiz looked up at the familiar voice and noticed its bearer, a gray-haired girl, standing before her. It was just past noon, and Aiz had come to this area upon learning that a new Jyaga Maru Kun stall had been established there in order to check it out.

Tipping her head, she wondered why she recognized the gray-haired, gray-eyed girl…and then Aiz remembered. She was a waitress at a bar called The Benevolent Mistress, a place that *Loki Familia* had sometimes frequented in the past. Her name was Syr if Aiz recalled correctly. She was wearing a straw hat and pure white dress instead of her usual waitress outfit, which was why it had taken so long for Aiz to recognize her, and she carried a large wicker basket under one arm. Aiz wondered where she was going as the girl beamed a sunny smile to her regular customer.

“Good day, Sword Princess. Are you out for a stroll perhaps?”

“Um…Hi… I, uhh…Yeah.”

Aiz’s cheeks reddened a little as she realized she couldn’t bear to admit the true reason.

The two casually dressed young ladies exchanged a pleasant greeting…and then, all of a sudden, a glint sparked in Syr’s eye.

“Come to think of it,” she said, “I heard you made Mr. Bell Cranell lie in your lap, isn’t that right?”

“Hmm?!”

Aiz jolted. How on earth did she know about that? Had somebody been telling tales at the bar? As she struggled to piece together a response, Syr suddenly went red-faced, too.

“The truth is…” she said. “Bell actually had me do the same for him.”

“Hmm?!”

Aiz gave the same reaction for the second time in a row. What? Really? And…Bell “had” her do it? What did that mean? And as if that wasn’t enough, the tavern’s poster girl hugged her own arms

bashfully.

“Oh, Mr. Bell…He was so…forceful. And passionate…!”

“Hmm?!?!”

Forceful?! Passionate?! Just lying in someone’s lap? Was that even possible?! How would that work?! Aiz’s mind reeled at the thought.

Of course, she couldn’t possibly have known about the artistic liberties Syr had taken. She just stood there in the street, her face rapidly cycling through all the colors of the rainbow.

“Hey! Something’s up with Sword Princess! She keeps turning red, then white, then red, and then white again!”

“*Gulp*…Did you see that? She talked War Princess into a corner!”

“Just what else are you capable of, Syr Flover…?”

Townsfolk, adventurers, and gods alike stopped in their tracks and watched the showdown between a first-tier adventurer and an ordinary city girl. They watched in utter shock and total horror, unable to breathe a word.

“You’re lucky you made it to the night shift on time, or you’d be in trouble. Next time you decide to take a day off, let me know first! I have scheduling to think about, you know!”

“I’m sorry, Mama Mia!”

Lyu bowed her head apologetically to her employer and rushed into the busy bar, eager to make up for the trouble she’d caused in slipping away to help Bell in the Dungeon. She joined her fellow waitresses and got to work.

“Ho, elf. Thanks for your help today.”

A customer who just entered the shop called out to her. Lyu recognized who it was—Aisha Belka, known by many as Antianeira. The two had been working together just earlier that day on Bell’s request.

“Don’t worry,” she said, sitting down at a small, two-seat table. “I’m just here to drink. I got no intention of spilling the beans about your true identity or whatever.”

Lyu just sighed. “…What do you want to order?”

Aisha ordered an ale, and when Lyu brought it over, she smirked.

“You know, you’re pretty sweet on this Cranell boy, ain’tcha?”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“You’re an elf through and through. I can smell it on ya. But still, you let down your guard when he’s around. You want to know more about him. I wonder, how does he look in your eyes?”

Lyu sighed again and turned away. But every subsequent time Lyu passed by her table, Aisha would order something and ask questions like, “What about that man’s so appealing to you?” “Is it his muscles? His power?” The questions became more and more obscene. “So have you taken what you want from him?” “You must have kissed him at least?” “How do his lips taste?” “He’s a human. Don’t you want his seed?”

Lyu ignored every provocation, causing Aisha to give a heavy, despondent sigh at the elf’s hardheadedness.

“Gah, you elves are a bunch of stuck-up softies,” she said. “At least the dwarves know how to have a decent conversation.”

At that utterance, something finally snapped. Lyu planted her feet, turned around, and fired off her retort.

“I’m sorry I don’t share your lust for carnal pleasures, but in *my* world, we don’t sleep with someone we just met!” Her eyebrows seesawed inward. “We wouldn’t dream of it before first swearing our eternal love in an abandoned glade under the light of the moon!”

Aisha froze and blinked in surprise.

“…Well, I’ll be. I never took you for such a romantic,” she said.

“……”

Lyu turned and briskly walked away, her slender ears turning bright red. For the rest of the night, Lyu had to endure the Amazon’s taunts every time she came to take her order.

MEMORIES OF DAYS GONE BY

“Oh, did Wiene fall asleep?”

“Yeah, she’s all tuckered out…”

Bell returned to find his goddess seated in the cool shade of a tree, with the dragon girl asleep in her lap. Three days had passed since taking the mysterious child into their care, and the sweltering midafternoon sun beat mercilessly down. Until just a while ago, the pair’s playful squeals had been filling the courtyard.

Despite her part-time job keeping her busy, and the two not having much time together as a result, Wiene had quickly taken to Hestia, just as she had to Bell and Haruhime. Bell thought perhaps that was just another perk to being a goddess of home and hearth, but the real reason was that Hestia couldn’t bear to see the foxgirl outdo her and had resorted to feeding the dragon girl Jyaga Maru Kun scraps to quickly earn her favor.

Today was Hestia’s day off, and she had been to see Hephaistos earlier in the day and explained everything.

“Sorry for making you look after her, Goddess.”

“Don’t be. I’m happy for the chance to get to know her a little better.”

Sunlight filtered through the tree branches, and Hestia lovingly stroked Wiene’s hair. Her touch tickled the young child, and she smiled in her sleep, looking nothing like the mighty, territorial beast from which she took her appearance.

Bell found his eyes transfixed by that moment of calm and sat down next to his goddess.

“Goddess…I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have brought her back. I’ve only made things more difficult for everybody.”

Bell felt he had to keep apologizing. He knew he’d done the right thing, but that didn’t mean he didn’t feel guilty for dragging the whole familia into it.

But Hestia cut him off before he could go on making a fool of himself. “Bell,” she said. “I am the hearth, remember? All lost

creatures seek a home…even monsters.”

Hestia beamed a loving smile and peered down at the child in her lap.

“…I want to give her my love, too.”

There was a longing in her eyes as she stroked the girl’s blue-silver hair. Bell stood wide-eyed and, feeling something grip his heart, placed his hand over hers.

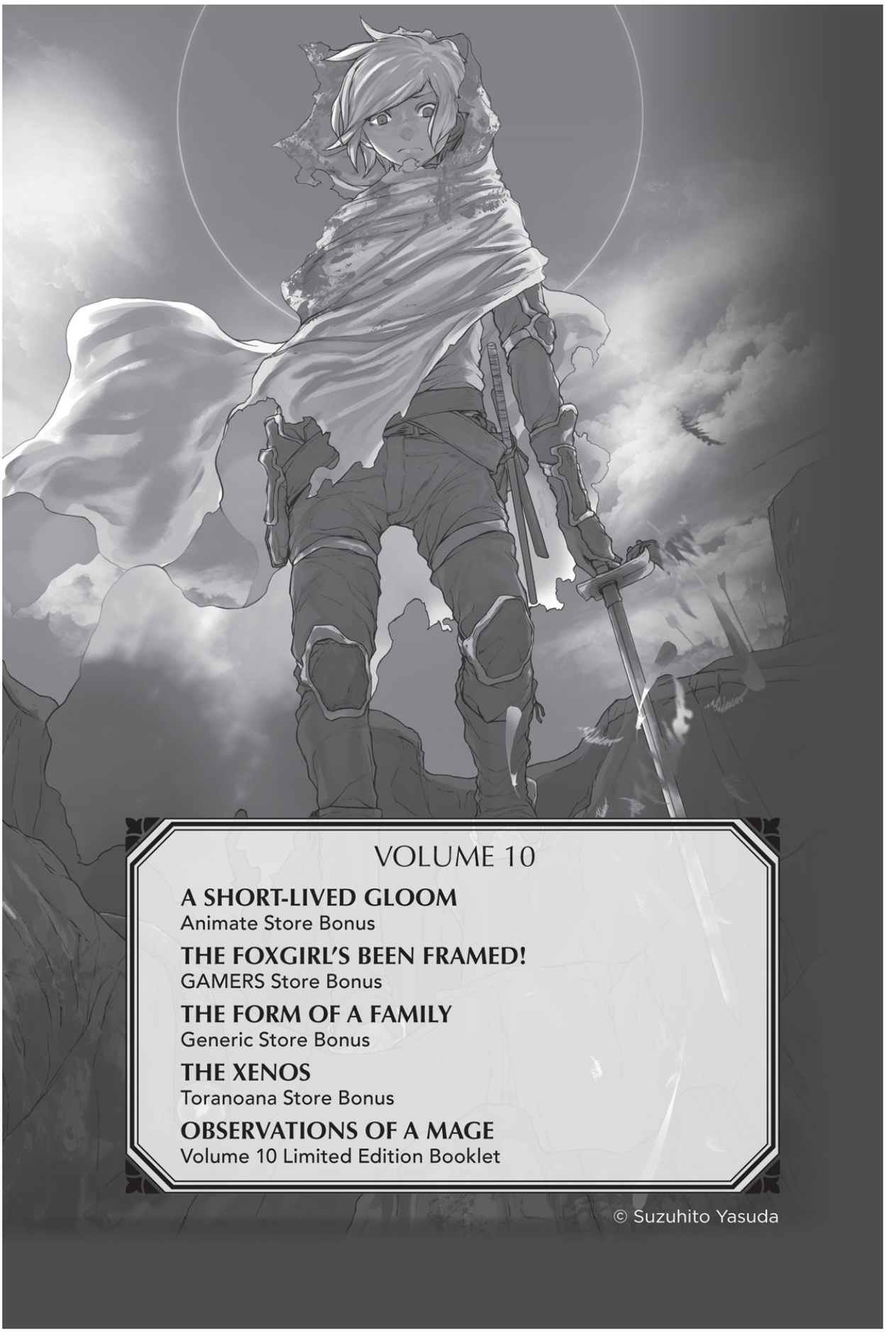
“Mm…”

“Oh, is she waking up?”

Wiene slowly parted her eyelids and looked up at the two people sitting over her. She started to say their names but stopped as an old memory unearthed itself in her mind.

“Mommy…Daddy…”

Bell and Hestia both went bright red. They shared a shocked glance, then both smiled, and all three burst into laughter like a family.



VOLUME 10

A SHORT-LIVED GLOOM
Animate Store Bonus

THE FOXGIRL'S BEEN FRAMED!
GAMERS Store Bonus

THE FORM OF A FAMILY
Generic Store Bonus

THE XENOS
Toranoana Store Bonus

OBSERVATIONS OF A MAGE
Volume 10 Limited Edition Booklet

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A SHORT-LIVED GLOOM

“I see…So that’s what happened.”

Hestia looked down at her feet and sighed. She, Lilly, and Welf were in a room of the mansion, the day after Bell returned from carrying out his mission for the Guild. The goddess had summoned them—the smartest and most levelheaded members of her familia—to ask about the Xenos and their secret village.

Hestia also told them everything that had happened on her end, including her conversation with Ouranos. She was troubled by the weighty, oppressive air she felt around each of the members of her familia, especially Bell, but pressed on with her questions nonetheless.

“What did you two think of the Xenos?” she asked.

“As strange as it is to say, I found them to be a kind, openhearted bunch,” said Lilly.

“Yeah, they seemed friendly enough. They kept asking to shake Bell’s hand.”

“Sh-shake his hand?”

Upon hearing Welf’s description, as well as an account of their touchy-feely nature, Hestia’s gloom transformed into a look of concern.

“Y-yeah,” said Welf. “And…the women and girls, they’re…well, you know…like Wiene, really…cute…or pretty even…”

“That siren lady…Ms. Rei, she’s as pretty as an elf as far as I can tell…”

“And if we’re talking about pretty Xenos, then those lamia and harpy girls aren’t half bad…Oh, I guess there was an al-miraj, too.”

“A-al-miraj?! The rabbit monster?!”

Hestia nearly jumped out of her skin at this startling news.

“T-tell me more! Are they like hume bunnies? You know, with the long ears and the soft bits and everything?!”

“Soft? I suppose so,” said Lilly. “She was covered in fur after all.”

“She seemed awfully interested in our Bell. Kept hugging and licking him all over. Guess she recognizes her own kind, eh?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!”

As her imagination ran wild, Hestia unleashed an almighty shriek.

“Why is there always some temptress trying to steal away my Bell?! And even worse, it’s a monster this time! You think I’m going to stand by and let some two-bit floozy lure my Bell away from his own species?!”

Lilly started to say, “Isn’t that what you’re trying to do?” But Welf sagely stopped her from making things any worse.

“How come the serious mood never lasts long when Lady Hestia is around?” she asked instead.

“Maybe she’s trying to cheer us up?” suggested Welf.

“Somehow, I doubt it…”

Lilly cast an unimpressed look back at Hestia, whose ranting and screaming didn’t seem like it would subside any time soon.

THE FOXGIRL'S BEEN FRAMED!

"Oh, Ms. Wiene…"

The day after parting with the Xenos and returning to the surface, Haruhime walked down the halls of Hearthstone Manor in her maid outfit. Everyone, not only her, was battling loneliness now that the vouivre was gone, and nobody knew what to do.

She had been like a little sister, always calling her name. *"Haruhime! Haruhime!"* And she always followed her around wherever she went, playing together, hugging each other, sharing in one another's warmth…Even if she was a monster, it really felt like Haruhime had gained a sister. Now that she was gone, just remembering their times together brought a tear to the foxgirl's eye.

And the girl had always been fond of Bell even more. Haruhime thought back on the times the three all played together, like one big happy family…Hmm?

All of a sudden, the absent child felt less like a sister and more like…a daughter?

Normally, this would be the point when Haruhime's delusions would get the better of her, but tonight, she just wasn't in the mood. She walked down the hallways bathed in the light of the setting sun until she arrived at a door. She knocked, waited a little, then went inside.

It was Bell's bedroom. Wiene always used to come in here, begging to sleep with him. She found herself drawn across the floor to the bed.

She sat down on the white bedsheets and laid her head down. Haruhime almost felt she could still sense the faint scents and warmth that Wiene had left behind. Eventually, she could bear it no longer and began to cry.

"Oh, Ms. Wiene…Ms. Wiene…!"

Her tail quivering, Haruhime pressed her face into the bedding and sobbed her eyes out.

Is she…going into heat?!

She is!!

Because of Bell's bed!

Lady Haruhime, what are you thinking?!

Outside in the hall, Hestia, Lilly, Welf, and Mikoto all peered through a crack in the doorway. They watched as the former prostitute—ahem—the perfectly wholesome foxgirl plunged her face into the folds of Bell's bed, sniffing and crying and moaning and gasping…and ended up with entirely the wrong impression.

"Hmm? What's going on?"

"Stay right there, Bell!" "Don't come any closer!" "You're still too young and innocent!" "Please, I'm begging you, turn around, Sir Bell!"

"But that's my room?"

Haruhime looked and tilted her head at the commotion going on in the hallway outside.

THE FORM OF A FAMILY

“Mikoto…?”

The day after *Hestia Familia* returned to the surface, Mikoto went to visit Sojourn Townhouse, the home of her old familia. When she arrived, Ouka looked up from his training and noticed her, as did Chigusa and three other humans.

“What’s up?” Chigusa asked.

“N-nothing,” said Mikoto. “I just suddenly felt like seeing you all.”

Unwilling to explain her true reason, Mikoto said something vague, prompting Ouka to mumble, “What a strange girl,” and leave it at that. Still, he and the others immediately realized there was something bothering her.

Mikoto had been feeling emotional ever since she had to say good-bye to the Xenos child. So much so that she found herself instinctively returning to the place that *she* thought of as her home and family.

Her gaze was drawn to the ground, and Mikoto falteringly parted her lips.

“If I…If I could no longer be with you all…Say, if I committed some terrible crime and was banished…What would you do?”

As soon as she finished her words, Mikoto wished she could take them back. She had said too much and obviously given away that there was something on her mind after all. But before she could fluster and come up with some excuse…

“We’d come find you,” said Chigusa.

“What…?”

“It doesn’t matter who tries to tear us apart. If you’re hurting and in pain, we’ll come find you. That’s how it works.”

Mikoto’s childhood friend beamed, a single eye poking through her forelocks. Mikoto’s indigo eyes went wide.

“That’s what you did for Haruhime,” said Ouka, grinning. “Why would we not do the same for you?”

The feelings that she felt—that Bell and every member of

Hestia Familia felt—were more complicated, blighted by the binding weight of reality. But at their core, they were not different from what Chigusa and Ouka had just said without hesitation. Mikoto felt her eyes welling with tears.

"You lot! It's lunchtime! Get inside!"

Takemikazuchi stood at the doorway, folding his impressive arms. How long had he been standing there, watching them? A smile graced his divine lips.

"Mikoto," he said. "That means you as well!"

"…Of course."

Mikoto dried her tears and, just this once, allowed herself to impose upon her family's kindness.

THE XENOS

“Waaaaaahhh! Beeeeeell!”

In the Xenos secret village on the Dungeon’s twentieth floor, Wiene was bawling her eyes out. The vouivre girl had been like this ever since she was separated from *Hestia Familia*.

“Uh-oh, Wiene’s cryin’ us a river.”

“That’s because you were too harsh on her, Lido…”

“You sayin’ this is my fault?!”

The lizardman and the lamia were at a loss as to how to placate their newest addition. It was the first time anything like this had happened.

“You two are too soft on her. Allow me to teach her how things work around here.”

“Ranieh, you stay back! You want to scare her off already?!”

Lido was genuinely concerned for the girl’s fate if the arachne was allowed to proceed with whatever sort of baptism she had in mind.

“It’s okay, Wiene, you’ll see them again,” Rei reassured her. “Isn’t that what Mr. Bell said, too?”

Wiene stopped crying and looked up, her eyes full of tears.

“Hmph. I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you. He’s an adventurer. It won’t be long before his greed leads him to an early grave.”

It was the gargoyle, Gros, who chimed in with that tactless remark. Wiene’s tear glands kicked in, and she burst out crying once again, screaming, “Beeell!!”

“Idiot!” “You fool!” “Is your head made out of rocks?!” The other Xenos quickly yelled at Gros, and he tucked his tail between his legs and retreated in shame.

“There’s only one thing to do now…” came a voice.

“Fia!” “You have an idea?”

It was the harpy girl who stepped up to put a stop to this seemingly unwinnable situation. She gently scooped up the child in her arms and offered her something to quiet her down—a soft,

white rabbit.

“What do you think of Aruru here? Doesn’t she remind you of somebody?”

“Gyu?”

“……”

Wiene stared into the fluffy bunny’s horrified eyes and immediately threw her arms around her. Seeing that she’d stopped crying, the other Xenos all said something along the lines of, “All right. Seems like that’ll keep her occupied for a while,” and walked off.

One day, Wiene would learn to respect the al-miraj’s boundaries and be able to bear being in a separate party to her, but that day was still far off.

OBSERVATIONS OF A MAGE

Keep an eye on Bell Cranell, his party, and the Xenos girl.

These were the orders given to me, Fels, by my master Ouranos. An intelligent monster has succeeded in reaching the surface, forcing our hand.

Truth be told, though, I wonder if we should not take more drastic action. Can we really afford to simply observe from a distance as such a dangerous and critical event unfolds before our eyes? It troubles me, but if that is my savior's wish, then it is not my place to argue. I, too, would like to see the Xenos saved.

From this day on, my loyal owl, Gafiel, will assist in my observations of *Hestia Familia*. I have also decided to keep a journal of my findings. I am not always by my lord's side after all, and it will be easier to present my report in a compact, digestible format.

Can *Hestia Familia* truly become a beacon of hope for the Xenos? I, for one, will not hold my breath…



Day 1.

Today, many of the *Hestia Familia* members, including their goddess, were absent, leaving only the vouivre girl, Little Rookie, and one renart at the familia home. The three of them played together in the mansion courtyard, making for a truly heartwarming sight.

It seems that, much like the rest of this city, the vouivre girl is quite interested in Mr. Bell Cranell. Never have I seen a Xenos open up to an adventurer so quickly before. Perhaps, as I learned, the fact the girl was recently born in the Dungeon is partly responsible for this. Could it be that some level of imprinting is taking place?

The incident I observed shortly afterward appeared to lend

credence to this theory, albeit primarily through the words and actions of Bell Cranell himself. Bell seemed unconsciously predisposed to accept and comfort the Xenos after she injured him. Even to an outside observer such as myself, the love and affection were plain to see.

You may laugh at me if you will, but from the very first page of this journal, I have been wondering if this boy may be the one. Indeed, though my master's decision still gives me grief, I cannot dispute the facts, and I find my doubts partly giving way to a sense of hopeful optimism. Bell has well and truly risen to the occasion and seems almost wholly uninterested by the potential personal gains inherent to the discovery of a rare monster breed. His behavior intrigues me, and given the chance, I would very much like to pick his brains about it someday.

However, I have a task I must fulfill, and on that note, one point did come up today that I feel obliged to bear in mind moving forward.

Bell Cranell seemed highly aware of the observation being conducted. It is exceedingly likely, in fact, that he realized he was being watched. When Gafiel returns, I shall have to reexamine my methods in order to eliminate any possibility of detection.

After sunset, the entire familia reconvened and spent some quality time in each other's company. The vouivre girl seemed to have opened up to every member by this point, likely due to the actions of Bell Cranell and, in particular, the renart girl Haruhime Sanjouno. They had become quite close, as evidenced by the incident that occurred in the baths. Incidentally, seeing the naked vouivre girl and half-naked members of his familia caused Bell Cranell to shriek and faint.

Still, it got me thinking…How long has it been since I last experienced a bath? Certainly, the notion of a pile of bones soaking in the tub is almost comically futile, but oh, what I wouldn't give to feel the warm waters envelop my flesh once more. Unfortunately, it can never be.

I must say, this journal business is quite a bit more fun than I initially expected. I must be finding it so to be jotting down such idle thoughts. The gods would surely say of me that, even after eight hundred years, I am still a child. Perhaps they are right.

Of course, I must not let this devolve into mere voyeurism, but

for now, I shall consider any personal enjoyment I may take in the course of my tasks a welcome blessing. I shall do as I usually do and learn from the gods' example. No being is greater than they at relishing the joys of the world after all.

Now whatever will tomorrow bring? I find myself waiting eagerly in anticipation.



Day 2.

Something peculiar has happened already. Rather than summarize the conversation, which I highly suspect to be an impossible task, I shall write out what I overheard verbatim.

"Lady Hestia, what on earth are you doing exiting Master Bell's room at such an ungodly hour in the morning?! And with young Wiene in tow, no less! Did we not all sign an agreement forbidding the use of such underhanded tactics?!"

"I-I just thought Wiene was feeling lonely! I wasn't thinking of me, honest!"

"D-d-d-does that mean you also involved an i-i-i-i-innocent young girl like Wiene in your depraved acts?! Scandalous!!"

"Hey, who are you calling depraved?! I'm a virgin goddess, I'll have you know! And what do you even mean by that?!"

What on earth goes on within these four walls…?

I do not envy Bell Cranell, trapped in a war of affections as he is. It was a truly piteous sight, with the poor boy unable to do anything, the vouivre girl crying in young Mikoto Yamato's arms, and the other girls screaming at each other. Welf Crozzo stood off to one side, sighing, and I found myself worrying about the young man's mental health.

Not that any of that is my business. In any case, it seems that Mikoto Yamato aside, the other 80 percent of *Hestia Familia*'s womenfolk harbor feelings for Bell Cranell. What a strange familia indeed…

Many of the gods say he is building a so-called harem, and it is difficult to argue otherwise, seeing the ladies close ranks so

dramatically in response to a rogue element…However, based on my observations, Bell Cranell is not a heartbreaker, nor is he polyamorous, nor does he seem to be the kind of vulgar character dead set on bedding every woman in the city.

Oh, my own imagination does amuse me sometimes.

In any case, I have a sneaking suspicion that witnessing such arguments is not conducive to the wholesome upbringing of a newborn Xenos. I am starting to get the sense that leaving the child in their care may not be a good idea after all.

To lay my fears to rest, I must cut to the heart of this cobweb of relationships that has so thoroughly ensnared the young Bell Cranell…



Day 3, Morning.

My investigation has uncovered many things surrounding the boy. It is clear to me now that it is not only out of convenience that he sits in the captain's seat. He truly possesses the respect of his fellow familia members, despite being the youngest and his frequent incidents that are so embarrassing that I cannot bear to watch them.

Of course, it is entirely possible that this respect is more akin to that of a group of big brothers and sisters all looking after their younger sibling. The things he says are oftentimes foolish, and yet those around him cannot help but be charmed by them. They will do anything to support him, almost as though whatever he says is the absolute, undeniable truth. Of all the members, none display this attitude more prominently than Hestia herself.

Today, I observed the following development:

"How did you meet Bell, Haruhime?"

"I was living in a…nightlife district on the outskirts of town. Master Bell and Ms. Mikoto rescued me, much as he did you, Ms. Wiene."

© nilitsu



“Mm-hmm. You should have seen Sir Bell back then, Lady Haruhime. He was prepared to leave the city with you if that was what it took.”

“R-really?!”

“Yes. I, too, was shocked when I heard it. It moved me how, even through all the pain and suffering, the only things that occupied his thoughts were you and your safety.”

“I’m jealous…”

It was in the courtyard, at a time when Bell Cranell was otherwise engaged. The renart girl made a strange sound and reddened, but her fine tail wagged like a dog’s. She’s exceedingly easy to read, that girl.

Haruhime Sanjouno.

It was clear from day one that she harbored feelings for Bell Cranell. Judging by the conversation I just transcribed, as well as the prior allegiance with *Ishtar Familia* recorded in her Guild registration, I can only assume that something happened between her and Bell Cranell when war broke out between Ishtar and Freya. A former brothel worker sold into bondage…I mean, out of bondage. What a romantic tale…I’m jealous.

This girl, it seems, dotes the most on the young vouivre out of any member of the familia. I cannot tell whether it is simple kindness or sympathy born of a common past. What is evident, however, is that she does not view the Xenos girl with any of the fear or revulsion she would a normal monster. Whenever Bell Cranell is away, it is usually this Haruhime Sanjouno who looks after her. She has made an active effort, and the vouivre girl has opened her heart in return. Surely, this is how Ouranos and the Xenos wish all their kind to be treated. This renart girl possesses some truly rare qualities.

She is assisted by Mikoto Yamato, who appears to be some kind of samurai or ninja from the Far East. They seem to be old acquaintances and must have grown up together over there. Although she seemed frightened at first, she is gradually learning to accept the vouivre girl at Haruhime Sanjouno’s urging. It seems she still does not fully trust her, however, and keeps a watchful eye on the girl at all times, but those eyes are tinged with kindness as they watch her play with Haruhime Sanjouno.

My personal analysis is that she is something of a moderating

presence within the familia, much like Welf Crozzo. She is neither completely naive nor completely uncompromising. She is serious, with a strong sense of duty, especially toward her family, and pure and upstanding, as can be seen in the circumstances of her conversion.

The attitudes of both Haruhime Sanjouno and Mikoto Yamato can be traced back to Bell Cranell. It is their trust in him that leads to their acceptance of the vouivre girl. If he had not been there, there's no doubt neither of them would be who they are today. They would have ended up just like Lido…like all of the Xenos, endlessly persecuted without anyone seeing them for who they truly are.

Perhaps I place too much value on the boy, but it is true, whichever way you slice it, that something extraordinary had to have happened for me to see what I saw today. The gulf between mankind and the monsters is simply too vast to bridge otherwise.

So you may call Bell Cranell a good-natured fool, but I wish to believe that it is his foolish acts and those who believe in them that have succeeded in bringing a smile to a young Xenos's face.



Day 3, Afternoon.

One thing is abundantly clear to me now after the events of today: Lilliluka Erde is a pragmatist.

While her fellow familia members happily chatted with the vouivre girl, she alone did not participate. In fact, she has been getting steadily more distant day by day, in inverse proportion to the increased familiarity displayed by her peers, almost as though she seeks to offset their efforts.

She has had fewer interactions with the vouivre girl than anyone else in the familia, and based on my observations, she seems to be actively avoiding her. The way she looks at her is no different from if she were a normal monster, and her eyes always seem coated in a thin layer of ice…until today, when, at Welf Crozzo's encouragement, the vouivre girl came over and embraced the young Ms. Erde, causing her to erupt into a furious rage. Was it her own racial characteristics that were the problem?

She may be the one to watch out for, given our circumstances. This prum is material, calculating, and knows when to cut her losses. I wouldn't go so far as to call her cruel, but if push comes to shove, as they say, then Lilliluka Erde will not hesitate to put the needs of her familia above anything else.

It is all due to a harsh past that has forced her to make difficult choices. According to my intelligence, she formerly belonged to *Soma Familia*. There, she lived at rock bottom, unable to avert her eyes to the world's injustices and unable to see things in a positive light. As a result, she always views things with objectivity and emotional detachment.

She and Hestia seem to form the backbone of *Hestia Familia*. Given that the goddess cannot enter the Dungeon, I do wonder if it is Lilliluka Erde who takes command down there. Perhaps it is fair to call her the party strategist.

Out of all the characters in this familia, I find hers is the plight that resonates most highly with my own. Before Ouranos saved me, I was submerged deep in what might be termed the darkness of mankind, and there are times I see a little of myself in her eyes. Perhaps, when the time comes to reveal my hand, it is her I should seek out.

What I find most interesting, though, is how devoted she is to Bell Cranell. She clearly feels a great deal of affection for the boy, which in her case manifests as a desire to put herself in danger, shielding the boy from anyone who might do him harm. She is like a knight protecting her king—or perhaps a knight and his page is a more apt metaphor. The only difference between her and me is that I could only dream of possessing her adorable appearance.

…Oh no. I got a little carried away, there. What on earth have I written? Have I forgotten that Ouranos will read this?

I mean, I am sure he would absorb the whole thing stone-faced, as is his wont, but I'm not so sure my own nerves could take it. Perhaps I should prepare a second, edited journal? But then…

(The following paragraphs have been struck through and rewritten many times, and a section of the page has even been cut out.)

I digress.

I would like to focus next on Welf Crozzo. By contrast, his thoughts are always the farthest from my own, and I find it hardest to predict what he will do.

I am a humble mage, and he is a blacksmith. That alone puts us in entirely different worlds.

While there is no doubt he strives to support Bell Cranell, he is by no means subservient and possesses a fiery will—a pride that matches what he invests in his own work perhaps. He will not hesitate to turn down money and fame if obtaining them runs counter to his principles, no matter whose criticism he might invite. If he has decided a cause is just, then he will stick to it, whatever those around him have to say.

Of course, the same goes for whatever he considers unjust. And so, depending on the actions of the vouivre girl, he could very well turn out to be her ally or her enemy. I cannot predict which.

While mages such as myself act according to logic and reason, craftsmen decide their course with conviction. That is, they possess a code of conduct that aligns best with their beliefs. Often, this code of conduct inspires them to take action that we mages would never expect. This incalculable nature is the bane of our existence.

I may have referred to him as a moderating presence in previous pages, but that is only because I am yet unsure how to classify him. If I were forced to define his position in the familia, I would liken him to a trusted court adviser. Many in the group seek and value his opinion, even Lilliluka Erde—though she often hides her intent through curses as she does so. Perhaps, as a realist, she values his ability to grant the group a sense of direction and purpose.

Here is a conversation that occurred today:

“Mr. Welf? Have you forgotten what we talked about the other day? She’s a monster. You mustn’t get too close to her. If even you begin succumbing to emotion, Mr. Welf, then this familia is doomed.”

“You’re makin’ too big a deal out of it, Li’l E. Sometimes, you’ve got to be a little flexible. It’s just like in the forge, where the

hardest metal is the hardest to work."

"Are you calling Lilly stubborn?"

"I didn't go that far. It's just, you gotta know your enemy before you jump to conclusions. I know you're worried about making mistakes, but you can always change your mind. Don't forget that. That's how I forge my weapons, too."

"……"

"Why don't you try hanging out with them for a change? I'll give her the cold shoulder on your behalf."

"…Shut up."

That one exchange alone speaks volumes.

While *Hestia Familia* is only a recently established group, Welf Crozzo is its eldest member, possessing a wealth of experience he acquired during his time with *Hephaistos Familia*. Perhaps he assumes the role of an elder brother, helping his fledgling familia grow.

What an admirable familia. They may not admit it, but their personalities complement each other well. Perhaps one or two of them are too gullible, but the others more than make up for each other's shortcomings.

Is it Hestia's divinity? Or Bell Cranell's humanity? Apart from him, all the other members are converts. Even in Orario, such a thing is rarely seen.



Day 4, Morning.

The excitement began early in *Hestia Familia* today. The goddess is usually kept busy by her part-time job, but today, she took some time off.

I must say, nothing I observed during the week indicated that this was a familia in such dire financial straits that their patron goddess should be forced to seek employment, but if the rumors are to be believed, then they owe a debt in the hundreds of millions of valis. Truly, there is no shortage of troubles for them.

Hestia seems to dote on the vouivre child at every opportunity.

I am not sure whether this is due to some perceived rivalry with Haruhime Sanjouno, whom the child also fancies, or purely due to a fondness for children that transcends species.

Watching the two of them play merrily in the lush courtyard beneath the warm sunlight, I must admit that I felt myself quite moved. It was much like watching a quarrelsome elf and a dwarf join hands and dance, only many times more remarkable.

I could not possibly say how the goddess felt at that moment, sitting beneath a tree, with the vouivre girl in her lap. What I can say for certain is that she is a goddess of love. That much was clear from the gentle look in her eyes. The whole scene was so serene—it was almost enough to make me forget her usual rambunctious behavior.

Afterward, Bell Cranell returned, and upon waking, the vouivre girl called him and Hestia “Mommy” and “Daddy,” which was enough to make me want to rush in and immediately demand to know exactly what they had been teaching the poor girl. The two shared an embarrassed look and began laughing like one big happy family, but immediately after that, Lilliluka Erde ran in and started throwing accusations around, and the whole matter got quite out of hand. I, meanwhile, felt cheated for having been allowed a rare moment of sentimentality, only for it to all come crashing down.

But my futile quibbles aside, I am relieved that Hestia was the first god to speak to the vouivre girl, even more so than I am at Bell Cranell being the one to discover her.

If you knew Hestia, you might call it wishful optimism, but I think otherwise. As a goddess stripped of her omniscience, none have more reason to show concern than she, and yet she accepts the outcast without hesitation.

She treats her not as a representative of her species but as an individual. Not as a monster but as a being with a heart.

Ouranos was right to trust her. It is just as he said. She is a goddess of compassion. A warm hearth that shelters all those who seek its protection. Ouranos never doubted her for a moment, and I think I see why now. She is indeed worthy of the title, “warden of lost children.”

There is, however, one thing I must note, and that is that the vouivre girl seems to have inherited the goddess’s love of Jyaga

Maru Kun…or perhaps it is fairer to say she has been taught it. Not a day has gone by wherein the goddess has not successfully bribed the girl with one of those potato treats, and the girl's mindless devotion to the snack is staggering.

Surely, only a god could be capable of such a feat…

Oh, but my hands are quivering. Perhaps I'm more agitated than I thought. I can barely hold the pen still…



Day 4, Night.

It appears that the focus of this journal has inadvertently shifted somewhat, but at this stage, I may as well go all the way and touch on the important subject of Bell Cranell.

First, I must admit that I found observing him to pose a difficult challenge. His senses are remarkable, even for an upper-class adventurer, and I failed to keep count of the number of times his suspicions were raised.

He was truly like…an easily startled rabbit. Is that too harsh an assessment, I wonder?

To give my honest impression, he truly deserves his titles and praise. His aliases of Little Rookie and Record Holder are no mere embellishment.

The point is…it was hard work. Not so much for me as for Gafiel, my loyal familiar.

Of course, Gafiel always flies as silently as the night, but I also taught him never to come too close or to look at Bell Cranell directly. On top of this, upon his return, I always had to provide a mountain of rats to soothe his temper.

Over the past four days, the vouivre girl has very rarely left Bell Cranell's side. She would always follow him into the bath as a matter of course, and when it came time to sleep, she would slip into his bed and cling to him as she slept, even while Hestia was being shouted at by the other womenfolk of the familia for attempting the same. Thus, Bell Cranell always had one thing or another to contend with, and I overheard Welf Crozzo stating that he was just like a father dealing with a newborn daughter, which I thought summed up his woes perfectly.

Although he has gotten used to it now, Bell Cranell would always panic when the vouivre girl hugged him in the early days. He would constantly be running around, screaming, panicking, not knowing what to do…Completely unprepared and unbecoming for a second-tier adventurer. If the people of this city saw him in that state, no doubt they would wonder just who the brave fighter Bell Cranell they saw projected on the mirrors during the War Game was.

And…this is merely the observations of a fool, but Bell Cranell seems to have bad luck with women. I do not mean that it is written in the stars but more that it seems to follow him around, or it makes him who he is—or perhaps the boy's upbringing had something to do with it…I do not know.

Mortals favored by a goddess tend to suffer misfortune—or *lead interesting lives*, I should say. This is the case even if the goddess herself means no harm, for other gods conspire to stir the pot or to get themselves a piece of the action. I cannot say it always ends up like this, but I do wonder what will happen to the boy.

That said, however, I trust him just as well as I do Hestia when it comes to how much he cares for the vouivre girl. His expressions of apology, gratitude, and determination toward the other members of his familia would be hard to fake. You could say that his sincerity has moved me, and you would not be too wrong, but it is far more than that. It is blinding. At least for one such as me.

And at the same, I cannot deny he is still a child. That much is clear from the uncertainty and confusion he displayed when separated from the vouivre girl.

The boy has found no answers yet.

Something happened when the members of *Hestia Familia* were going to bed. Just as they all retreated inside the mansion, outside the reach of Gafiel's eye, and I thought my day of useful surveillance was coming to an end, Bell Cranell and the vouivre girl left the bedroom and exited the mansion through a hallway window.

I was curious what they could be up to, but the pair climbed up to a part of the roof overlooking the courtyard and looked up

at the sky. When I saw that through my oculus, I stepped outside and immediately understood. The whole firmament above was illuminated by countless silver stars set into the boundless night.

I suppose it had been the vouivre girl's wish to see it. Watching her shimmering eyes, both Bell Cranell and I were forced to wear a bittersweet smile. Yet, in the end, the beautiful sky transfixed our eyes as it did hers.

And as we stood streets apart but in the same city, connected by the same summer sky, a bright spark cut across the curtain of night. A shooting star. It stole the vouivre girl's breath away, and she turned to Bell Cranell excitedly to ask him precisely what she had just seen. The boy explained to her a tale often told to young children—that a wish must be made before the light fades—and despite the meteor having long since fizzled away to nothing by that point, the young girl closed her eyes and mouthed a few silent words.

Bell Cranell asked her what she had wished for, and the vouivre girl smiled and said:

"I wished that all of us could stay together forever."

I still recall the look on Bell Cranell's face when she said that. For a while, he said nothing, and then he beamed a smile quite unlike his usual one and said, "We will."

At that moment, in all honesty, I felt despair. There was no conviction in those words. Bell Cranell had spoken them simply for the vouivre girl's sake. He lied to her, just as he lied to himself, belittling the efforts of all those who work toward a peaceful world. He spoke nothing but empty platitudes while turning his back on the cruel, harsh truth.

The vouivre girl smiled and embraced him, but the look on Bell Cranell's face was so terribly fragile.

The illusion cannot last.

I know this.

What I have seen within the halls of *Hestia Familia* is a glimpse of a better world, but it is not this world. Lilliluka Erde is correct, and the brave souls of that group cannot delay the inevitable. The day is fast approaching when I shall have to step in.

It is as I feared. A single familia, a single adventurer, cannot be

called upon to shoulder the hopes and dreams of the entire Xenos race. Even sustaining the present status quo is too much for the boy, and his conscience gnaws at his mind constantly. Yet the world will not wait for his inner conflicts to be resolved.

What will his answer be, when the time comes?

Will he abandon the vouivre girl, as I have seen so many times before?

Will he bend to the consensus of his peers and opt to ignore the plight of these poor souls?

Or will he forge ahead with a third option? One I have not yet seen?

But I must stop all this wishful thinking before it gets the better of me. Even a shooting star cannot help me now.

The happy life that I have seen is just like that silvery streak—a flash in the pan, an ephemeral beauty that comes and goes in an instant.

One day, *Hestia Familia* will do as so many adventurers before them have done, and…

"…I should stop."

My hand stills, ceasing the scribbles of my pen. Alone in a pitch-dark room, I look down at the page I have just written and lay my quill aside.

This is hardly a professional report. It reads more like a record of my woes—a personal diary of gloomy secrets. I cannot hand this to Ouranos, filled as it is with my own baseless projection and conjecture into the hearts of others.

Instead, I shall tell him this:

The vouivre girl is well. They have not harmed her.

If there is any hope to be found, it is not a beacon but a faint, nebulous light. As of now, it is unformed. As of now, they struggle blindly. Perhaps, in time, that dust will coalesce into a star, but perhaps it will not. Either way, it is something to be protected.

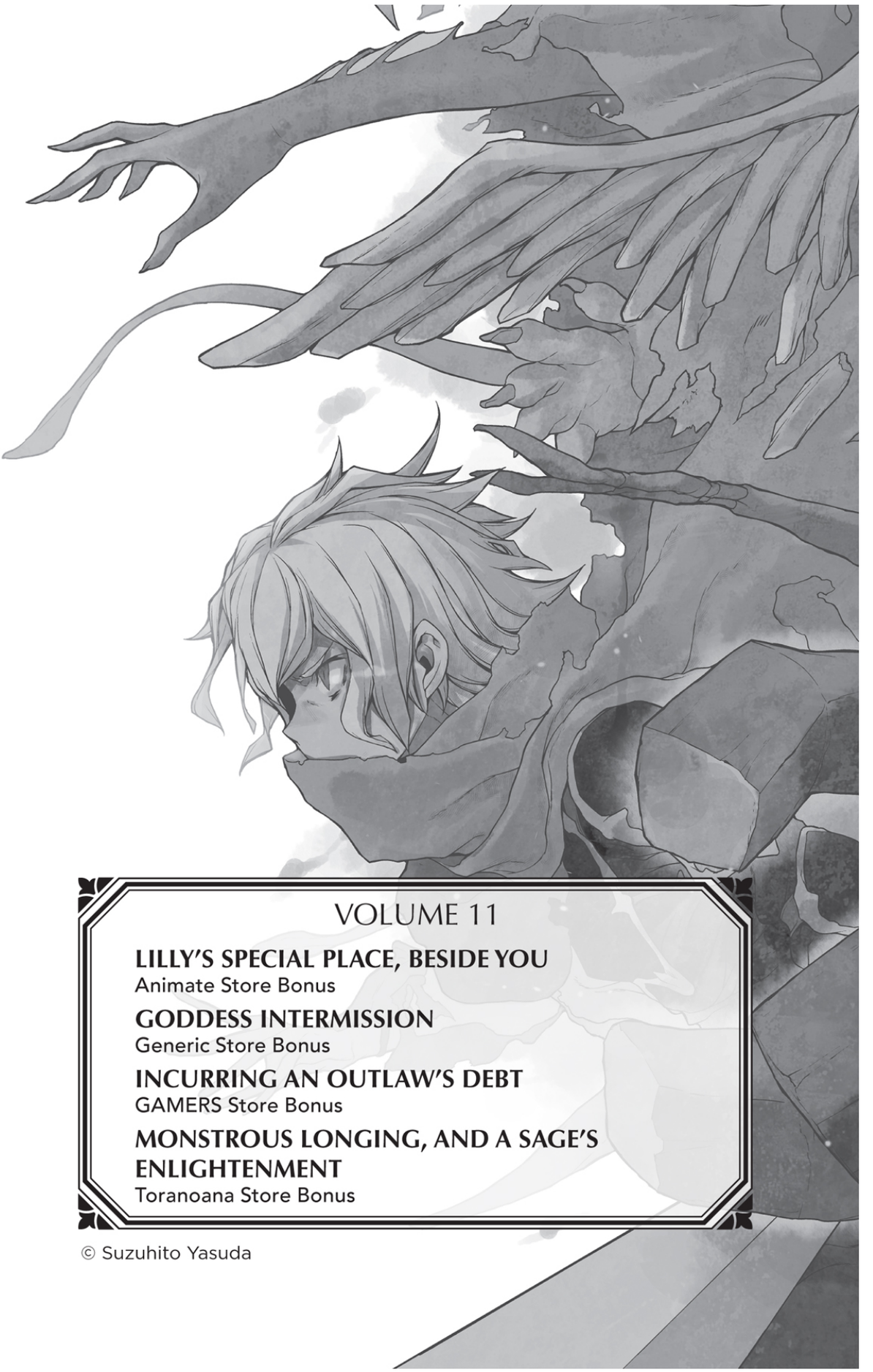
"……"

But that changes nothing. Soon, these people will be forced to confront an unpalatable truth. And I will be forced to watch on and bear witness to what kind of answer Bell Cranell will give.

I wish him the best of luck. For the smiles I saw in that mansion courtyard cannot be found any other way.

“…Don’t you think so, too, Gafiel?”

In a dark and dusty sanctum, nestled among old books, a sage spoke to their owl. The bird closed its eyes and hooted as if in agreement.



VOLUME 11

LILLY'S SPECIAL PLACE, BESIDE YOU
Animate Store Bonus

GODDESS INTERMISSION
Generic Store Bonus

INCURRING AN OUTLAW'S DEBT
GAMERS Store Bonus

MONSTROUS LONGING, AND A SAGE'S ENLIGHTENMENT
Toranoana Store Bonus

© Suzuhito Yasuda

LILLY'S SPECIAL PLACE, BESIDE YOU

"Are you sure you're okay leaving things like this, Mr. Bell?"

Lilly's backpack rocked from side to side as the pair walked through the night. *Hestia Familia* had sent the two of them to follow up on the contents of Fels's secret message and visit the Witch's Hideaway. Even now, they attracted suspicious gazes and were pretending to be out shopping for items.

"Like what?"

"Everyone's saying all those mean and untrue things about you. That you're a greedy rabbit, even that you have a perverse interest in monsters…Isn't it tough to live like this?"

The reason for Lilly's chat was partially to appear as nonchalant as possible, but she also wanted to ask. Bell looked off into space as he tried to come up with an answer.

"It is tough," he said, placing a finger to his cheek. "I want to tell everyone they've got it all wrong. Sometimes, I really want to go back to the times everyone in the city smiled at me…"

Lilly listened intently as Bell laid his heart bare.

"Maybe I can never go back. Maybe it'll crush me in the end, but…"

He looked up at the stars.

"Right now, I want to do everything I can to help the Xenos."

Explanations could come later. Perhaps, by then, it would be too late, but Bell's conscience was clear—the Xenos came first.

Lilly felt a sense of sadness come over as she stared at him. Bell would wear himself out for their sake if he had to, and at this rate, it was looking like he might. But then Bell said something Lilly didn't expect to hear.

"Besides, I have you guys helping me."

"Huh?"

"You're all sharing the pain, so I don't have to fight alone…I think that's why I can do it…Thank you."

Bell looked embarrassed but still managed to choke out the words. Lilly was shocked and felt her cheeks turning red.

Eventually, a bright smile formed on her lips. Then it transformed into a crafty grin as she suddenly got an idea.

She leaned in, adopted a sultry voice, and whispered in Bell's ear.

"Anytime, boy. You *know* you can count on me."

Bell's shoulders cramped, and his face went bright red.

"Th-that's not fair…" he whined.

"Hee-hee."

Lilly giggled and wrapped a hand around his—the supportive, uplifting hand of an elder sister.

GODDESS INTERMISSION

Level 3
Strength: D 577→A 812 Defense: D 508→A 855
Dexterity: D 582→A 814 Agility: A 807→S 998
Magic: D 531→B 777
Luck: H Immunity: H

"Wow…"

Looking at the boy's back, Hestia couldn't help but marvel at how much Bell's ability scores had shot up.

It was the evening of the Xenos rescue mission, and all the members of *Hestia Familia* were gathered at the mansion to have their status updated before heading out to Daedalus Street.

"I guess the hunters gave you a tough time, Bell?"

"Er…you could say that, yeah…"

Hestia looked down at the Koine copy she had made of Bell's status, and the boy quickly pulled on his shirt. Bell's last status update was a week ago, shortly after the city turned on him. Bell had faced a gauntlet of trials since then, including the hunt for the Xenos, the battle with Dix and his hunters, and not least of all, chasing after the rampaging Wiene. It had been a long time since any of them had been given a chance to breathe.

Still not enough for a level-up, of course…

As level increased, the amount of excelia required to advance shot up as well. Hestia was well aware of that, but she had half-hoped that Bell's recent exploits were enough to do it. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

"I'm sorry, Bell," she sighed, slumping in her armchair. "It looks like it's all in your hands after all."

"It's fine, Goddess," said Bell with a smile. "I'll do everything I can. It'll all turn out okay…I hope."

Normally, Bell's rapid growth was bewildering and a little scary, but right now, it was a source of hope and strength. But

Loki Familia was Bell's toughest foe yet. Would it be enough?

Bell picked up his update sheet and returned to the living room to rejoin his friends. After a while, Hestia got to her feet as well.

"…I complain when he grows too fast. I complain when he grows too slow. Guess he can't win, can he? …Right, I suppose I'd better pitch in, too!"

What the goddess didn't yet know was that Bell's status would shoot off the charts in just one night.

INCURRING AN OUTLAW'S DEBT

"Why don't you start by tellin' us everythin' you know?"

"If you don't like it, maybe you shouldn't have attacked us in the first place, yeah?"

"Don't think for a moment you have any friends around here."

"Shoulda done this a long time ago. Woulda made things a lot easier."

Thuggish adventurers appear before me in droves, itching to start some trouble. It's the night of the Xenos rescue operation, and it hasn't been long since I entered Daedalus Street, but I'm already surrounded.

There's no time to lose if I want to draw *Loki Familia*'s attention away from the Xenos successfully, so these adventurers picked a really unfortunate time to get their hands dirty. Or perhaps they were always waiting for a chance to get back at me. If so, this would be the perfect place to do it—Daedalus Street is a rough part of town, and a lot goes down here that the ordinary people of the city never learn about.

"Even a Level Three like you doesn't stand a chance against an attack from all of us upper-class adventurers at once."

There are about thirty of them, so they have a point. They know my strength, but what they don't know is the magic item I'm holding on to. But just as I make my mind up to use it…

"I'm gonna throw my lot in with Little Rookie here!"

"Wha…?! Mord?! You traitor!"

One adventurer steps forth, much to the surprise of his peers. What's more, about half of the crowd follows him over to my side.

"I-it's you, Mord!" I cry. "B-but why are you helping me?"

"Ain't that obvious? You owe me one now, so when you get your hands on that reward, you make sure you share it with me, yeah?"

That wasn't the answer I was expecting to hear. Not by a long shot.

“I ran into a lizardman in the sewers once and got my ass handed to me. There’s no way in hell I’m goin’ up against a whole bunch of ’em. So here’s the deal, Little Rookie. I won’t ask any questions. In return, you beat those monsters up and bring me the money, you hear?”

Mord wraps a thick arm around my neck, showing me a money-crazed grin. I hear his associates Scott and Gyle mutter things like, “What a sly bugger,” under their breath.

But I suddenly realize something. I recognize these people. It’s not just Mord—these guys were all there for our duel on the eighteenth floor.

They were trying to show me the darker side of society. Now they’re saving me from it. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anything more ironic. Still, it makes me so happy my heart quivers.

“…I’m sorry! Thank you!”

“Yeah, get outta here! Give those monsters a good whipping!”

I take off running, wiping my eyes and smiling, with Mord’s voice at my back.

MONSTROUS LONGING, AND A SAGE'S ENLIGHTENMENT

"Please go easy on me, Miss Einaaaaaaaaaa!"

Night had well and truly descended on Daedalus Street, and a battle to decide the monsters' fate was fast approaching.

A glowing oculus transmitted the boy's shriek. Its location was not the command room, where Hestia and Haruhime were, but the underground sewers, where the Xenos were hiding out.

"He's really something," said Lido, impressed. "Human males are more sought after than I expected."

"I wonder if that's the right way to put it...?" commented the gargoyle, Gros.

The siren, Rei, was mysteriously silent. "...No comment," she said.

Possibly due to interference from Hestia's paired crystal, the Xenos could see what was happening to Bell just as well through their own. As Nahza, Lyu, Aisha, and Eina each made an appearance, the monsters tossed out various comments.

"You've grown quite fond of that boy, haven't you, Rei?" commented the lamia, Laura.

"What are you trying to say?" Rei shot back with a deathly glare.

"Well, you know our Rei," said Lido. "Her two dreams are to fly in the sky aboveground and be held by the one she loves."

The lizardman's impertinent remark caused Rei to spin around, red-faced. "Wh-what's that got to do with anything?!" she shrieked.

The female Xenos had much to say about Bell's apparent trysts.

"Aww, I wanna lie with Bell too! I wanna mate!"

"Wh-what are you saying?! You know the humans only m-m-m-mate with those they love!!! Besides, we can't even have children with them!"

"You're too serious about this, Rei! Keep that up, and even Fia

and Aruru will get to Bell before you!"

"Wh-wh-what…?!"

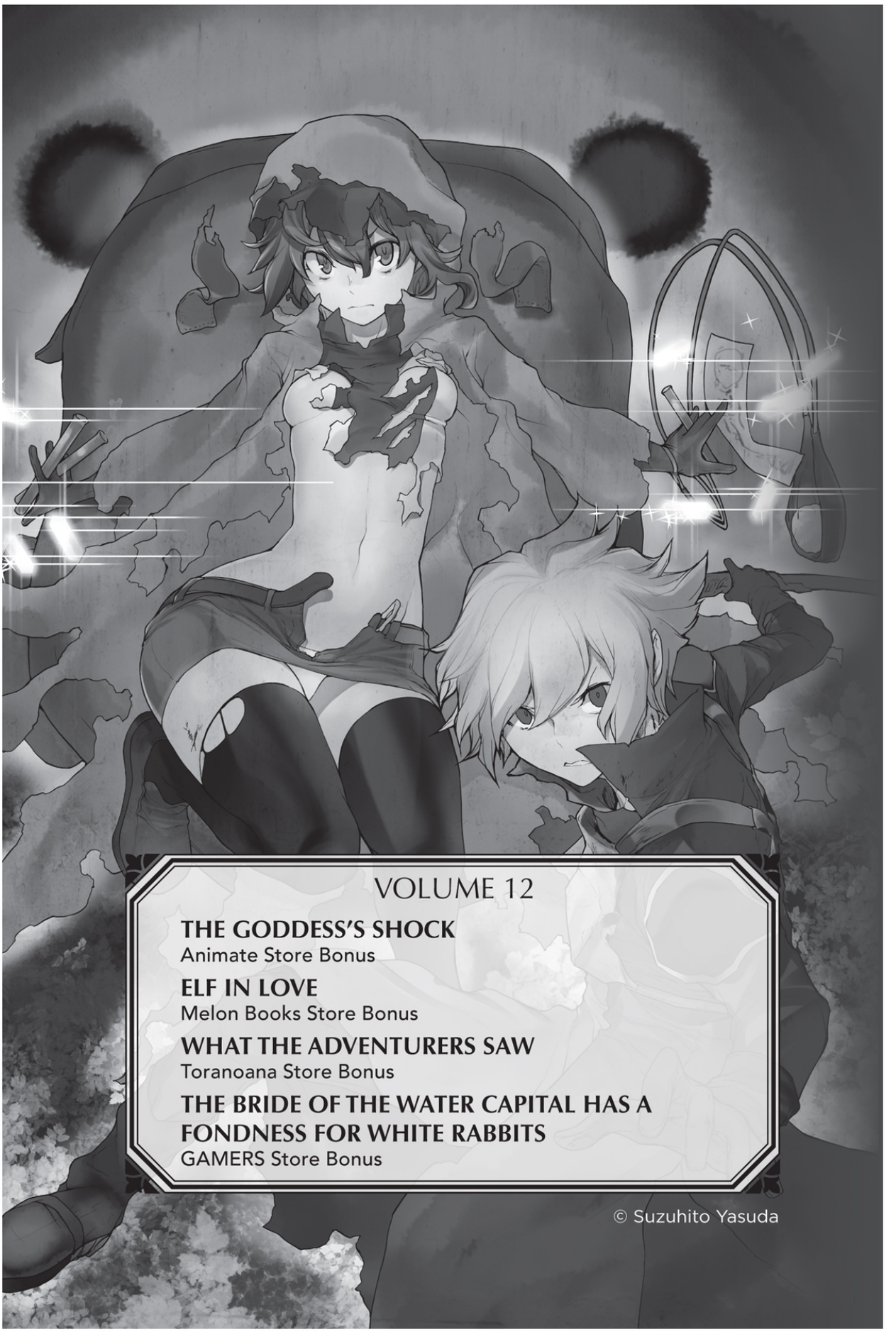
"Well, I slept with Bell all the time! We held each other so tight!"

""""""Whaaaaaat?!""""""

Wiene's innocent declaration was like a bombshell that set off a massive uproar. Male and female voices alike joined in the loudest shriek of the night. This carried on until Gros turned around and roared, "I thought I told you guys to keep it down!!"

"Great men have the greatest appetites…while little white rabbits are hunted for sport."

Before Welf and Mikoto arrived, Fels was forced to endure the noisy Xenos alone. If the ex-sage had possessed eyes, they surely would have been distant while they proceeded to coin a brand-new saying.



VOLUME 12

THE GODDESS'S SHOCK
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ELF IN LOVE
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WHAT THE ADVENTURERS SAW
Toranoana Store Bonus

THE BRIDE OF THE WATER CAPITAL HAS A FONDNESS FOR WHITE RABBITS
GAMERS Store Bonus

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THE GODDESS'S SHOCK

"Ox Slayer," said Haruhime with a sense of wonder. "Bell's new skill."

It was the day Bell achieved his level-up, and Hestia was sharing an account of the boy's updated abilities with the rest of the familia so that they could put it to good use in the Dungeon. Everyone except Bell was gathered in the living room.

"This makes three, then," said Welf. "Three skills, including that one that boosts his stats."

"Three combat-oriented skills make for quite a proficient adventurer," said Mikoto. "In addition to that, Bell's development abilities have been coming along nicely, too."

Of course, their friend's explosive growth was cause for celebration, but the other members of Bell's familia suddenly felt like they had to get down to business themselves if they were ever going to keep pace.

"Well, the new skill only activates under certain conditions, so there are limits to what it can do," said Hestia. "Still, Ox Slayer? Isn't it just Bell's luck to end up with something like that…?"

"Ha-ha, I know what you mean," said Welf. "He seems to always get involved with minotaurs somehow…"

"Did Sir Asterios truly have such a deep effect on Sir Bell…?" wondered Mikoto. "I am somewhat vexed I missed the fight now…"

"Liaris Freese…Ox Slayer…"

"Hmm? Is something the matter?"

Hestia turned to Haruhime, who seemed to be muttering the names of Bell's skills under her breath.

"Oh no," she said. "It's just…Well, apart from Argonaut…How do I put this…?"

Hestia cocked her head in confusion as the renart girl awkwardly pieced together what she wanted to say. It was Lilly, who hadn't said a word in the meeting up to that point, who spoke next.

“There’s not a single skill that relates to Lady Hestia…”

The entire living room froze. Hestia’s jaw fell.

“W-wait, you’re right!!” the goddess cried. “How did that overgrown beefsteak get a bigger reaction out of Bell than his own deity?! As if it’s not bad enough, I’m lower down on the ladder than Wallen-what’s-her-face, but I’m below a *cow*, too?! What are you trying to say, Beeeeell?!”

Clutching her head, the baby-faced goddess ran out of the room screaming bloody murder while the rest of the party buried their faces in their palms.

Seconds later, the young boy’s scream could be heard echoing throughout the mansion’s halls.

ELF IN LOVE

“B-Bell! Would you like to…get dinner together?”

Eina steeled her resolve and extended an invitation. It was some time before *Hestia Familia*’s planned expedition to the lower floors, right after Bell had finished attending a class at Guild HQ. He was just putting some books away when Eina’s voice caused him to turn around.

“You mean…right now? It’s getting quite late…”

“W-well…then it’s just the thing, don’t you think? I mean, I still haven’t eaten yet, and I’d appreciate the company, and also…um, yeah. Th-that’s all it is! There isn’t any other reason!”

Eina’s cheeks were on fire. She already wanted to die after giving such an obvious excuse. Then again, it wasn’t like her motives could be considered inappropriate. But the class had dragged on, and since they had the opportunity, something approaching a date might be just the thing to soothe the restlessness that Eina had been feeling lately…

Her emerald eyes spun as she tried to unravel the complex tangle of feelings in her heart. Meanwhile, Bell lifted his hand apologetically to his neck.

“You’re right, Miss Eina. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Let’s go, then.”

“Huh…? Wait, really?”

“Yeah. It was my fault the class ran so long after all. To make it up to you, I’ll pay.”

Seeing Bell’s embarrassed smile made Eina’s heart soar.

“Th-thank you!” she said, beaming.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve shared a drink with someone from the Guild,” said Welf.

“That’s very true,” agreed Lilly. “They’re always so helpful to Mr. Bell, but we never get the chance to show our gratitude.”

“Tee-hee. Thank you for always coming to our bar, Bell,” said Syr, happily taking the group’s order.

You see, in order to ease Eina's loneliness, Bell had done the only thing he could think of—he had invited all his friends around for a lively evening at The Benevolent Mistress.

"I should have known. I'm not sure what I expected…Bell is, without a doubt, kind and supportive…"

"M-Miss Eina?"

Bell wasn't sure what to make of Eina's lifeless smile as she sat there on the verge of tears. At that moment, Lilly and Syr leaned in, devilish smiles plastered across each of their faces.

"So? What were you planning to do with him alone?" they both asked.

Eina could only turn aside and pretend not to hear them.

WHAT THE ADVENTURERS SAW

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!”

On the twenty-fifth floor, standing at the edge of the large lake that lay at the base of the Great Falls, Bell fought alone. Separated from his party by the raging current, he faced off against a flock of iguaçu, known to many as the fastest creature found on the lower floors. The swallow-like monsters dive-bombed him all at once, meeting their collective end as they ran headfirst into the wall of slashes the boy frantically put up.

Here, an adventurer was locked in a mortal struggle.

“…What’s going on over there?”

Meanwhile, a totally different adventurer was watching in the distance.

“A white-haired human boy? That’s gotta be Little Rookie…Or I guess he’s Rabbit Foot now.”

The adventurer and his upper-class party members stood at the base of the passageway that led down from the twenty-fourth floor, atop a cliff that offered a sweeping view of the entire cavern. Their jaws dropped at the sight of Bell’s struggle, taking place hundreds of meders in the distance.

They were a group of Level 3 adventurers who had descended from Rivira to challenge the lower floors. None of them were greenhorns by any means, and they fully intended on descending even deeper and breaking their current record…but watching Bell’s battle gave them pause.

Upper-class adventurers had a saying. *“If you run into iguaçu, drop whatever you’re holding and run.”* Yet Bell was doing the exact opposite.

“He’s taking them all on…That kid doesn’t even have a shield. All he’s got is his knife…”

“What a weirdo.” “What a weirdo.” “I once saw the Sword Princess training like that…” “What a weirdo.”

As soon as the Sword Princess’s name came up, all the

adventurers were in agreement.

“Let’s call it here for today…”

“Yeah, I don’t think I can do this anymore. I think my confidence just tanked…”

And so, mere moments after reaching the twenty-fifth floor, the adventurers all turned around and headed back the way they came. Thus, they conveniently avoided running into one of the most powerful enhanced species ever seen but missed out on everything that transpired between Bell and the mermaid.

Soon, stories began to spread about the weirdo who massacred an entire pack of iguaçu by himself.

THE BRIDE OF THE WATER CAPITAL HAS A FONDNESS FOR WHITE RABBITS

“I’m back, Mari!”

“Welcome back, Rei!”

The Xenos returned to their hidden village on the twenty-seventh floor, where the mermaid girl awaited them. She was the Xenos’s designated lookout for this village, just as the Green Dragon was for the one on the twentieth floor.

The other Xenos had just carried out Fels’s request and chose to drop in on their way back home.

“Let’s sing another song together!” cried Mari with joy, embracing the siren girl.

“Okay,” said Rei with markedly less enthusiasm. “But…we’ll have to be quiet, or the adventurers will hear us, okay?”

As fellow monsters who enjoyed singing, Rei and Mari were close friends. The source of the “Dungeon Song” adventurers often spoke about was none other than them.

“Did anything happen since we last spoke, Mari?”

“Yeah! I met Bell!” replied Mari, beaming.

Rei’s face stiffened. “Bell? You mean…the human?”

“Yeah! He’s cute and soft and cool! He’s my hero! I love him!”

Rei was astonished enough to hear that Mari had even met the boy, but the other things she said were even more shocking yet, and Rei couldn’t let them slide. But before she could even speak, the lamia and harpy girls rushed to Mari’s side in a frenzy.

“What did you do with Bell?! Soft?? Did you touch him?! Tell me!!”

“Did you get all lovey-dovey with that surface-dweller?! Well?? Did you?!”

“Tell me everything!” “Tell me everything!!”

“WRAAAAAAAAGH!”

“Laura! Fia! Everyone! Settle down! I’m sure Bell didn’t do anything like th-th-th-th-th-that!”

Rei calmed down her overexcited compatriots, but the trepidation in her own voice was all too obvious.

“I made him eat a part of me,” said Mari. “It felt so warm and fuzzy!”

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Her easily misinterpreted remark made the entire horde of Xenos go wild.

“Lido? Gros? Are they talking about Bell? I thought I heard his name…”

“You’re imagining things, Wiene.”

“Stay right here. If you join in, it’ll only make things worse.”

The vouivre girl curiously glanced back at the crowd. Gros and Lido placed their hands over her ears and let out a pair of deep sighs.



VOLUME 13

PLIGHT OF THE PROPHET

First Printing

© Suzuhito Yasuda

PLIGHT OF THE PROPHET

“Um…excuse me! Ms. Erde! If you go any further, something terrible will happen!”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“I…I don’t really know either, but there’s something down there that will be the death of you all! Only Bell will be spared!!”

“What on earth are you talking about?! I don’t have time for this nonsense. If you don’t have any basis to be throwing around such claims, then leave me alone! We need to make contact with Ms. Lyu before anyone else!”

“M-Mr. Crozzo…er, Welf, please listen to me! If you go down to the lower floors, you will be torn to pieces!”

“Whoa, be chill. Don’t go jinxin’ me now. I can’t die yet, not until I catch up to Lady Hephaistos and become the greatest smith this world has ever seen.”

“I-I understand, but I’m just saying what will happen if you—”

“Come on. This ain’t the time for jokes. Let’s get moving before the others leave us behind.”

“M-Ms. Mikoto! My fortunes are always one hundred percent correct, and this time, they’re telling me that something terrible is going happen!”

“Is that right?! Well, not to worry! Adventurers are brave souls who stand up and defy fate! I shall protect you, Lady Cassandra, whatever comes your way!”

“Th-thank you, but…it’s not about me! It’s about all of you and Gale Wind and…!”

“I see what you mean. It *would* be terrible if the bounty hunters found Lyu first. But we believe in her innocence! We must hurry and prove it to everyone else!”

“M-Ms. Chigusa! I just remembered! The Guild put out a bulletin saying that there are monsters deadlier than a moss huge

beyond this point!”

“Huh?! Is that true?! We’d better tell Daphne and the others fast!”

“Ahhhh! Wait, no! Don’t tell Daphne—Owww! Don’t hit me, Daphne! I’m sorry I was lying! I mean, I was lying about the monsters, but my dream was real!!”

“M-Mr. Ouka! The truth is…I have a skill that lets me see into the future!”

“That can’t be right.”

“……”

“If you had a skill like that, then how did *Apollo Familia* ever lose? How did you even wind up here?”

“…That’s true.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to achieve, but I’m a little hurt you thought I was so gullible that such an obvious lie would work on me.”

“But that’s not…!!”

“Ms. Aisha! I promise I’m not lying to you! I had a dream of something terrible happening, and it’s definitely going to come true!”

“What kind of adventurer wets their pants over one measly nightmare?! Pull yourself together and do your job, healer!”

“Urgh…It’s no use…” Cassandra whined, clutching her staff to her chest.

She walked through the Colossal Tree Labyrinth, descending toward the lower floors alongside the search party formed by the residents of Rivira who wanted to take out Gale Wind. On the way, she had worked up the courage to approach various adventurers about her prophetic dreams, but she was mercilessly ignored or denied every time.

Cassandra’s curse was as unhelpful as ever. While blessed with the ability to see the future, no one she told would ever believe her oracles. She had followed the group after they departed from Rivira and practically begged them on her hands and knees to change course—but to no avail. If the curse could be broken so easily, then perhaps Cassandra would not be so prone to despair

after only eighteen short years of life. No matter what she tried, no one ever took her seriously. If anything, she seemed to make people angry.

The only one who might listen to me is Bell…but he's already made up his mind to help Gale Wind. Telling him about the danger that lurks down there will only make him even more determined to save her.

The pain of misunderstanding was not new to her, but that didn't make it any easier to stomach. Mired in despair, Cassandra turned to the last adventurer she hadn't yet tried speaking to—a renart sorceress somewhat similar in abilities and personality to herself!

Ms. Haruhime! If it comes from her mouth instead of mine, then maybe Aisha will listen…!

Fight on, Cassandra! It isn't over yet!

"M-Ms. Haruhime! I have a favor to ask!"

"Hmm? Lady Cassandra? Whatever is the matter?"

Her innocent eyes reminded Cassandra of Bell's, and she suddenly got cold feet, but she pushed her guilt aside and set her plan into motion.

"H-have you ever had a dream come true, Ms. Haruhime?"

The crux of her plan was *sympathy*.

Leading with her calamitous prophecy was likely to invite nothing but suspicion. Perhaps if she started the conversation on the topic of a similar experience from Haruhime's past, she would be more likely to trust Cassandra's warning. Yes, it was grasping at straws, but what else could she do?

"A-a dream come true, you say?!"

Haruhime's ears pricked up, and her whole body shook. It was clear Cassandra's remark had elicited a strong reaction.

D-does this mean…there's a chance?!

Encouraged, Cassandra launched into her spiel.

"Y-you see, the truth is, my dreams quite often come true, and I thought maybe we might have that in common! Maybe we're kindred spirits or connected on a deeper level or psychically paired…or, as the gods say, best friends forever!"

"You're saying Cassandra and myself are…twins? Best friends forever?"

"Yes, best friends forever! BFFs! I wondered if maybe, like me,

you sometimes suffer because of those dreams…?”

“Yes, I have! In fact, it happened just the other night!”

Yes! I’m in!

Glimpsing a ray of hope, the ill-omened prophet leaned in closer.

“A-and what kind of dream was it, may I ask?! A-and perhaps you’d like to hear about mine as well…?”

“W-well, you see…It all started when I woke up early and decided to go for a bath but I was still half asleep and I accidentally walked into the male baths by mistake and Bell was there because he’d just finished his early-morning training and my foot slipped and I fell on top of him completely naked and then we both toppled over and I passed out from seeing his collarbones and his ni-ni-ni…the pink part of his chest while Bell caught me but fell and hit his head and he got knocked out because he’d been in the baths for a while and was quite dizzy already and we stayed in each other’s arms until Lady Hestia and the others wondered where we were and came to find us!!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?! And that really happened?!”

“Y-yes, but it’s not my fault! It felt like a dream but so real as well! I couldn’t tell if I was dreaming or not! B-but I’m certainly not saying that if it *was* a dream, then I would have liked for it to go on a little longer or anything like that!”

“Wait! Ms. Haruhime! You’ve got to tell me everything again from the top! Every last detail!!”

Cassandra had hoped to garner sympathy by asking about Haruhime’s dreams, but the utter bombshell the foxgirl dropped was enough to send her into a panic instead. Her plan lay in tatters, her face bright red, as she desperately urged the blushing renart to spill everything.

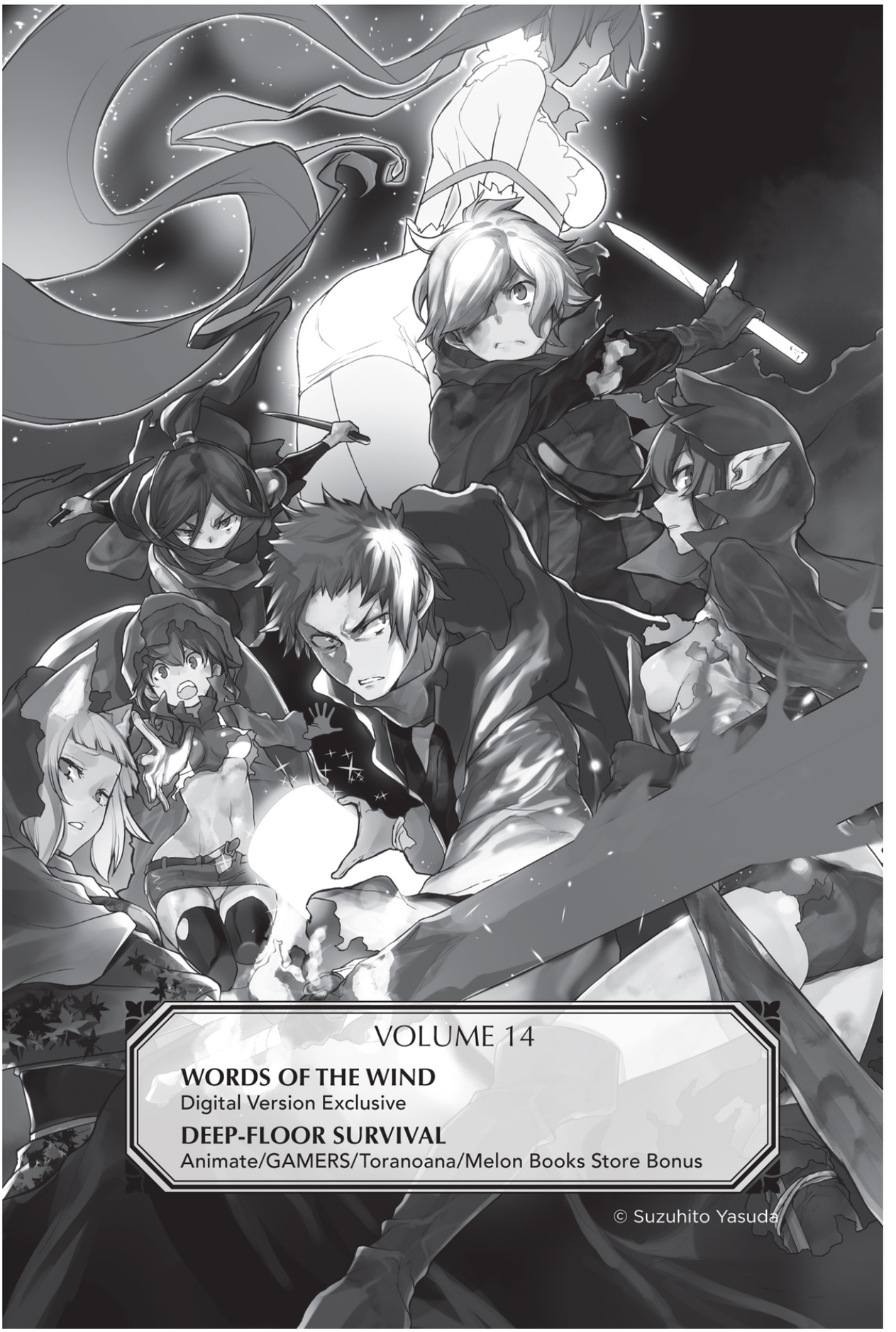
“Are you clowns screwing around back there?!”

“Don’t slow the rest of us down with your nonsense!”

“”We’re sorry!!””

Aisha and Lilly turned and gave our two dreamers a cruel reminder of reality. Cassandra’s plight went unanswered, her dreams dashed by a fox’s delusions, and the group reached the twenty-fourth floor before she could do anything about it.

Incidentally, Cassandra may or may not have remained bright red for some time, unable to think and casting furtive glances at Bell and Haruhime until she suddenly returned to her senses.



VOLUME 14

WORDS OF THE WIND
Digital Version Exclusive

DEEP-FLOOR SURVIVAL
Animate/GAMERS/Toranoana/Melon Books Store Bonus

© Suzuhito Yasuda

WORDS OF THE WIND

“Ms. Aiz…what is it like down on the deep floors?”

It was a casual question. But it was something that had been on my mind for a while.

My training with Aiz had taught me just how far I still had to go to catch up with her, and that scared me. But it wasn’t nearly as terrifying as doing nothing at all. And so, even though I knew that knowledge alone wouldn’t close the gap, I had to ask.

Atop the city walls, surrounded by the bright blue sky, Aiz turned to my worn-out self and considered it.

“What is it like?” she said. *“Scary…I guess… I think that was the first time I ever saw the Dungeon and monsters that way.”*

“Scary?”

“Yeah.”

Looking back on it now, I think Aiz found it difficult to choose her words. But she did it for me. Her clear eyes peered deep into mine.

“I can tell you…but you won’t understand. Not until you go there yourself…”

“……”

“And…when you do…when that day eventually comes…you need to remember something.”

I remember.

I remember how the wind blew just then. How it scattered her radiant hair. For so long, I had locked that memory away, never to be seen. Now I remember how it went.

“You need hope.”

“Hope?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant when she suddenly introduced such an abstract concept. Luckily, Aiz helpfully provided an example.

“Yes. Think about what you’ll do when you get back, about eating Jyaga Maru Kun or something. Anything’s fine as long as you have something to hold on to. Because the monsters down

there…the darkness…It's too much for us otherwise."

"……"

"And when it starts to consume you, it won't be your spells or your skills that will save you. It'll be hope. The courage to never give up."

"The courage…"

"Well, that's what Finn and everyone else taught me…"

Aiz turned her gaze away and muttered to herself. Her cheeks flushed slightly, and I returned an awkward smile.

"*But…I felt it too,*" she said. "*Down there, anger isn't enough. Only something good can lift you out of the depths.*"

Aiz looked up to the sky as if remembering something that transpired long ago. She smiled as if treasuring the sky spreading out before her. It was like she was giving thanks.

Aiz taught me that to overcome the deep floors, you need something, anything to light the flame of hope. Because the only thing that could cut a path through the darkness…was either the fires of one's own heart or the proud bonds of friendship.

"*If we went down to the deep floors together,*" she said, "*I think you would be my hope, Bell.*"

"Wh-what?!"

"You cheer me up…and whenever you talk or do something reckless, it makes me think I need to work harder for the both of us."

Aiz elevated my spirits and crushed them in a single breath.

Seeing how crestfallen that made me, she hugged her knees, tilted her head, and smiled. I don't think that meant she was playing mind games with me. The look in her eyes was kind and gentle.

And I don't think she meant for that look to warm my heart the way it did, either.

I know this is silly, but seeing that smile made me really happy.

I want to see that smile again.

Is it okay if I make that my hope, Ms. Aiz?

“……”

I open my eyes, transporting me from a wind-wrapped memory to a place of interminable gloom.

“Mr. Cranell, are you okay?”

“Ms. Lyu…I’m fine. What about the monsters?”

“I don’t sense any nearby.”

We speak hushed words in an enclosed space too small to be called a room. It’s nothing more than an alcove in the wall. As we huddle in it, our shoulders pressed together, Lyu’s voice brings me back to the real world.

We’re on the thirty-seventh floor. We’ve just finished taking our third short break. Those five minutes of sleep were nothing more than a drop in the ocean of our exhaustion. My arms and legs feel just as heavy as before, but my mind is a little clearer.

I can fight.

I can press on through the darkness.

Thank you…Ms. Aiz.

I had a dream. I remember what she said, the words I couldn’t recall before.

That was very important because those words are precisely what I need right now.

I need hope. The courage to never give up.

I want to go home. See Goddess. Be with my friends. Talk to Syr and everyone at The Benevolent Mistress. Bring Lyu back to them.

And last but not least, I want to see that smile again.

I have many hopes. I must scrape them together and make of them a light to cut through the darkness.

“Let us move on, Mr. Cranell. I shall keep watch. Preserve your strength, for we shall undoubtedly need it soon.”

I help Lyu to her feet, and the two of us set off. Her head on my shoulder, our breaths mingled together, we press on through the darkness.

As we do, I think about what they both told me.

When Lyu speaks, she speaks of hope.

Her faded justice gives me courage.

What Aiz taught me…

…and what Lyu is trying to show me…

…I think they’re both the same thing.

We'll find our way back home…together.

I may have lost a lot, but I haven't lost hope.

I'll always hold on to it, whatever comes our way.

Marking that promise on my heart, I make my way through the deep floors with Lyu at my side.

DEEP-FLOOR SURVIVAL

This all happened before we discovered the spring on the thirty-seventh floor.

"I'm afraid it's not looking good…"

While we wander through the depths, hoping for hope, Lyu mutters something, her chin pressed into my shoulder.

"What is it, Ms. Lyu?"

"The dead gave us so much. Equipment, items, and even a little food. But there's one thing we still haven't procured…"

We just ate some moldy rye bread together and washed it down with a couple of discolored potions. Lyu leaves a suitably dramatic pause before her next utterance.

"…Water."

That single word reminds me of how distinctly dry my throat feels. Even superhuman upper-class adventurers aren't immune to hunger and thirst. Miss Eina taught me that water is even more necessary for the body than food.

In an extreme survival scenario, a lack of water is a death sentence.

I'm reminded now of the uncomfortable scratchiness that plagued my throat while we were fighting horde after horde of monsters.

"If we don't procure some fluids soon," says Lyu, "the thirst will get us long before the monsters do."

"Are there any springs or anything like that on the thirty-seventh floor?"

"No," says Lyu, dashing my hopes. "These floors are similar to the Cave Labyrinth. There may be a pantry, but nothing more."

The pantry crystals secrete a fluid that monsters feed on. Unfortunately, this fluid isn't safe for us to drink, causing heavy blistering and vomiting. Even if we could fight our way to one, which we obviously can't, only death would await us there.

I never thought I'd miss the Water Capital so much, and I was

just there. I gulp, but swallowing my own saliva does nothing to slake my parched throat.

"……"

Lyu's lips are pursed like she's thinking hard about something. Suddenly, she lifts her eyes, revealing determination, and begins searching.

"Um…Ms. Lyu…?"

Her keen, blue eyes pierce the inky darkness of the Dungeon. She leads the search, and as soon as we come to a large room of rough, ivory stone, Lyu pulls me into a shadow.

"Found some," she whispers.

I follow her gaze and see a group of monsters, amorphous blobs, sticking to the walls. If they hadn't been pointed out to me, I'm not sure I would have managed to register them as a threat.

"They're…oozes!" I remark.

The ooze is a rare monster that only starts to appear on the deep floors and below. Also known as a slime, it comes in many varieties—such as red, white, and green—but each one has the same mucus body.

"The yellow ones are acidic," says Lyu. "We're looking for the blue ones."

This room seems to be their breeding ground or something, because the walls are covered in them, softly glowing in many different colors.

An ooze's primary means of attack is the poison or acid stored in its mucus, the precise nature of which depends on the ooze's color. The worst are those that enter the body through the ears, nose, or mouth. Once inside, they dissolve the victim's organs, causing a slow and painful death. It's said to be one of the top five most excruciating ways the Dungeon can kill you.

Luckily, they are slow and pose little threat so long as you spot them first. I heard the hardest part is finding a way to deal damage. Their liquid forms make it a lot more complicated compared to other monsters. Some of the few ways include burning or freezing with spells or magic swords…

Shnk.

…or piercing the magic stone inside their body with a long, sharp weapon.

Spying one of the creatures moving around on the ground, Lyu

seizes the opportunity and lunges for it, shortsword in hand. Her blade plunges into the ooze's gelatinous flesh, its tip piercing the amethyst crystal that serves as the monster's core.

The ooze quivers, then collapses into a molten puddle.

This is the monster's drop item—ooze fluid. It's literally just the creature itself.

What confuses me most, however, is what happens next.

"Huh?!"

As I watch on in abject shock, Lyu marches over to the dead ooze and scoops up its remains using a soot-covered waterskin she picked up off the adventurer corpses.

I feel violently sick as I ponder why. Surely not…

Lyu, meanwhile, silently fills the container to its brim. I get the feeling she's putting on a brave face. Once she's done, she tells me, "We're retreating," and the two of us exit the room before the other monsters notice us.

"I need fire."

My fears are confirmed.

We move to another room, and Lyu damages the wall to create an improvised safe zone. After that, she looks me in the eye, completely serious. In one hand, she holds the ooze-filled waterskin. At her feet are a bunch of rocks and kindling we made out of drop items.

A bead of sweat works its way down my face.

"…What are you going to do with fire?" I ask.

"We're going to boil the ooze."

"…What are we going to do after we boil it?"

"Drink it, of course."

I feel faint.

The mere thought of eating monster flesh fills me with primal revulsion, as it should any right-minded person. It's the same kind of aversion to tasting human meat.

"What are you so afraid of?" Lyu asks me. "You know the potions you drink are created using ingredients from monsters, right?"

I mean, you're not wrong, but doesn't that feel different? It's one thing to drink a colorful liquid that technically contains some ground-up blue papillon scales or whatever but quite another to consume monster meat as is!

And wait…fire? You mean…*Firebolt*?

Wait…I can't…I'm not…!

I admit, we don't have any flint on us. And I admit, my spell does create fire. But my magic was not made for cooking up monster stew!!

"Just do it."

"M-Ms. Lyu, I really do think—"

"Now."

…She looks angry.

…She's not joking.

Lyu's on high alert for any monsters, and she knows that every second counts.

The problem is, *Firebolt* won't just start a fire—it'll blast our stove apart and fling us both halfway across the room.

I need to cast the weakest *Firebolt* I can muster. Oh dear. There's a first time for everything, I suppose…

"F-Firebolt…"

There's a disappointing *squib*, and a tiny flame falls from my fingers, setting our bonfire alight. Lyu says nothing as she sets the waterskin atop it.

Such is life on the deep floors.

…Is it? I can't help feeling this is a different matter entirely. Dammit, I don't know what's going on anymore.

And I also can't help feeling that all this chaos is making me moodier than usual, but whatever. I can't be bothered to fix that right now.

At last, Lyu seems to think that the ooze has boiled enough, and she lifts the waterskin from the fire and hands it to me.

"Drink."

Why do I feel like I've seen this somewhere before? Like something about a moldy old potion…?

She's not just using me to make sure it's safe to drink…right?

I'm sure it's because I've had to exert myself the most recently and, thus, am most in need of hydration. Her kindness truly moves me to tears. Seriously, I'm crying.

I steel my nerves and take the flask in hand.

"Urg…"

The gel-like substance struggles to make it down my throat. The taste is awful. So much so I'm hard-pressed to say if I hate

this or the potion more! “My Immunity ability will save me…” is what I wish I could say, but I don’t have that confidence!

My eyes wet with tears, I somehow manage to choke down the much-needed fluid and pass the remainder of the flask to Lyu. She hesitates for a moment, then downs it in one gulp and breaks out coughing just like I did.

“…Did you have to do things like this when you were down here with *Astrea Familia*?” I ask.

“Of course not. One of my former party members once lent me a book she’d borrowed from the Guild library. It was written by an adventurer who became trapped down here like us and used this method to survive…That prum wanted to try it herself, but it turned out so bad that she came at us, tears in her eyes, going, ‘Taste the hell I tasted!’”

“And what happened?”

“We fought her off.”

Figures.

I do wonder if Lyu is starting to lose her mind down here as well. She even did different voices and everything.

She smiles as if that one recollection brought back a wave of nostalgia.

“But thanks to her, we’ll make it through this…”

Still smiling, she brings the canteen to her lips.

Then she freezes.

She eyes the rim. The very same rim I drank from.

“Oh…”

I realize it, too, a little too late.

“…Erm…are elves concerned about that sort of thing…?” I ask.

“…Mr. Cranell. We are on the deep floors. This is neither the time nor the place.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

She’s right. I let my shoulders fall in apology.

Lyu drinks from the waterskin like it’s nothing, then gets to her feet and beckons me onward.



Of course we’re concerned about it…!

As Bell carried her, Lyu did her best to hide her reddening face from him. This was a matter of life and death. It was hardly the place to be acting like a blushing young maid.

What an embarrassment. She couldn’t allow Bell to see.

And so, battling with the humiliation in her heart, Lyu did her best to keep her long ears from overheating.



VOLUME 15

I CAN'T HELP IT, I'M JUST NATURALLY PERFECT
Toranoana Store Bonus

MAKING GOOD ON A PROMISE
Animate Store Bonus

WHENEVER THE ADVISER AND THE LOLI-GODDESS DRINK
Melon Books Store Bonus

AT THE BLACKSMITH'S: WHAT SHE DIDN'T KNOW
GAMERS Store Bonus

© Suzuhito Yasuda

I CAN’T HELP IT, I’M JUST NATURALLY PERFECT

“Omghnom! Ghomnomnom!”

With a voice like a famished animal, Bell wolfed down the food in front of him.

“…Huh. I guess you really were hungry down there, Mr. Bell…”

“…What a beast…”

Lilly’s and Hestia’s eyes went wide watching him eat.

It was after Bell had woken up following his return from the Dungeon with Lyu. Bell was whisked straight to a recovery facility at Babel, where Hermes had helped to arrange for Dea Saint, real name Amid Teasanare, to see to his critical wounds at once.

Now Bell was enjoying a long-awaited meal.

For four days and four nights, Bell had had nothing to eat or drink save what he could scrounge in the Dungeon. Right now, he could think of nothing other than shoveling food into his belly as fast as he could.

Bell was not usually a heavy eater by any means, so it was surprising to see him display such a voracious appetite. His normally docile eyes were twisted in bestial rage, and bits of meat and bread clung to his cheeks. He was so starving that Hestia and Lilly wouldn’t have been surprised to see him toss aside his fork and just begin stuffing his face with his bare hands. Then again, seeing him fill his cheeks did rather bring to mind the image of a hungry rabbit scarfing down a tasty carrot.

Hestia and Lilly felt their hearts soar! Their personal Bell Points went up by 100 each!

However, just then, the two baby-faced girls realized something.

Bell was unable to use his left arm, the one injured by Juggernaut, and was getting food all over his face as a result.

…This was the perfect chance to do something nice for Bell!

The two girls realized it at the same time and glared at each other. Sparks flew between their determined gazes.

“I’m gonna cozily feed Bell, and you can’t stop me!”

“You think I don’t see what you’re planning, Lady Hestia? I won’t let you and your inappropriate thoughts within ten meders of Mr. Bell!”

Bell munched on, blissfully unaware of the catfight brewing beneath his nose, when all of a sudden, Haruhime, who had also come to see him, stepped forward without a single ulterior motive in her mind.

“Are you all right, Master Bell?” she asked. “Hold still, you’ve got something on your face…”

“Ah…Sorry…Thank you, Ms. Haruhime…”

Holding up the left side of his body, she gently wiped his lips with a handkerchief. Bell blushed immediately. Hestia and Lilly had been soundly beaten to the punch.

““GAAAAH!””

After a moment of shock, they each toppled over backward, flabbergasted by the foxgirl’s genuine kindness and how it so thoroughly exposed their own vice.

MAKING GOOD ON A PROMISE

It was a while after returning from the deep floors, once Lyu had gotten over her ordeal and distanced herself appropriately from Bell.

As Lyu had predicted, Mia was not exactly pleased that the elf girl ran out on such a busy night. It came as no surprise that she received a thump to the head that knocked her to her knees, and it also came as no surprise that Mia ordered the pair to wipe the tables after closing.

“I’m sorry you also got dragged into this, Bell. It’s all my fault…”

“No, it’s okay,” said Bell, putting away the chairs. “I was the one who was so desperate to learn about your old familia after all…”

The other waitresses very much enjoyed seeing Lyu in trouble for once and had all left without offering to help. Bell’s friends had also gone back to their familia home, with Welf declaring, “You just let me talk to Hestia,” like a helpful big brother. Only Lilly seemed sad to go.

As for Syr, she had stared at Lyu and Bell for a while but eventually left them with a grin.

“You two troublemakers nearly done in there?”

Mia poked her head through the doorway. She had stayed behind to do the prep for the next day. Lyu was just about to inform her that they had finished their tasks when Bell spoke up.

“Um…Ms. Mia? I have a tiny favor to ask.”

“You got some brass ones, kid. You think you can ask me for a favor after everything you did?”

Bell cowered timidly but went on with his request.

“I was just wondering…if you could cook me and Lyu a nice, warm meal.”

Lyu was horrified. Mia raised an eyebrow. Bell proceeded to elucidate his end of the bargain.

“In return,” he said, “I’ll tell you a story…of two adventurers

who found themselves on the deep floors by mistake."

Stories were a tavern's lifeblood, perhaps even more than any food or wine. Clients and bartenders alike couldn't get enough of them.

"…Hmm. Very well," Mia said. "Have your fill."

Then she smirked and disappeared into the kitchen. Lyu still couldn't believe what she had just seen. She turned to Bell in shock.

"…I did say we would," he said simply.

"I want to eat one of Mama Mia's cooked meals."

"Let's go home together, then."

Lyu remembered it now. A promise forged in the shared warmth of each other's bodies.

Bell laughed and blushed, and Lyu felt herself going red, too.

She smiled. "Thank you, Bell. I'm very grateful."

Before long, the pair were treated to Mama Mia's extra-special risotto, which was delightfully warm and tasted of happiness.

WHENEVER THE ADVISER AND THE LOLI-GODDESS DRINK

“Did you hear from Bell?”

“Yes, I did…”

In the din of carousing adventurers, Hestia and Eina sat opposite each other in the corner of a bar. The mood at the table was solemn…or perhaps depressed. Both of them sounded absolutely exhausted.

It was early evening, and Eina had just finished her work at the Guild. Hestia had invited her out for a drink, which didn’t happen often. What she wanted to talk about, of course, was Little Rookie, the cause of so much headache for them both.

“I only meant to send them down to the lower floors,” said Hestia, “but he ended up going so much deeper! I mean, I know it wasn’t his fault, but…”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Eina replied. “I know.”

“When I saw how much his stats went up, I thought he must have nearly died, like, twenty times! He said it was only eight, though!”

“When he told me, I slammed my head into the table…”

“I knew it!”

Glug, glug, haaah.

Hestia and Eina drained their flagons in unison and heaved a deep sigh. It was a pain only understood by those following Bell’s journey as closely as those two. They sympathized with each other on a spiritual level. And it wasn’t even like Bell himself was to blame…

“It’s almost like he naturally attracts trouble…or maybe he doesn’t know how to leave well enough alone…”

“But that’s just how he is. It’s what makes him such a good person.”

“See, you get it, adviser girl! Come on. Have another drink!”

At some point, the conversation shifted from Bell’s pains to his

perks. And on that point, the two could talk into the night, exchanging opinions on what made him cool or cute…

“What are you saying, Lady Hestia?! It’s that *difference* that makes Bell so charming!! How he’s usually so unreliable, but he can stand up for other people when he needs to!!”

“You’re wrong, adviser girl! Bell’s greatest point is how he smiles when he cries! How can you look at that face and say it’s not the cutest thing you’ve ever seen?!”

…In the end, the conversation had turned to “What’s the most endearing thing about Bell Cranell?” Completely red-faced from their drinks, the two kept ranting and were generally being a nuisance for the other adventurers in the bar who had been so noisy earlier.

Luckily for Eina, though, when she woke up the next day, she had such a heavy hangover that she couldn’t remember a word of what she’d said.

AT THE BLACKSMITH'S: WHAT SHE DIDN'T KNOW

"Lilliluka Erde leveled up?"

Finn's eyes widened slightly.

The air rang with the restless vibrations of metal. The hammer swings of artisans combined in a hearty working song, filling the air with sparks.

Fires roared away in their hearths. This was the workshop of *Goibniu Familia.*

"Yes," the head god replied. "She came in here the other day to order a crossbow."

Goibniu silently handed over what Finn had come for—the prum hero's bespoke weapon, the Fortia Spear, practically restored to mint condition by Goibniu's efforts.

"I don't usually give out information about my customers like this…but I figured you ought to know."

Finn often entrusted his weapons and armor to *Goibniu Familia*. As a result, he had a long-standing relationship with their patron god. On top of that, Goibniu knew about Finn's ambition. He knew the captain of *Loki Familia* wanted to become a beacon of hope that would lead his race to prosperity.

And so the fact that even just one of his fellow prum had ascended—crossed the threshold of possibility and awakened a new potential—came as wonderful news. Perhaps even more so than Finn's own growth would.

"I see. Hearing that does make me happy. Especially since it's *her*."

What Goibniu wasn't privy to was Finn's past marriage proposal. He had judged her, out of all the prum in this city, to be a worthy bride.

And so there was no small amount of praise in the prum's words. He smiled with obvious affection in his azure eyes.

"Lord Goibniu," he said. "Would you mind putting however

much of my material you have left toward her new weapon?”

“…I don’t mind,” the god answered. “But are you sure? That material is rare, hard to find even here in Orario. And there is no promise the girl will use her weapon to benefit you.”

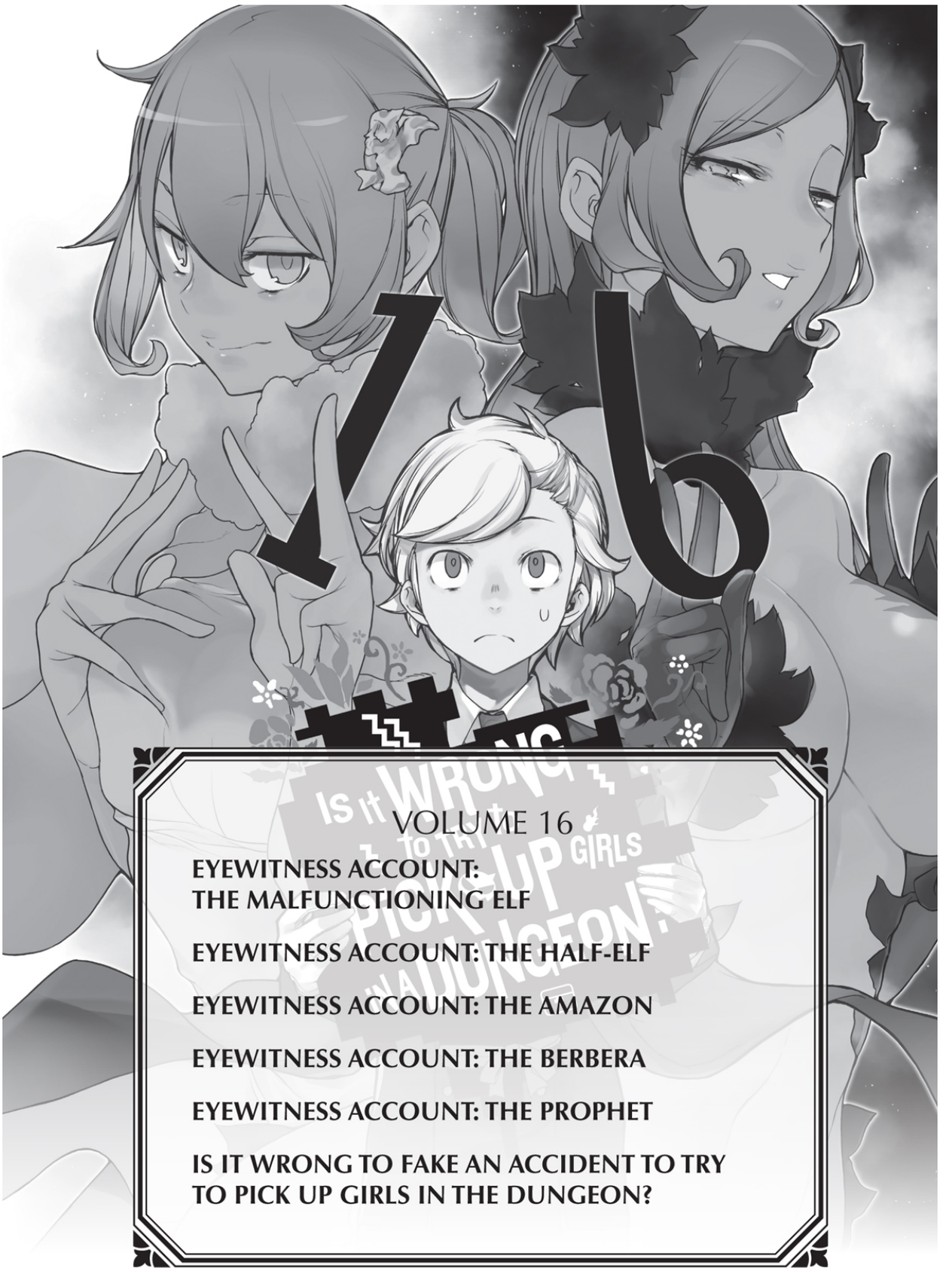
“Don’t worry. I owe her. This small favor probably doesn’t even cover it.”

“……”

“Consider it a present for a brave and deserving woman. A gift bouquet—or perhaps, in this case, a nut. In any case, I do hope you’ll keep this matter strictly off-the-record.”

Finn parted with a wink, eliciting a rare *hmph* of laughter from the surly god.

The rare material in question was an oathtree walnut. Unbeknownst to Lilly, this material would act as the foundation for the name of her new weapon: the Sciurus’s Walnut.



VOLUME 16

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT:
THE MALFUNCTIONING ELF

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE HALF-ELF

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE AMAZON

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE BERBERA

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE PROPHET

IS IT WRONG TO FAKE AN ACCIDENT TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN THE DUNGEON?

© Suzuhito Yasuda

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE MALFUNCTIONING ELF

Lyu was aghast.

“Oh my gosh, Syr! Holding hands with a m-m-m-man…!”

From a safe spot, she spied on Syr and Bell. Lyu’s face was bright red, and her long ears were practically flashing.

Beside her were Ahnya, Runoa, and Chloe, each rambling on. “Syr’s serious about this, meow! Those are the eyes of a feline toying with its prey if ever I saw them!” “I was hoping that the Sword Princess would spark some drama…” “Syr’s a witch, meow!”

It was the first day of the Goddess Festival, and the staff of The Benevolent Mistress were still going strong with “Operation Watch Syr’s Date.”

If they get any closer, then Syr’s chest will…! Aaahh, Bell’s face is going red! It’s not proper! Both of them are acting improperly!! I would never do anything like that if I were in that position!

Just as Lyu was blushing over Syr’s outlandishly provocative maneuver (by elf standards, at least), there was a dramatic development.

“Wow! Syr’s hugging him!” cried Runoa, employing a tactical whisper.

“What?!”

Sure enough, Syr and Bell were face-to-face, their bodies pressed against each other. Under normal circumstances, Lyu might have noticed that this was because Syr was whispering something into the boy’s ear, but at the moment, circumstances were anything but normal.

All she could see was: A man and a woman! Hugging! In broad daylight! Right in the middle of the street! Where everyone could see! How shameless! How brazen! How lewd! *All I’ve ever done is merely press my naked body against him to share warmth—*

“…Ahh…Aghh…Aaaaaaaaaaggghhh!!”

But if that was true, then what she did on the thirty-seventh floor was a hundred times more shameful! Even if it was a matter of life or death at the time, what she did was tantamount to a premarital affair!

In her mind, all she could see was the proud face of Alize Lovell, giving her a hearty thumbs-up, and the sneering grins of Kaguya and Lyra…

Lyu collapsed to her knees, burying her burning face in her hands. Ahnya took one look at her and cocked her head.

“What’s eatin’ Lyu, meow?”

“She’s malfunctioning,” replied Runoa.

“She’s just a malfunctioning elf,” replied Chloe.

It looked like Lyu would begin rolling across the floor like an embarrassed teen if they left her to her own devices for much longer, so Runoa grabbed her by the scruff and dragged her along while the other waitresses continued their surveillance.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE HALF-ELF

Eina was tired.

"The Goddess Festival is so much work…"

"We're always running back and forth, and the workload never seems to get smaller!"

Misha's sympathy elicited a dry smile from Eina as the half-elf adviser ferried sacks of vegetables from place to place.

Every time there was some kind of big event in the city, the Guild had a lot of work to do. Not only was there paperwork and logistics, but also working out security with *Ganesha Familia*, welcoming VIPs from other cities and nations, plus beating some modesty into the gods and goddesses so they didn't get carried away and spoil the festivities. The list was not exhaustive, and to give a full account of the Guild's duties would take all day.

But the biggest problem of all was simply that Orario was so large. Even with the help of volunteers, a lot was required to make the event a success, and the amount of work involved was anything but light.

"It's a good thing we have a day off tomorrow," said Misha. "We didn't get one at all last year."

"Right, but that's because we're given days off on other events instead."

"I mean, yeah, but…" Misha pouted, her pink hair bobbing. Then her mood quickly changed, and her face lit up. "Do you have plans tomorrow?" she asked. "We could explore the festival together if you like?"

"Oh, well, I, er…"

Of course, Eina was happy to go to the festival alongside her old friend, but a sudden thought gave her pause.

I wonder if Bell is free tomorrow…? N-n-n-not that I have any intentions of doing anything inappropriate!

Eina had been far too busy to confirm Bell's schedule, so chances were likely slim, but she was prepared to grasp at straws if need be. It wasn't even as if she was that interested in the

Goddess Festival itself—it never seemed her thing. She would tell herself she was far too busy and perhaps daydream. *"Oh, Natalie said she was going out to the festival with someone. I wonder what she's doing now…maybe eating a fancy dinner while gazing at the skyline…"* Something along those lines. Whenever she tried to picture herself in that position, however, her brain overheated, and she couldn't think straight.

Perhaps, if the stars aligned, Eina could enjoy a nice day out with Bell, just like when they went to sort out his armor that one time…

…But just as Eina daydreamed happily about the prospect, reality picked that moment to rear its ugly head.

"Oh, look! It's little bro! And check out that cutie on his arm. H-hey, Eina?!"

Thud! Clatter!

The sacks of pumpkins toppled out of Eina's arms and scattered all over the floor. When she saw Bell and Syr, hand in hand, enjoying the festivities, her brain chose to completely shut down.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE AMAZON

Tiona was having fun.

“Man, I love festivals! If only Aiz and Lefiya could have come with us!”

“I doubt they would be able to keep up with your appetite,” her elder twin, Tione, sighed.

Tiona licked the crumbs off her cheek. The sash around her waist was adorned with an array of colorful badges, causing onlookers to turn and murmur.

“Wow…”

“A complete set…”

“How much did she eat?!”

She had enjoyed practically everything the Goddess Festival had to offer by this point. For just a onetime purchase of a badge for a thousand valis, most places offered an all-you-can-eat buffet, making it a sheer paradise for a food junkie like Tiona.

Now with a full belly, the Amazon clasped her hands behind her head and smiled, when all of a sudden…

“Hmm?”

…she spotted, off in the distance, a white-haired boy walking with a gray-haired girl.

“It’s Rabbit Foot,” observed Tione. “And with him…isn’t she that waitress from…?”

“Huh?! Why?! What’s going on?!”

Tiona’s wild shriek made Tione plug her ears.

“What do you mean, why?” she asked, irritated. “It’s not like you called dibs on that man. You just helped him on the eighteenth floor and in the War Game. That’s all.”

“I mean, yeah, but…Argonaut’s…different…like with Aiz and me…”

Tiona normally spoke her mind with a clear disregard for the consequences, so it was a little strange to see her falter with her words like this. After a few moments, however, she brightened up and put on her usual smile.

“Oh well! I’m gonna go hang out with Argonaut as well!”

“How does that make any sense…?”

Tiona rushed off without a second thought, ready to give Bell a big surprise by hugging him from behind. However, a dark elf and four prum brothers stepped in front of her, tasked with making sure nothing got in the way of Syr and Bell’s outing.

The standoff quickly devolved into an impromptu brawl, and even Tione got dragged into it, but that whole mess would be a story for another time.

…As would the detail that this battle caused Syr’s five protectors to lose sight of their charge completely.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE BERBERA

Aisha was bemused.

“Hey, Aisha. Isn’t that Rabbit Foot over there?”

“Huh? Really?”

While out on the prowl alongside her colleagues from the old *Ishtar Familia*, Samira drew her attention to Bell, who was walking happily hand in hand with a gray-haired young girl.

“What’s Haruhime waiting for?” said Aisha with a sigh. “I *told* her she needed to hurry up before some other girl took her man. And look. That’s exactly what happened.”

The sight of the happy young couple left little room for interpretation. Bell had even dressed up and changed his hairstyle for the occasion—although Aisha couldn’t have suspected that his appearance was drilled into him on pain of death by one of *Freya Familia*’s highest-ranking members. She was rapidly suspecting that the only routes left open to her foxgirl protégée were affairs, wiles, or sneaking into Bell’s bedroom at night and taking what she wanted for herself.

Then she realized something.

“Hmm? Hold on. Haven’t I seen that girl somewhere before?”

Aisha took a closer look at the girl gazing lovingly into Bell’s eyes, whom she remembered working at The Benevolent Mistress alongside Lyu. Aisha recalled a fight breaking out over Bell—with her and Haruhime on one side and Lyu and Syr on the other—back before the incident with the Xenos came to a head.

I’m still annoyed we lost that one. But that girl’s the jealous type, for sure. I can smell it on her. Once she finds a man, she wants to have him all to herself.

When she first met Syr, Aisha hadn’t made much of the girl, but seeing her smiling face now, she was confident.

That was Syr’s true nature. She was deeply, madly in love. Obsessed, even. She was at once an innocent field of flowers and a patch of vines and thorns that tangled up anyone who got too close.

It was strange to put so much stock in a girl who wasn't even an adventurer, but that was what Aisha thought.

"Looks like Haruhime has a lot of work ahead of her…Guess I'll go break them up."

"What's that, Aisha? Craving a taste of Rabbit Foot?"

"Heh. Something like that. Haruhime's not the only one with her eyes on Bell Cranell after all."

There was plenty of competition for Bell's affections in the city, and even Aisha herself had caught a whiff of his manliness ever since that day he came barging into the Pleasure District, besting her in combat and taking Haruhime away. Amazons were usually attracted to men more powerful than themselves, and Aisha was no exception.

And so if anyone asked who was at the top of her list, Bell Cranell would be the answer. Aisha had bedded more men than she could count and left them all in tears, but she wouldn't mind having a child if it was with Bell.

And so, in Orario, the center of the world, a battle was unfolding for control of a single male. Perhaps those women could feel it in their bones—who the next great hero would be.

"All right. Here I come!"

"Give her hell, Aisha!"

Thirty seconds remained before Aisha would run into Syr's *Freya Familia* escort.

"It looks like Lady Freya isn't the only one with her eyes on that rabbit."

"I was mad at first, but now I just feel sorry for the poor guy."

""""Agreed."""""

That may or may not have been a conversation that transpired between the four prum brothers tasked with fending off the many high-class adventurers apparently keen to make contact with the white rabbit that day.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: THE PROPHET

Cassandra was zoning out.

…Bell was so cool…

The events of her "date" replayed in her mind she emitted a deep, heavy sigh.

"I thank you, ladies. I hope you will come back to my store in the future. I shall be waiting for you!"

""Yes, Lord Miach!""

Beside her, the god's cool voice elicited squeals of delight from two young ladies, residents of the city with no ties to any familia. He saw them off with a smile as they left with small, ribbon-wrapped bottles in their hands.

"Heh-heh. This is why I love the Goddess Festival. The products just fly off the shelves…"

"That was just a regular potion watered down with fruit juice. Don't you feel ashamed of yourselves, scamming your customers like this?"

"It's not a scam, Daphne. This is our newest product, Potion Lemonade."

Every street in the city was packed with people thanks to the festival, and businesses were eager to capitalize—none more so than those of *Miach Familia*. But they knew they wouldn't get many customers coming to their combination home and store, Blue Pharmacy, which was tucked away in the back alleys of the city. That was why they had set up this mobile stall, which Hestia's and Takemikazuchi's familias had come together to create.

"We want ordinary people to know the taste of potions they can't normally afford," said Nahza with a grin. "We apothecaries have a duty to spread appreciation and awareness about the work adventurers do every day…"

"Yeah, right," said Daphne with a sigh.

"By the way…" said Miach, tipping his head. "Is something the matter, Cassandra? You seem distracted, and I've seen you

fidgeting, too. Hmm, and your cheeks are red."

It was Daphne who answered. "Oh, probably thinking about Rabbit Foot again. She's been like that ever since yesterday. Just ignore her."

Meanwhile, Cassandra had her head in her hands and, like Miach had noticed, was fidgeting restlessly.

Oh, to think I'd get to go on a date with Bell in the town of Rivira… That was *a date, right? What else could it have been?*

For Cassandra, the festival had come a day early. She had been exploring the Dungeon with Daphne when the pair came across Bell on the eighteenth floor, and he invited her to do some shopping with him. Even a town of rough-and-tumble adventurers far underground could be a romantic date spot for Cassandra.

"Bell was like a different person. So kind, so charming, so reliable…"

Her cheeks reddened as she looked up to the sky and giggled. The girl was normally very gloom and doom, but now it was almost as if you could see pink blossoms filling the air around her. Even Nahza wasn't sure what to make of it.

What Cassandra didn't know, however, was that Hedin had orchestrated the whole thing. He had dragged Bell down to the eighteenth floor, where word wouldn't get out, and forced him to "practice" his escorting skills in secret, not just on Cassandra but on any woman he could find.

I'm a little worried about last night's dream, though…In it, I saw a devilish witch nuzzling and then devouring a white rabbit. I wonder what it could mean…?

Just then, a boy and a girl walked past Cassandra's line of sight, holding hands like a couple.

"Was that Bell and the waitress girl…?" said Nahza. "Whoa, I hope Hestia doesn't find out about this…"

"I've never seen them like that…It looked like they were about to get married—Hey, Cassandra?!"

Swoon, thud.

Cassandra felt her consciousness recede, and the next thing she knew, she was lying flat on the ground.

I'm such an idiot…I knew I should have paid closer attention to that dream…

Her fading mind registered only Miach, muttering to himself as the girl walked by, and Daphne calling her name. The shock was so great that she lost consciousness almost immediately, tears building up in her eyes.

IS IT WRONG TO FAKE AN ACCIDENT TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN THE DUNGEON?

It happened during my long nights of torturous training under Master's tutelage, which were blending together, and I was beginning to lose track of time. In our room at the fancy hotel we were using, the fair-featured elf turned to me and said these words:

"We're going into the Dungeon."

"Hweh…?"

My mind tattered and worn, I could barely muster a feeble noise in response.



Hedin has been remaking me…

No, more like domesticating me…

No, more like reincarnating me…

Whatever, *remaking* is good enough.

In any case, he has been drilling into me what he calls "the absolute bare minimum of how you should treat a woman," from forging the correct mental attitude to taking the initiative in every encounter. His training has been going on for forty-eight hours straight now, and his lessons are so intense they put Eina's to shame.

Of course, I have not been given a wink of sleep in that time, but Hedin mocked my weakness, saying that a Level 4 should be able to go five days straight without issue. Then, all of a sudden, he dragged me down to the Dungeon to "practice" taking the lead.

"Um, Master? Why do we need to be in the Dungeon for this…?"

"Because, you mindless simpleton, if you were to philander around on the surface, as I'm sure is your wont, word of your frivolous behavior would undoubtedly reach the delicate ears of

Lady Syr. Would you really want to be responsible for breaking a young lady's heart before the rendezvous has even begun? Even you can't be that much of a churl."

"Right…Sorry…"

"Perhaps this fact has not gotten through your thick rabbit skull yet, but for whatever reason, this entire city finds you hopelessly enamoring. Even a complete nitwit such as yourself should be able to understand how fast word of your misconduct will spread."

"Yes…I wasn't thinking…"

Hedin's relentless stream of insults leaves me unable to do anything but weakly apologize. Does the dignity of man mean nothing to him…?

"But still…the Dungeon?" I ask. "It's just not what I expected. That's all. I mean, how do you even know which monsters are female?"

"Are you deliberately being obtuse, you little worm?"

"Eep!!"

Master's expertise in psychological torture is matched only by his propensity for corporal punishment, and as his kick to my waist mercilessly knocks me into the wall, I can only think, *Hey, at least my defense must have skyrocketed since this training began!*

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I plead, splayed out on the ground. "But…if I'm not hitting on monsters, then…"

"Precisely," says Hedin, pushing the bridge of his glasses up his nose. "For the next three days, in addition to the monsters, you shall be hunting for *women.*"

"Huh?!"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, you filthy little rabbit!"

"Bwah! I-I'm sorryyy!!"

After a second kick makes me crumple to the ground, Hedin peers down at me as though I were a simple beast, incapable of conscious thought.

"We shall be turning adventurers of the fairer sex into your training dummies."

I'm a little disturbed by how shamelessly he said that, but I nod in understanding.

Picking up from what Master said earlier, behavior that might

cause a stir on the surface is unlikely to make many waves down here. While news travels fast, disputes between adventurers are almost expected, so at the very least, even if I slip up and word gets out, it shouldn't rise above the realm of tavern talk. Syr will be unlikely to hear of it before the festival begins. My fellow adventurers, on the other hand…

"Erm…so am I supposed to just talk to every female adventurer I see?"

"What a load of inefficient rubbish. Have you not realized why I brought you here?"

We are currently on the thirteenth floor—the first of what people call the Dungeon's middle floors, in a place known as the Cave Labyrinth.

"Of all the areas in the Dungeon, which do you suppose sees the most casualties?"

"Oh, erm…the upper floors?"

"Correct. Novice adventurers, those without talent, those who fail to put in the effort, the arrogant, the impatient, and the simply unlucky all meet an early death on these floors."

Relieved beyond belief that I've apparently given a satisfactory answer, I follow Master as he sets off.

Of course, he's right. The upper floors are where most adventurers die. It's said that nearly half of Orario's adventurer population are lower-class, and many accidents occur on floors one through twelve. Of course, the danger ramps up from floor thirteen onward, but by then, the upper floors have already filtered out those prone to making basic mistakes.

As Miss Eina put it, the sample size is simply much greater. Mistakes on the lower floors may be far deadlier, but slipping up on the upper floors is overwhelmingly more common. That's how I interpret it at least.

"Then if you ignore the upper floors, on which floor do you think the most accidents occur?"

"That would be…around here, on the middle floors?"

"I asked for a floor, you ignorant rabbit. Don't hedge your bets with me!"

Without even turning around, Hedin flicks a pebble that strikes me directly on the forehead! Ignoring my injured wails, Master speaks, as if filling in for an incompetent student.

“The answer,” he says, “is precisely where the difficulty spikes after getting past the upper floors. That is right here, on floor thirteen.”

Hedin strides through the halls of the Dungeon as though it’s his very own backyard.

“Your training dummies shall be the poor women doomed to misery upon this very floor.”

“Huh?”

“Due to the danger, your perceived value will start off strong, so it should be no problem at all to lure your target into a date.”

At last, I finally understand Hedin’s plan. Unlike some of the gods, I could never dream of hitting on complete strangers—or even women I know, for that matter—but in a situation where she’s already primed to trust me, then maybe I stand a chance.

…I just realized I’m *actually* picking up girls in a Dungeon. If only old Bell could see me now…

“The upper floors are more crowded, and the risk of detection is higher,” Hedin explains. “However, the more pertinent reason we’ve come down this far is that the upper floors are frequently populated by empty-headed narcissists with no personality. To even hypothetically use one of those women as a stand-in for Lady Syr would be beyond insulting.”

He’s the one being insulting…

“Not that your head is much fuller, but at the very least you aren’t a complete lost cause. The kinds of women who roam the middle floors should be moderately impressed.”

And now he’s insulting me…

My heart is steadily being gouged out, but I understand Hedin’s plan now. And I also understand why we’re walking the beaten path. This is the shortest route to the next floor, and as a result, it’s where most adventurers congregate. Even those looking to stay on this floor and farm excelia generally don’t stray too far so that they can call for help from their fellow adventurers if need be.

With the Goddess Festival only three days away, it’s more important than ever to avoid unwanted attention. It’s clear that Hedin chose this place with that in mind.

But isn’t this kind of exploitative? These people are trying their best, and we’re just…

“Wipe that stupid look off your face. Here one comes now.”

“…!”

As my guilt threatens to swallow me up before we’ve even begun, Hedin’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts. He darts into the shadows, and I hastily follow, and before long, we see a party of four coming down the path toward us.

“Two male humans, one male half-elf, and a female elf,” Hedin remarks. “Perfect.”

“H-how is that perfect? There’s only one woman, and there’s three men guarding her!”

“But those three men are all competing for her affections, thereby keeping each other in check. Meanwhile, the woman is not interested in any of them and only stays silent to keep the peace.”

“How do you know all that?!”

“It’s written all over their faces.”

“Elves are something else!!”

Also, did I really need to know all the sordid details?!

Meanwhile, my adventurer’s eyes pick out something else. The party in question is quite well-balanced, and their equipment is in good condition, too. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re all Level 2. Are they really going to mess up and conveniently run into trouble for us?

“…Wait, Master? Where did you go?”

I turn to look, but Hedin is gone. Then, seconds later, I hear a huge crackle in the distance, like a discharge of lightning, and the cries of dozens of monsters.

…

……

……He didn’t…

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhhh!!”

“There’s a huge monster swarm coming this waaaaaaaaay!!”

He did!

He’s corralling the monsters—effectively creating a pass parade! As soon as I realize that, my heart sinks.

What I see next is almost too horrible for words. A huge horde of monsters surges into the relatively narrow hallway, and all I

can hear are screams. If I were Level 2 and I saw this, I'd be too traumatized to ever enter the Dungeon again.

The party valiantly tries to beat back the wave of monsters, but after a while, the men all turn tail and flee, leaving the woman behind.

"Huh?! Aren't they supposed to be companions?!" I shriek.

"Hmph. If they insisted on dragging things out, I would have taken out a few of them myself," says Hedin, appearing silently by my side once more. "But it seems their wretched personalities have saved me the effort."

"Yours is the worst by far!" I cry.

"Just go before you squander your chance."

I'm lost for words, but I can hear the elf girl crying out for help, so I rush over as fast as I can. By the time I catch up to her, she's already on her knees and badly injured. My blood boils, and my entire heart screams out to save her, spurring me head-on into the horde of al-miraj and hellhounds.



I suppose this is what I deserve, thought the elf girl, Laurier, as the monster's claws and fangs bore down on her.

It all began when her god gave her a tall order.

"Could you investigate the familia mentioned in this note for me? I'd like some inside information if you don't mind. Just pretend to be a poor little solo adventurer who needs help from some big, strong men. I'm sure they'll spill everything if you ask. What's that? This is seduction? An elf like yourself could never do such a thing? Hey now. Don't underestimate the great Hermes! I think I know what my followers can and can't do, thank you very much. This should be a walk in the park for a cutie like you!"


© nilitsu

And so Laurier was sent into the Dungeon before she could even cry about it.

Laurier was a member of *Hermes Familia*, an organization that regularly engaged in this sort of espionage. Hermes often said that information was more valuable than gold, and he'd recently sniffed out rumors of some suspicious behavior involving a certain familia that could be used as blackmail material against them.

"Seriously…How could a proud elf like me be called upon for mere seduction?"

Laurier was a beautiful young woman. Her long, drawn-back golden hair and dark green eyes were typical of elves, and coupled with her blossoming youth, many men found her very attractive. If she smiled, there would be no end of adventurers lining up to ask her out for a drink after work.

At Level 2, she was also a capable adventurer, but in Orario she was relatively unknown. That was because Laurier was usually in charge of operations *outside* the city.

Hermes Familia possessed eyes and ears in every land, but they still found it useful to sometimes send their own familia members to faraway nations and cities. Laurier often worked as a spy or accompanied the god on his many excursions. It was even she who, a little over two months ago, had uncovered the captured Xenos being kept in a mansion belonging to Elurian nobility.

"I know that nobody recognizes me here, and that's why I'm the only one who can sneak into adventuring parties, but still…!"

In any case, it was this sequence of events that had led to Laurier joining up with another familia's party. She had been holding out hope that she might arouse suspicion and end up having to call the whole operation off, but just as Hermes predicted, the adventurers were irritatingly gullible.

Laurier found it difficult to be happy, but she hid it with a smile, exploring the Dungeon with them while surreptitiously investigating the adventurers' backgrounds. After this expedition, she fully intended to take her new friends back to the tavern, get them all good and drunk, and see what else she could pry out of them.

Which was why she saw her current predicament as her just

deserts.

“GROOOOOAAAAGHH!”

Abandoned by the men she sought to trick, a horde unlike anything she had ever seen stampeded toward her. All alone, with no help in sight and far less Dungeon experience than her fellow *Hermes Familia* members, Laurier’s chances for survival were looking slim.

It’s all because I acted shamelessly…I should have known the Great Tree would not permit it. Curse you, Lord Hermes!

Laurier looked up as a hellhound pounced, baring its sharp fangs. But just as she was ready to resign herself to her cruel fate…!

“Hah!!”

There was a flutter of white, and Laurier’s destiny was altered.

“…Huh?”

The hellhound let out a guttural cry as its body was sliced in two. Before Laurier could even tell what had happened, the white figure began what could only be described as an *extermination*.

Armed with only a single jet-black knife, the mysterious warrior took out dozens of al-miraj before ending the life of a huge liger fang with a single meteoric swing. It all happened so fast that the only thing Laurier saw was a pair of rubellite eyes. Finally, a group of hellhounds prepared a breath attack, but the person who had come to her aid unleashed a ridiculously fast spell with no audible chant, burning the last of the horde to a crisp. It was then that she realized the one responsible for this carnage was a boy no older than she was.

When she looked into his rubellite eyes, Laurier’s heart soared like nothing before.

And off to the side, a single elven adventurer adjusted his spectacles, seeing that all had gone just as he planned it.



I take no chances, even using *Firebolt* in order to ensure the girl’s safety, and eventually, the monster horde is no more. I quickly

scan the area to make sure they're all dead, and my eyes fall upon the elven adventurer, sitting on the floor and peering up at me. Her smooth, ivory cheeks are ever so slightly flushed.

…I feel incredibly guilty. I just want to die. If the old Bell really *could* see me now, it'd break his heart.

"Erm…are you okay? Can you stand?"

"…Oh! I-I-I'm fine! …Wh-who might you be?"

…Master is frantically signaling me from the shadows. *Hurry up and introduce yourself!*

"I'm, er…I'm Bell Cranell…" I say, helping her to her feet.

"R-Rabbit Foot! You're the one they call Record Holder! The one who shot straight to Level Four in no time at all! Lord Hermes talks about you all the time!"

Did she just say "Lord Hermes"? After her gaze settles, I notice that she keeps stealing furtive glances at me.

Th-this must be the suspension-bridge effect Hedin told me about! I feel so bad about exploiting it, though!

"M-my name is Laurier. You saved my life, Bell Cranell. I-I am eternally grateful…"

"N-no! That's quite all right! I was just passing by and…"

Due to her nerves and my guilty conscience, the conversation is going nowhere when…

"Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning."

"Eek!"

"Hm?"

Master's ultra-short spell hits me in the back. It all happens so fast that Laurier doesn't notice anything except the strange yelp I make. I look over my shoulder and make eye contact with an icy glare in the shadows. I swear I can even hear Master's voice.

Do as I taught you and seize the initiative, you imbecile. Unless you want me to punish you.

You just did!

My face as pale as a sheet, I turn back to the elf girl.

"M-Ms. Laurier! I-I notice your adventuring clothes are in tatters! Please take my coat!!"

I don't normally wear a coat, but Master gave me one before we entered the Dungeon. Now I know why. As fast as I can, while trying not to startle her, I place it over Laurier's shoulders.

S-so kind!!

Laurier's heart thrummed. The feel of the boy's coat on her shoulders caused her face to redden even more.

"Miss Laurier!" Bell declared. "I don't mean to presume, but I think it's dangerous for you to walk through the middle floors by yourself! Would you mind if I escorted you back to the upper floors?!"

"What? I-I can't ask that! We're complete strangers, and I'm just a second-tier adventurer…"

"No, please, I insist! I couldn't bear the thought of what might happen if I leave you alone!!"

"Y-you couldn't? You really feel that way…?"

Gazing into Bell's eyes, Laurier mistook the look of someone held at knifepoint (or rather, *spellpoint*) and thought it was actually steely resolve. She shyly raised a hand to her flushed cheek, casting her gaze this way and that.

Laurier had no experience with love. At least not in a purehearted, transaction-free sense. She was aware of her charms and would use them to exploit gullible men to advance her familia's ambitions, but in her heart of hearts, Laurier despised the kinds of people who typically approached her. She was an elf after all, and her race's famous beauty made her stand out. That was what her hardheaded compatriots typically believed, and Laurier herself was no exception.

And so when an innocent young girl like her was placed in such an exhilarating situation, this was the result. A dashing young man with a deep, passionate gaze (her interpretation), quick and courteous, and with such clear regard for Laurier's well-being (and more to the point, his own, though Laurier didn't know that).

She was trembling. Her chest felt hot, too, and she didn't know why.

To be perfectly frank, it was because a younger human with white hair and red eyes was precisely her type. Laurier just didn't realize it yet.

"…Well, then……If you insist…"

Her face bright red, Laurier wrung her fingers and accepted Bell's proposal. She failed to notice the bead of sweat that rolled down Bell's face in relief.



Without letting down my guard, I strike up a conversation with Ms. Laurier while the two of us make our way back through the Dungeon. Master advised me to pick a topic we're both knowledgeable about, such as information about the Dungeon or personal anecdotes. It seems to do the trick, and before long, we have both gotten over our initial awkwardness.

"I'm telling you, my last party was a pack of total cowards! They obviously only saw me as a potential partner, and even then they all ran off when it came time to step up and actually do something!"

"Ha-ha…You must be very popular with men, Ms. Laurier."

"M-me?! Ha! Only because of my heritage perhaps. Beyond that, there's nothing special about me…"

"Erm…I think you're a good person, Ms. Laurier. I can tell just by talking to you."

"…!"

"You felt guilty about joining a party you didn't belong to. That's why you tried to kill as many monsters as you could. I bet those guys just thought you were strong enough that they didn't have to come to your rescue."

"Th-that's not it! I was using them for my own purposes! I was only doing that so I could relieve my own guilt! …That's just who I am. I'm a bad person who uses other people…Fate was trying to punish me for that today."

"…I know another elf like you, someone who holds things against herself because of how she treats other people. I don't think that makes you a bad person. I think it makes you a very kind one."

"O-oh? Er…Well…"

When I smile at her, Laurier suddenly gets very flustered, pressing her hands to her reddening cheeks.

Is this really working…?

Just say what you think. Find out what makes them a good person and just keep on repeating it. That's all you need to do. If there's enough chemistry, then you'll provoke her protective

instincts, which will blah blah blah…

All I've done is put Master's words into practice, but Laurier's ears are already bright red, and she seems to be fidgeting about suspiciously. Where have I seen this before…? Oh, right, with Lyu…

We continue on through the Dungeon, with me occasionally stepping in to protect the wounded girl from a monster attack, and soon enough, the passageway to the upper floors comes into view.

And with that, my mission is complete.

I understand this is simply the first of many I'll have to do today, but still, I feel a sense of relief at having cleared the first hurdle.

Laurier, meanwhile, is staring at the ground, as if she's having trouble working up the courage to say something. Then, as if realizing she doesn't have much time left to do so, she stops in her tracks and calls out to me.

"R-Rabbit Foot! I mean, Bell!" she says, her face still bright red. "Thank you for saving me today! I *will* find some way to pay you back, mark my words!"

"Seriously, please don't worry about it."

I mean it. Don't feel indebted to me for saving you from a situation we created in the first place—I don't think my conscience will be able to take it.

"No, I *must* insist! W-would you mind if…we met again sometime?"

"If we met?"

"I-I just mean if it happens! I don't mind waiting! Though I would be happy if it were sooner…b-but anyway! If we meet again, I would like to pay you back somehow! I-I know! We could go shopping, maybe? For weapons! Oh, or armor!"

Oh, I wonder if she means like what I did with Eina. Weapons and armor *are* important to an adventurer…I wonder if this is some kind of unspoken rule I don't know about? Like…if someone helps you out, you buy them a weapon? There's a lot of stuff like that in this line of work.

"Wh-what do you think…?"

Laurier keeps dropping her gaze and looking up at me. Her purehearted attitude makes me smile. If there's one thing you can

say about elves, it's that they insist on repaying their debts.

"I'd be glad to," I reply, and the most beautiful smile blooms on Laurier's face. But then…

"Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning."

"Aagh!!"

Approximately zero seconds after opening my mouth, I get struck by lightning. Why?!

Laurier looks on, baffled, as I collapse to the ground, and Hedin scoops me up faster than the eye can follow. He hoists my smoldering form onto his shoulder and whisks me away.

"Wh-why…?"

"You foolish rabbit. You really think I'll allow you to arrange a date before your engagement with Lady Syr is through?"

"I-I'm sorry…!!"

"Besides, no good things will come to you continuing to cavort with that elf."

Wh-what does he mean by that? Unfortunately, I'm not able to speak well with my tongue shocked, but Master picks up on my confusion nonetheless.

"There is no one more irritating than an elf who believes she has found her first love," he says simply.

I'm still not sure what he means, but before I can figure it out, Hedin says, "On to the next one. We must see if your abilities hold up against a different woman."

It looks like my battles are only just beginning…



"What just happened…?"

Bell had suddenly collapsed, then somebody seemed to rush by, and he was gone, leaving Laurier to wonder if everything she had just seen had been a dream.

"No…it was real. I'm sure of it!"

She felt the coat around her shoulders, and a smile appeared on her lips. His warmth was still there, protecting her. She tugged it closer, and her cheeks turned a deeper shade of crimson.

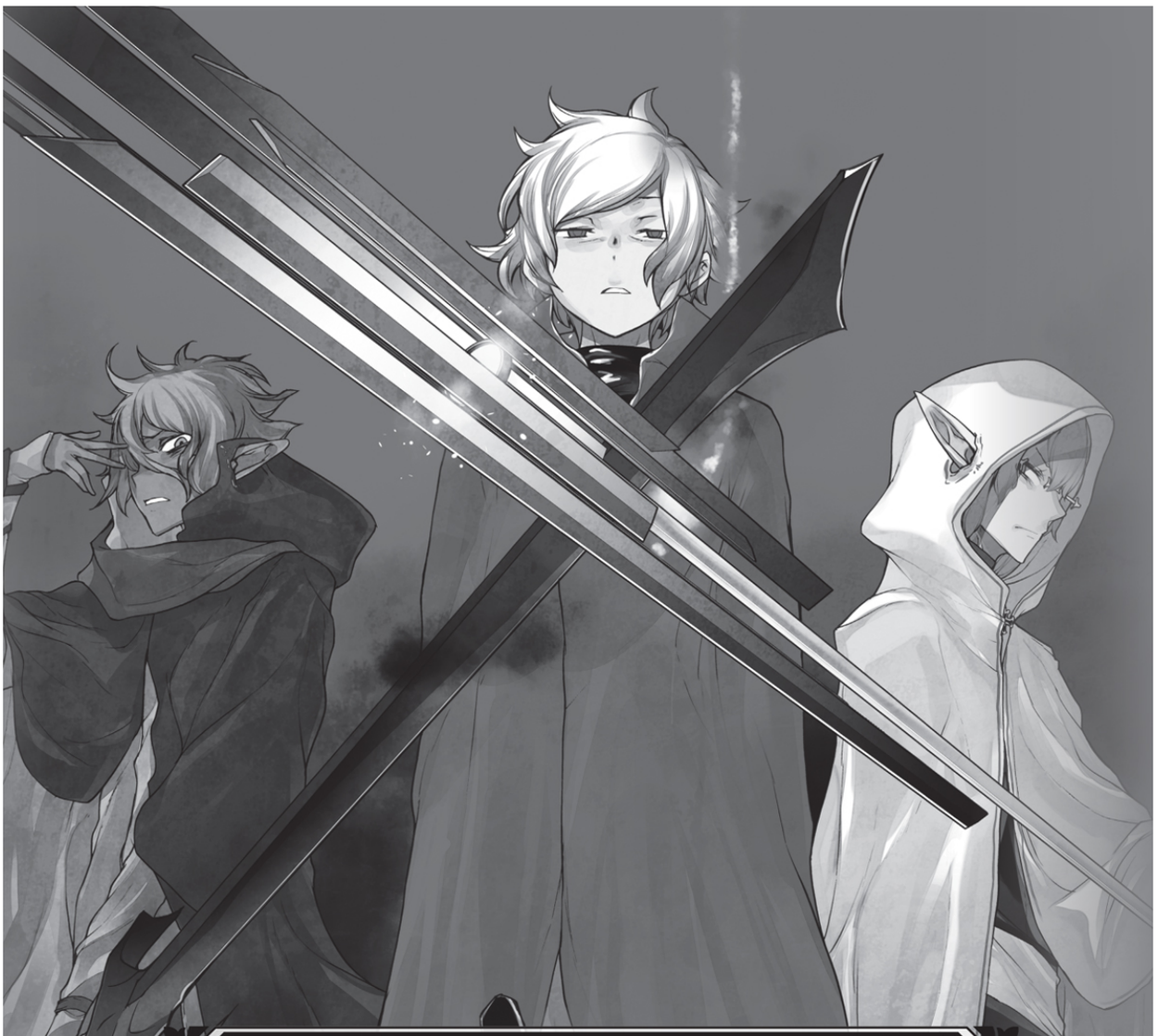
"Oh, Bell! When will the fates allow us to meet once more?"

The elf's delusions transported her off into a world of

daydreams, putting a decidedly dopey look on her face that were quite at odds with her race's stoic reputation.

And so the little white rabbit gained another ardent fan.

Hermes was said to have had quite the reaction upon hearing that one of his followers had deserted her duties in order to fall madly in love with Bell, but that is a story for another time.



VOLUME 17

THE PROMISED CAMPANELLA
Animate Store Bonus

A WORLD WITHOUT YOU
Melon Books Store Bonus

LOOKING FOR A LOVE DAGGER
Toranoana Store Bonus

BECAUSE ALL SHE WANTED WAS TO WATCH OVER HIM FOREVER
GAMERS Store Bonus

SYR AND HÖRN: THE SPACE IN BETWEEN
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THE PROMISED CAMPANELLA

Putting on her hair clips.

That was the one form of resistance permitted to her.

In this isolated realm of Freya's creation, Hestia was not allowed to make contact with Bell. She even had to lie and act like he wasn't a member of her familia. Freya's loyal followers had made sure to erase any and all evidence that might connect Hestia to the boy.

Everything…except this.

"Erm…excuse me!"

One evening, a boy on the street called out to her. His hair was the color of fresh snow, and his eyes were like rubellite, but he possessed the air of a wizened man, worn beyond his years, lost and alone. When he first noticed Hestia, he cast his gaze downward, determined to walk by without speaking a word.

But in the end, just as they were passing, the boy stopped and turned.

"Erm…your hair clips…"

The decoration adorning them looked like blue petals cradling a silver bell. They were a present from the boy to Hestia, back when the two first founded *Hestia Familia* all those months ago. A *campanella* for the goddess.

It was one memory Freya knew nothing about. After all, Hestia had already been wearing it regularly by the time Bell met Syr.

"It looks good on me, right? These are very important to me, you know."

A half-prum walking alongside Bell glared, and so did the members of *Freya Familia* observing the interaction from the shadows.

If Hestia told Bell about his true past, Lilly and the others would be harmed.

So Hestia limited herself to what she could get away with.

"Someone very special gave these to me."

Bell was shocked. After much hesitation, he asked her

something else.

“That someone…where are they now?”

Who was it?

That was what the boy wanted to ask. It was written all over his face.

“It was you,” Hestia longed to reply, but she couldn’t.

With trembling lips, she said the only thing she could.

“I can’t see them now. They’re somewhere far away.”

“…Oh.”

Bell’s downcast look pained the goddess deeply.

“But,” she said, “I’m always thinking of them. And someday, we’ll be together again. I promise.”

Bell lifted his head, his eyes wide.

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, Hestia smiled and silently took her leave.

That was it for Hestia’s resistance. She knew she would never get through to Bell with his mind as worn down as it was now. All she had done was make *Freya Familia* more suspicious of her.

But even so, there was a promise she had to fulfill.

Hestia bounced down the street, letting the bells in her hair ring—a *campanella* for the young boy.

A WORLD WITHOUT YOU

While crossing Central Park beneath the white walls of Babel, Lilly came to a sudden stop.

“Our balance is all off…” she muttered.

Hearing her strange outburst, Welf, the frontline fighter, turned around as did Haruhime, the combination sorceress and supporter.

“What do you mean, Li’l E?”

“Is something the matter, Lady Lilly?”

“No, I was just thinking…How did we ever manage to reach the lower floors with a party like this?”

The Goddess Festival had ended without a hitch, and Lilly’s party was ready to resume their regular forays into the Dungeon. Lilly was hoping to reach the eighteenth floor as usual, but on their way over, something occurred to her.

Welf on the front lines, Mikoto in the center, and two supporters. Haruhime had a level-boosting spell up her sleeve, but it still felt like something was off. It would normally be a tall order for a party with this composition to get through the first few middle floors, let alone reach floor eighteen. Lilly and her companions had really been pushing their luck lately, hadn’t they? Come to think of it, what kind of strategist would put together a party like this?

If only there were, say, a second-tier adventurer who could be the core for their party, then Lilly would have no complaints…

…What am I thinking? We don’t have anyone like that.

Lilly corrected herself. Beggars couldn’t be choosers. Lilly might have been Level 2 now, but in terms of combat ability, she was still far behind Welf.

…I did well to get to Level Two, didn’t I?

It was all thanks to the powerful adventurers she had teamed up with lately—Aisha, Ouka, and Daphne among them. They went all the way down past the lower floors, into the depths…

…Wait, why did we go to the deep floors again?

Lilly raised her head and surveyed her party. Welf was there. Mikoto was there. Haruhime was there.

Nobody was missing, and yet Lilly felt like there was a gaping hole right in front of her.

“Lady Lilly…?”

Lilly had clammed up. Mikoto tilted her head questioningly.

It felt like Lilly could hear something in the back of her mind. Like a fist pounding on a door, begging to be let in. She clutched her head, and that was when it happened.

“Ms. Supporter! Ms. Supporter! Are you looking for an adventurer?”

She swore she heard a voice.

“An adventurer in need of support has come to buy your services.”

She spun around, but there was nobody there. Of course there wasn’t.

It was a hallucination, as was the smile she thought she saw.

“L-Lady Lilly? Are you all right?”

“What’s gotten into you, Li’l E?”

Her friends were worried, but Lilly couldn’t say what was wrong.

“Lady Lilly…Why are you crying?”

Lilly hadn’t realized until it was pointed out to her. From the prum’s chestnut-colored eyes came a stream of tears. She wiped them away, but still, they came, even though there was nothing to be sad about.

“Just some dust in my eye,” she said. “Let’s go.” She urged her party members on.

But the sound in the back of her mind didn’t fade.

And Lilly felt that a part of herself was weeping, searching for a treasure that she just couldn’t find.

LOOKING FOR A LOVE DAGGER

“What in the world is going on?”

Hephaistos was annoyed.

She stood in the halls of her home, counting the numerous examples of her own work hanging from the walls, and frowned.

I must have forged something about half a year ago…but I can’t remember what it was.

As a goddess of the forge, Hephaistos remembered each and every piece that crossed her anvil. She recalled every bump and every crease. It was the only way to make sure that nothing she did was ever in vain. She remembered the processes she used, what came of them, the materials, the type of hammer, and even the temperature of the forge. Everything she learned, she poured into her next piece, adding onto a series of works that constantly sought greater heights, each one better than the last.

“And yet there’s obviously something missing. A single weapon I can’t remember at all.”

This was a serious issue. Hephaistos suspected that some outside influence must be manipulating her memory, but that could wait. There was a more pressing concern: What was that weapon like?

Was it conventional or unorthodox?

What was it made of? How high-quality was it? What kind of weapon was it? A sword? A spear? An ax? …Or a *knife*?

Hephaistos had to solve that mystery before she could even think of unveiling the true cause of these contradictions. What if that weapon had pushed the boundaries of her work? The not-knowing caused Hephaistos so much stress that all she wanted to do was shut herself in her forge and hammer away.

“Lady Hephaistos! Lady Hestia failed to show up for her part-time job again! This is the seventh day in a row!”

“…Why now, of all times?!”

Hephaistos launched herself out of her chair in a rage. Sparing only a glance for the terrified familia member who had reported

Hestia's absence, she stormed off toward the home of the goddess, who—*for some reason*—owed her two hundred million valis.

She would take out her anger on Hestia, then ask her if she knew anything about the weapon so conspicuously missing from her own memories. Wasn't it also around half a year ago that the goddess began working for her…?

"You know something about this, don't you, Hestia?! What weapon did I make?! Tell me! Now!"

"I'm sorry, Hephaistos!!"

The fiery goddess's rage reduced Hestia to a sorry puddle, and because she tried to whistle hopelessly and act like she knew nothing—because the *Freya Familia* adventurers breathing down her neck would punish her if she didn't—she ended up seeing what Hephaistos was like when she was *truly* angry.

BECAUSE ALL SHE WANTED WAS TO WATCH OVER HIM FOREVER

Tiona was itching to read a story.

"…Or so I thought, but for some reason, I just can't seem to get into it."

Tiona sat on the floor in a corner of her home's library, the open book in her hands.

The title was *Argonaut*. A comedic, lighthearted romp about an unlikely hero who slays a minotaur and rescues the kidnapped princess. It was Tiona's favorite tale.

"How come…? I could have sworn I felt like I was missing *Argonaut* just now…"

A silver gleam flashed across her eyes, twisting her feeling into something unrecognizable, but Tiona didn't know why. She looked down at the open pages, saying nothing. Her finger lingered at the point the hero came to save the princess, and for some reason, when she gazed at the illustration on the page, depicting the two gazing into each other's eyes, Tiona felt a sharp pain, like a knife in her heart.

"…That'll never be me," she muttered.

Tiona was loud and carefree, and her elder twin sister always called her an idiot. And that was to say nothing of her comparatively meager bust. An Amazon filled with battle lust like her couldn't even compare to the proper, ladylike princess in the story. That character was more like…Aiz. And Tiona was just the audience, reading the story but never a part of it.

"That's where I belong…"

Watching over the hero, cheering him on, not walking alongside him.

Without even realizing it, Tiona was experiencing loss. The loss of a hero she could watch over forever. And because of that, she couldn't even understand why she felt so lonely.

And when she flipped the page, the villainess of the story

seemed to be staring at her from her place on the paper. Was she taunting Tiona or sympathizing with her?

“It’s okay to be a spectator.”

“But there may come a time you’ll regret not stepping up.”

“Just as I do.”

Those words on the page stuck a chord with Tiona, and she suddenly felt an urge to cry.

She had always wanted to support a hero.

That was the difference between her and the princess who took that boy’s hand.

SYR AND HÖRN: THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

Hörn was always watching the boy.

“I’m sure you remember what you promised me—the consequence should Bell discover your lie. You may not speak to Bell again. Do not even attempt to enter his sight.”

In accordance with her goddess’s order, she observed Bell as he clumsily fought on the grounds of Folkvangr. Either with her own eyes from a high-up window or through the senses of Freya herself.

As a result, she spent more time watching Bell than anyone else, and this was the conclusion she always came to.

“…What a foolish boy.”

The other first-tier adventurers would beat him down and make him sputter blood until he collapsed to the ground with tears in his eyes, but still, he wouldn’t relent. What was he fighting? Was it them, or was it this very world? This world that so thoroughly spurned the idea of a Bell, who was a member of *Hestia Familia*, and substituted its own? He would struggle, scream, and cry no matter how uncivilized it made him seem.

Hörn could only watch with eyes of scorn. But nor could she tear her eyes away.

“This is your punishment,” she muttered. “You made my goddess suffer. You left her with no other choice.”

This is what you deserve.

For some reason, Hörn couldn’t bring herself to say that. Was this what she had wanted all along? She couldn’t say.

Her attempt on Bell’s life during the Goddess Festival had ended in failure. Her plan to have Bell kill Syr with his own hands was also in tatters, though Hörn wasn’t sure whether to call that a failure or not.

On the one hand, Bell had rejected Freya’s feelings, and that left the goddess unable to go on pretending. It turned Freya into what Hörn wanted all along—a divine, transcendent being fated never to cross paths with lowly mortals.

And yet even that had not been enough to end Freya's obsession with the boy. If anything, her madness had only grown deeper, taking on the form of something truly abhorrent.

Hörn had escaped execution.

She was prepared to face any fate for her goddess, even death, but Freya had shown mercy. Or perhaps this was too cruel to be called that. The goddess was forcing Hörn to live with her shame.

And live with it she did. Not a second went by without Hörn feeling unbearable guilt for what she'd done to Freya. No matter how much she worked herself to the bone, making good on her commandments, she could never look her goddess in the eye again.

The other chamberlains' gazes felt different now, too. They didn't ostracize her or pick on her, but what they did was far worse. Whenever she passed, they would whisper to each other in hushed yet unmistakably piteous tones. Freya had told them exactly what Hörn had done, deepening her torment. Worst of all was Allen, who said to her, *"How come you're still around anyway?"*

With all that in mind, Hörn couldn't help but see the boy as a fellow sinner. Their crimes differed, but she and Bell were both equally despicable.

But just as this strange sympathy conspired to etch a faint smile into Hörn's lips, she stopped herself.

"What is so joyous about finding common ground with a pauper like you?" she spat. "Ridiculous."

She peered down once more at the boy, exhausted and lying splayed out on the ground.

And although she didn't know it yet, the other chamberlains had added a new rumor to their repertoire of hushed gossip.

"Lady Hörn has been speaking to herself more frequently as of late."



One day, Hörn was to leave the city as Freya to focus on keeping up appearances within the goddess's miniature world. She was walking through the halls of the home when she suddenly heard

whispers from around the corner.

“Erm…Ms. Heith…? Is Ms. Hörn a part of *Freya Familia*…?”

“Of course she is, Bell. She’s our goddess’s attendant. Surely you haven’t forgotten even that?”

Hörn immediately pressed her back against the wall and ventured a peek around the corner, where she saw Heith and Bell having a chat. Because of the outing, it seemed the boy was spared his usual daily ordeal.

For some reason, hearing her own name out of his mouth had made her jump.

“Why do you ask, Bell?”

“Erm…well, I go to Lady Freya’s chamber every night, but I never seem to see her around. I was just wondering why that is…”

As Hörn strained her ears to eavesdrop on the conversation, her lips took on a slight frown. Hörn had been forbidden to show herself before Bell, but the boy himself was unaware of this command. Bell couldn’t be allowed to realize what had really happened during the Goddess Festival. Hörn knew that. But it seemed that Bell sensed something was amiss regardless.

Now how would Heith handle this delicate situation? Hörn gulped and listened in.

“Oh, well, there’s a reason for that. You see…you once walked in on her getting changed!”

“Whaaat?!”

Pffft?!!

By some miracle, Bell was so shocked by this revelation that he didn’t notice Hörn half-choking to death around the corner.

“Yes, your timing was almost godlike,” Heith went on. “She had just stripped down to her black lace underwear, which she always wears, by the way!”

“B-black lace?!”

“And then, of course, according to an unwritten law of nature, you accidentally tripped and fell face-first into her soft bosom!”

“Did that really happen?!”

“Oh yes. And after shouting at you and teaching you a lesson, Hörn washed herself in holy water, then locked herself away in her room, not even eating or drinking for three days and three nights. She prayed to all the gods and Lady Freya that she would

never look at you or even breathe the same air as you ever again!”

“Isn’t that a bit overkill?!”

Of course it is! Because it never happened!!

Hörn was screaming in her mind. She would never do something like that! Okay, maybe she would, but the point was she hadn’t!

Bell asked a few more questions, then staggered away, reeling with the implications. Completely red-faced, Hörn marched over to Heith.

“Heith!”

“Oh, hello there, Hörn!” She wiped her forehead. “Phew, that was a close one, don’t you think? Did you see my quick thinking in action?”

“I saw nothing of the sort!!” the chamberlain yelled, causing Heith to wince. “Is that what you call pulling outrageous lies out of your backside?!”

“I am simply covering for your mistakes, Hörn. Try to be reasonable, won’t you?”

Hörn had half expected to hear some sort of snide remark like, “Well, maybe if someone *hadn’t…”* but instead the directness of Heith’s answer gave her pause.

Then Heith, realizing this meant Hörn had been listening in on her conversation with Bell, asked a question in return.

“I know all about your special relationship with Lady Freya, but does that mean you’ve inherited her love for Bell as well?”

“Wha—?!”

“I can’t imagine what an honor it must be to have her emotions running through your veins…I’m a little jealous, to be honest, but don’t you think it’s time to put a stop to it?”

Hörn was about to lose it at this blatant misrepresentation when she stopped, noticed herself becoming outraged, and attempted to calm down.

“…What about you then, Heith?” she asked instead. “You seem awfully fond of that boy as of late.”

“Well, that’s because I am.”

“Wha—?!”

Heith ignored Hörn’s flabbergasted reaction and cheerily spoke on.

“Of course, I would never make a move on Lady Freya’s special someone, but even if I weren’t his healer, I wouldn’t mind spending time with him. He’s waaaay more charming and cute than our pigheaded captain and the other boys!”

“Grh…! Have you no shame?! Are you telling me you’ve fallen for the boy’s wiles like everyone else?!”

“I never said anything of the sort! You’re simply jumping to conclusions! It’s not like I said, ‘Oh, Bell. Oh, Bell! I love you, I love you, I love you!!’”

Heith sighed. “All that I am belongs to Lady Freya anyway,” she added.

Though her manners were graceful, the amiable nature of Heith Velvet never failed to shine through. In some ways, she was the polar opposite of Hörn, and even other women could sense her charm.

Her long, pale pink hair was tied up in two bunches, and she looked just like a nurse with her white pinafore worn over a red smock. She possessed the beauty of a goddess if one ignored the deep bags under her eyes from daily overwork, and she was charming and smart and less stubborn than Hörn (though, like most members of her familia, this came with the caveat that she turned uncharacteristically ruthless wherever Freya was concerned).

With her seemingly carefree yet hardworking personality, she would undoubtedly have been very popular and well-liked if she hadn’t been with *Freya Familia*. Hörn had even heard that adventurers referred to her and Amid of *Dian Cecht Familia* as the “Two Great (Pretty Girl) Healers,” with Amid often called the “Silver Saint,” and Heith the “Golden Witch.”

It was also only with Heith that Hörn ever spoke in anything less than the most carefully crafted words. She wouldn’t go so far as to call the healer a friend, but they were roughly peers, and perhaps Heith’s winsome personality simply got the better of her.

If Hörn was like ice, then Heith was a lone flower blooming carefree on a hilltop.

She and Lady Syr are both the complete opposite of me.

Was this the kind of woman that captivated that foolish boy? Hörn started to realize she had seen Heith and Bell together a lot…

Hörn was proud to be her lady's attendant, and she'd never spared much of a thought for the other girls in her familia before, but now, for some reason, she felt slightly envious of them.

"Besides," said Heith, "do you think you could stop breathing down my neck while I'm trying to have a normal conversation? Don't think I haven't seen you staring from the windows whenever we're in the courtyard. It's creepy."

"Wha—?!"

Hörn couldn't tell whether the girl had read her mind or not, but she was speechless. Not because of Heith's perceptiveness but because Hörn hadn't realized it herself until Heith pointed it out.

All Heith had been doing was her duty as a healer, accompanying Bell in Folkvangr, and yet Hörn had been glaring daggers at the two of them.

She couldn't speak. Heith looked at her for a while, then sighed.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say *you're* the one who's fallen for him, wouldn't you?"

At that, Hörn went redder than ever before.



The days immediately after that were spent in shame. Because of what Heith had said, Hörn found her thoughts drifting to the boy more and more often. She'd become hyperaware of him, and it was all Heith's fault.

No—it was *Bell's* fault. Though the days went by in a flash, Bell's spirit showed no signs of breaking while Hörn's was put through the wringer.

"Caurus Hildr!"

"Ughhh!!"

The sun lit up the western sky, and the white elf's lightning burned Bell to a crisp.

"Grh…Rrrrghhh!!"

After the light of healing engulfed him, he stood up once more, even as tears rolled down his cheeks. As if he knew that if he fell down here, he would never be able to stand up again.

Hörn, as always, was watching this scene from a window of

the mansion when she suddenly placed a hand on her breast.

"…I don't understand," she muttered.

The Bell that Hörn saw through her own eyes was uncouth, unrefined, and desperate.

Surprisingly enough, it was a new experience for her. Usually when Hörn watched Bell, it was through the eyes of her goddess, filtered by Freya's thoughts and feelings. Without that filter, all she felt when she looked at him was a painful longing.

I always thought he was just like me…

He was alone, just like she had been when she went by the name Syr. Spurned by the world, with nobody to validate his existence.

Seeing him trapped here in endless struggle, Hörn thought he must be feeling the same as she once felt—cold and helpless.

But she was wrong.

There was no one he could call a friend in any true sense of the word, but he fought on alone no matter how futile it all seemed.

And he still didn't know what he was fighting for.

Back in the slums, on that fateful, snowy day, Hörn had taken the goddess's hand without a second thought.

But Bell…He continued to refuse it even now.

He was strong. Stronger than she'd heard. Stronger than she had ever imagined. Stronger than her. And it hurt.

Hörn was forced to admit that for the first time, she was seeing Bell not through the goddess's eyes but her own.

"…I don't like it. I hate it. How could I ever fall in love with a man like that?!"

Hörn screamed at the floor. She tore her gaze from the window and retreated into her solitary room, inhabited only by the evening glow, where she shook her head in denial.

"These are Freya's feelings! They cannot be my own!"

Nobody agreed or disagreed. There was no one there. But no matter how many times she repeated it like a chant, her own heart did not believe her.

"They're…not…mine…!!"

If Syr was not Freya.

If Hörn was still Syr.

Would she have been able to love him then?

Would she have been allowed to run out onto the battlefield and protect him from the swords and spears of the einherjar?

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Hörn wanted to break her goddess's order and end her own life.

In the distance, the thunder rumbled.

The boy cried out in pain once more.

And a single teardrop fell and struck the ground at Hörn's feet.



After that, the goddess *changed*, too, as if recognizing the anguish in Hörn's heart.

"……"

After the boy departed for the night, Freya's emotions drifted out of her chamber and took root in Hörn's mind.

At first, she thought she was imagining it. But she wasn't.

When Bell complimented Freya's dress and when the goddess silently stared into her wine, Hörn had felt it then as well.

It's my right eye…

When Hörn first received Freya's blessing upon her back and obtained the power to change forms, it came with a change to her physical appearance as well.

Her right eye.

Whenever she channeled her goddess, Hörn's eye transformed from its usual color to a silvery gray, the exact shade varied depending on which way one looked at it.

Hörn thought of it as the price paid by a lowly mortal seeking to imitate a god.

It was through this eye that Hörn, at times, felt the goddess's feelings. Although she was not using her spell, *Vana Seiðr*, a piece of Freya remained with her nonetheless.

And so it was that Hörn came to see a part of the goddess that even Freya herself didn't know—a girl crying and standing all alone in a field of flowers. She didn't know what to say.

She's weeping.

She's suffering.

She's hurting.

But that means, she…

“What are you doing?”

Hörn had just activated her magic to feel the goddess’s emotions more deeply when a voice broke her out of it.

“…Master Hedin.”

On the other side of the wall, Freya stood in her chamber, holding half of a pair of accessories to her breast.

Hörn ran back to her room, locked the door behind her, and slumped to the ground.

“Was what I did not enough…?” she muttered, shocked speechless. “Even now, the goddess is…”

Her nails dug into her arms. Her body was shaking.

She had to decide.

Would she go on observing, never interfering?

Or would she spit on her goddess’s mercy, feign ignorance, and betray her once more?

She stood at a crossroads.

One path, to go on as Hörn.

The other, to go back to being Syr.

To forget her promise and appear before the boy, just once, as she truly was.

Could she bring herself to accept her own feelings?

“…It couldn’t be more obvious.”

After what seemed like an eternity, Hörn lifted her head. The light of the moon illuminated her features.

“I am Hörn. A child of the gods.”

She smiled.

“My first love is and always will be the goddess. It is that love that brought me this far.”

She smiled through the tears.

“You saved this life, and now, in your hour of need, I offer it once more in your service.”

She chose to be a goddess’s attendant.

She would never choose “Syr” again.

She clasped her hands, closed her eyes, and swore an oath in the moonlight—to give all that she was, her feelings for the boy included, back to who they truly belonged.

MISCELLANEOUS

A SLIGHT SUMMER SHADE
GA Bunko 2014 Summer Fair Exclusive

GHOSTBUSTER AIZ AND HER RABBIT COMPANION
Is it Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?
Manga Exclusive Bonus

A BOOKSHOP DATE?
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UNTIL NOW, AND FOREVER
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Bookwalker Exclusive Story Sold with *Wistoria: Wand and Sword*

A SLIGHT SUMMER SHADE

“Ahhh, I want to go to a tropical island!” Goddess says as she throws herself onto the sofa.

“What’s this, all of a sudden?” I ask.

“There’s nothing sudden about it, Bell,” she grins back. “It’s been summer for ages, and the heat is unbearable!”

It’s a rare day off for the two of us, and we’re both spending a carefree day at home. Goddess speaks without taking her eyes off the book she’s reading.

It’s that time of the year when the nights are short and, just as Goddess says, warm as well. It’s not so bad down here in the basement of the abandoned church, but as soon as you step outside, the heat gets you. It’s been like this for several days now, and it seems like Goddess is finding it hard to handle.

“On days like this, I just want to move somewhere cooler or go all the way to a tropical island to enjoy the heat there,” she says.

That doesn’t sound very goddess-like to me. I give a nervous smile, and Goddess flips the page of her book. The illustrations inside depict just the kind of environment she’s talking about.

“Blue seas, blue skies, bright yellow beaches! Oh, I just want to run along the sands, playing tag with Bell!”

She sighs enviously at the sight displayed in bright colors on the page.

“Or at least sample some delicious tropical fruits…”

Goddess takes one last look at the coconut-laden page before flopping her head down on the sofa, refusing to move another muscle. She looks exhausted.

I gaze down at the book she was glancing through before staring at the ceiling for a while. Then, once I notice Goddess snoring, I silently exit our home.

I return about an hour later. Goddess looks up at me as I enter. “Huh?” she groans. It seems she’s only just woken up.

“Did you go out, Bell…?” she mutters, bleary-eyed. Then she

notices the basket in my arms, and her eyes go wide. “Wait a minute, what did you buy?!”

The basket contains a large, striped, spherical object.

“They were selling them at the market,” I answer, sheepish. “It’s supposed to be a summer fruit called a watermelon. I’m not sure if it’s tropical or not, but…do you want to try one?”

In the blink of an eye, Goddess’s blank face lights up. “Yes, I do!” she says, beaming like the sun.

And so we leave the basement and sit in a corner of the abandoned church. We wash the fruit with cool water from the well and cut into its succulent flesh.

Beneath the setting sun, Goddess and I bite into the red fruit, both smiling.

GHOSTBUSTER AIZ AND HER RABBIT COMPANION

The rumor spread through the Labyrinth City like wildfire:

The Sword Princess failed a quest.

It was astonishing and unprecedented in equal measure. *Loki Familia*'s first-tier adventurers enjoyed pretty much a hundred-percent success rate when it came to quests, and of course that included Aiz. Whenever a quest came in that was otherwise deemed impossible, it was common practice for the Guild to delegate it either to *Loki Familia* or their equally powerful peers over in *Freya Familia*. Whether it was an enhanced species responsible for slaying dozens of upper-class adventurers or a great horde gathering in the depths of the Dungeon, *Loki Familia* was known for getting things done and keeping the city safe.

And so news of the Sword Princess's defeat came as a shock. Nobody knew who started the rumor, but the city taverns were soon abuzz with debate into what exactly could have stumped Aiz Wallenstein. For several days, the prevailing theory was that some greedy merchant had asked the impossible, like bringing back an exorbitant quantity of gathered goods from the deepest floors of the Dungeon.

The whole city was swept away on a wave of speculation, and I was no exception.

"G-Goddess! Did you hear?! Everyone's talking about how Aiz failed a quest!"

"Mrmr…What's so difficult even Wallensomething can't do it? And more importantly, if she can't, who can?"

Goddess folds her arms and adopts a puzzled look. The rumor hasn't been officially confirmed yet, but it's earth-shattering that even our tiny familia isn't immune to the gossip. My worries are 30 percent this city's future, and 70 percent Aiz, so this news hits

me harder than most, and I suspect Lilly and Welf are starting to grow tired of my panicking.

"Well…maybe we should just go ask her about it," Goddess suggests, "but I doubt they'd let us through the front door. And if it turns out to be just a rumor, I'd look a fool!"

I can't stop thinking about Aiz, but I have work to do, so I gather my things and head out. Lilly and Welf are both busy today, so for the first time in a while, I'll be tackling the Dungeon solo. Just as I round a corner, however, I bump into somebody.

"Bell."

"Hwah?!"

It's Aiz. I'm so shocked to see her that I let out an unseemly yelp. After I calm down, however, I notice she seems downcast. After a pause in which I wonder if I should ask, she speaks up.

"I…need your help with something," she says.

That gives me my second shock. Does this mean the rumors were true?!

"Erm…people around town are saying you failed a quest, Ms. Aiz…"

"Yeah, I did."

She gives an embarrassed nod. I don't know what to say. I never even knew there was a job too big for someone like Aiz. But if that's the case, then how am *I* ever going to be of use?

"I'm honored you'd ask, Ms. Aiz, but your *Loki Familia* friends are way more powerful than me…"

"I…can't ask them," she says simply. "If they find out, they'll make fun of me. Especially Loki."

I can only guess from the serious tone of Aiz's voice what nature of mischief she'd have to endure at Loki's hands. The worry on her face is making *me* sweat, too.

"But I thought…Bell would keep it secret."

Aiz drops her gaze to her feet. I've never seen her so forlorn. Instead of an impenetrable warrior, standing before me is a helpless young girl. She twists her fingers nervously and looks at me with an upturned glance that steals my heart a second time.

"You wouldn't tell anyone…would you?"

"Forget what I said! I'd be honored to help in any way I can!!"

She's so adorable that it stirs my protective instincts, and though I can feel my cheeks getting hot, I thump my hand to my

chest like a knight swearing a solemn vow. If Goddess could see me, she'd tell me I'm too soft for this world, but I don't care! The person I look up to came to *me* for help! How could I say no?!

Of course, I can't look *too* happy since Aiz is so upset about it. I do my best to conceal my excitement, but it's a hopeless endeavor.

"So, Ms. Aiz, what's the quest you need help with?!" I ask, bright-eyed.

Aiz's expression turns even gloomier.

"A haunted mansion…" she says, her voice trembling. "I've been asked to clear out a ghost."



"I-is *this* the place…?"

In the dead of night, an impenetrable gloom blots out the sky. Cracked, blackened exterior walls and broken upstairs windows paint a picture of a house long devoid of human habitation. The garden is lined with withered, blasted trees that resemble a witch's fingers. It looks like it might rain at any moment, and at the center of it all, there it stands.

The most mansion-y mansion I've ever seen.

"Is this where the little girl told you about?" I ask.

"Yeah," Aiz replies. "That's the place I have to clear out."

I was surprised to hear that the person who asked Aiz for help was a little human girl she met by chance on the streets.

"Ms. Adventurer, there's a ghost in that mansion. Can you make it go away?"

After speaking to her, Aiz learned that the girl used to play in the grounds of the mansion often, but then an unsettling presence began to appear, which the girl described as a specter dressed in black rags.

Aiz felt sorry for the girl, but as a first-tier adventurer, she knew she couldn't go around making promises she couldn't keep. Instead, she agreed to take on the request as a personal favor, without going through the Guild. Aiz then came here to investigate the case…and the rest is history. Not only did Aiz fail to uncover the true nature of the ghostly sighting, but she also fled the mansion, screaming in terror. That was what gave rise to

the rumors around town of a quest so terrible that even the great Aiz Wallenstein couldn't handle it.

We are in northwest Orario, far from the city center, in an old residential area populated mostly by ruins. It's near the old church where Goddess and I used to live, and I can understand how it would be appealing to a young child eager to explore.

What I *don't* understand, however, is…

"…Why did we come here at night? Couldn't our investigation wait until it's a bit brighter…?"

"The client said the ghost only comes out at night…"

The client? Does she mean the little girl? I turn to Aiz, and she already looks tense. *Even she has a ditzy side*, I think a little rudely.

"…So did you see it?" I ask, turning my eyes back to the building's facade.

"…Yeah. When I went through the door, there was something standing at the top of the stairs dressed in black…"

But just as she points, we both see it. In one of the third-floor windows, there's a ragged figure.

""…!!""

It was only for a moment, but we saw it come into view before passing by the window and out of sight.

The rain begins to soak our shoulders, but neither of us moves a muscle. Aiz has gone white as a sheet, and I can barely blink.

W-was that really a g-g-g-g…?

"…Let's go."

"Erm…Ms. Aiz, are you sure? You're looking a little pale…No, you're right. Let's go…"

Looking at the mixture of resignation and terror on Aiz's face, I steel my nerves and accompany her into the mansion. We open the door, and I poke my head through.

"Hello? Anybody home?" I ask.

The inside, too…It's so…mansion-y…

Immediately after passing through the front doors, we find ourselves in a large entrance hall. Cobwebs coat the ceiling, and glassy-eyed goat heads line the walls. There's also what looks like it might once have been a rather splendid statue, but half of its face has been broken off, as has one of its arms. Now it only contributes to the eerie atmosphere.

I cast my lantern light around the place, imagining how scary it would be to come here by myself. Aiz, meanwhile, has already drawn her sword and advances warily, constantly turning—*swish*, *fwip*—to keep a sharp eye on every angle.

"Erm…Ms. Aiz? Could it be…you're scared of ghosts?"

"……"

She doesn't answer. I guess that's a yes.

"…N-not that that's strange of course, but…aren't monsters way more scary?"

Aiz gulps and answers.

"Ghosts are worse. I can't hit them with my sword."

Really…?

From the beads of sweat on her face, I guess that wasn't a joke. I still feel like fainting though, and we haven't even properly seen the ghost yet.

"Are you not scared of ghosts, Bell…?" she asks me, turning one terrified eye in my direction. How do I even describe the look on her face…?

The truth is, I wouldn't say I'm *not* scared, but I find monsters much scarier. At least they're usually *trying* to kill you. I hate it when you just turn a corner in the Dungeon and they leap out at you with a *Graaah!*

I'm not sure how to feel, to be honest. I've finally won the acknowledgment of the girl I'm trying to impress, and it's over something as silly as this…

"…Well, we saw the figure on the third floor. Should we go up and take a look?" I suggest.

"W-wait," says Aiz. "Shouldn't we make sure the rest of the house is clear first? Riveria says you always leave the boss room for last."

I wonder if this is the first time I've ever seen Aiz so desperate. Normally, she cuts down monsters without breaking a sweat. Now she's practically drenched. Still, she's got a point, so we head to the second floor instead, which, according to Aiz, she left unexplored the last time she came.

Meanwhile, I think about the figure we saw earlier. Could it really be a ghost? It could just be a person dressed in rags, but I swear I saw it appear out of thin air, and so did Aiz.

As I pass a window, I note that it's pouring rain outside, which

doesn't help settle my nerves. What's even worse, though, is the sudden tug I feel on my arm.

"What was—?! Oh, Ms. Aiz?"

"I-I don't want us to get separated…" comes her meek reply. Her cheeks are flushed, and my heart begins to race.

I know it's awful of me to think this when she's so terrified, but I can't help feeling that taking this job was the best thing to ever happen to me. I get to be strong and brave for Aiz and see her cute side to boot.

It could only be better if she suddenly got frightened and hugged me, but that's never going to—

And just as that wicked thought surfaces in my brain, like a trick played by cruel fate, a thunderbolt strikes!

"—?!"

Keeping her sword raised, Aiz wraps her other arm around mine. Her skin is soft, her breastplate is touching my elbow, and I can even make out the soft fragrance of her hair. I-I-I-I can't believe my dream actually came—

"W-wait, Aiz, you're hurting me! Gaaaaaaagh!!"

Immediately, my dreams are shattered by the overwhelming might of a Level 6! Her first-tier strength is going to grind my arm to dust!!

I should have known.

I'm a hundred years too early—or should I say, three levels too low—to enjoy a hug from Aiz!!

Our continued investigation exacts quite a toll—primarily on my arm.

Every time a mouse scampers across the carpet, Aiz shrieks. Every time she spots a shadow or hears a noise, she points her sword in its direction. Worse still is the constant rolling thunder, which elicits the same reaction every single time. I'm slowly succumbing, not to the mansion itself but to Aiz's nerves.

Ghostly sightings are an unexplained mystery, but first-tier adventurers are famed for their ability to remain resolute in the face of the unknown. Despite this, however, even the mere thought of seeing a ghost is causing Aiz so much distress that she's expending around 90 percent of her energy flailing around.

I, meanwhile, am performing no better and I'm growing keenly aware that I won't be fit to be Aiz's supporter at this rate, let alone a valued partner.

The whole affair steadily chips away at both my physical and mental health, but eventually, we reach the final room at the far end of the third floor.

"Th-this is the only place we haven't investigated yet..." I say, my voice quivering due to the serious beating I've taken.

Aiz's expression is tense. "Yeah...let's do it."

She reaches out and gently pushes the thick wooden door. It slowly creaks open, revealing a truly horrifying sight.

"...!!"

At first I think we've discovered a secret witch's coven. There are no windows in the room, but the walls are lit up with an eerie red glow. That's because of the huge cauldron in the center of the room. The fire below it is still burning, and inside the cauldron, a mysterious crimson liquid gently bubbles away. There's a magic circle I've never seen before drawn on the ground, with candles set at various points, and around the edge of the room are strange flasks and bottles filled with bones and bits of flesh, like sacrifices...

It's enough to make me forget how much my body aches. All I can do is stare, same as Aiz.

Wh-what kind of dark ritual have we stumbled upon? Is some cult attempting to summon a demon? That's the plot of a horror story, not real life!

It's obvious Aiz is thinking the same thing as me. Her entire face has gone pale.

And then we see it.

At the far end of the room, swaddled in darkness...something moves.

""........""

It appears out of thin air, just as we saw before. Neither a human nor a monster. Before our terrified eyes, the darkness coalesces into a bleached white skull.

"Wh...
Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaghhh!!"

That scream, for me, is the last straw. I turn and follow Aiz out

of the room as fast as I can, trying not to look back at the horrifying apparition.

“Tempest!!”

“Huh?! W-wait, Aiz! My arm! AAAAAAAAAGHHH!!”

Aiz activates her magic spell, clamping a hand around my limb. And so I have a maddened Aiz and her furious winds to contend with as I frantically make my way to the exit.



“Phew…”

“What is the matter, Fels?”

“Do you recall how I said I was in need of a bigger workshop? Well, unfortunately, the one I set up was discovered, so I shall have to move…”

Beneath the Pantheon, the Guild’s chief god Ouranos sat in his Chamber of Prayers, speaking to Fels, a mage dressed in a tattered black cloak one might be tempted to describe as “rags.”

The old god cast a glance at the bony arm of his assistant before looking back at the parchment in his hands.

“Hmm? It is strange to see you reading a report, Master Ouranos. Did something happen in my absence?”

“…It seems the Sword Princess has failed one of her quests.”

“Oh? Now that *is* a matter of concern. But I suppose the girl is only human.”

Then Fels seemed to recall something.

“Now that you mention it,” they said, “she and Bell Cranell were the ones who discovered my workshop. Unfortunately, the pair of them ran away so fast that I missed the chance to ask what they were doing. Were they on a dare or perhaps a midnight rendezvous? Ha-ha-ha, he’s a smooth one, that Bell Cranell…Hmm? Master Ouranos? What’s the matter? You look like you’re in pain…”

The next day, the little girl approached two brave but highly confused adventurers to tell them that the ghost had stopped appearing ever since their intervention.

And the day after that, the story of the Sword Princess’s failure

faded into the stuff of urban legend without anyone ever discovering the quest's true nature.

A BOOKSHOP DATE?

“Mr. Cranell?”

On a warm and sunny afternoon, Lyu met Bell on a street corner while she was out stocking up for the tavern.

“Oh…Ms. Lyu…Er…Hi.”

It was clear that she had caught him at a bad time. While Lyu was dressed in her waitress outfit, Bell was in his casual clothes, so it was obvious he wasn’t on his way to or from the Dungeon.

Instead, he was carrying something with both arms—a big pile of thick books.

“What are those?” Lyu asked. “Are you taking them somewhere?”

She thought she might as well help the boy out, but Bell responded with nervous laughter.

“Ha…ha-ha-ha-ha…Well, erm…”

Sweat dripped from his face, and his cheeks reddened. He seemed to be trying to hide the books from Lyu’s sight while steadily backing away. The elf narrowed her sky-blue eyes. Judging by Bell’s reaction, she wondered if the books Bell possessed weren’t the kind of seedy literature some of the male gods tended to enjoy.

If they were, then that wasn’t something Lyu could ignore. Not only would it wound Syr’s heart, but as a purehearted elf, she couldn’t allow such immoral activity on her watch. With blinding speed, honed during her time as a second-tier adventurer, she closed in on Bell and snatched one of the books from his hands.

“Ack!!”

“What’s this? …A children’s book?”

Ignoring Bell’s odd cry, Lyu examined the book she had seized, which turned out to contain illustrations. The page Lyu turned to depicted an elven heroine commanding a powerful blizzard to freeze a colossal monster.

“It’s not what you think…! It’s just…I was going through the library at home, you see, and I came across these old books I used

to read as a child. Once I read them, all these old memories came flooding back…”

“……”

“And…I’m not going into the Dungeon today, so I thought… maybe I’d go around town and…see if I can find any more…?”

Bell’s hasty defense only grew more and more flimsy as time went on. By the end, his voice was barely above a whisper.

His face was still bright red. Was he embarrassed to still be reading stories at his age? Lyu had been confused at first, but if this was Bell’s hobby, then it was quite a charming one. She didn’t think it embarrassing at all—in fact, it kind of suited him.

She suddenly felt a little guilty for having doubted him at first.

“…Did you not bring a bag?” she asked, meekly handing back the book she had snatched from him.

“I had one, but it tore open just a minute ago,” replied Bell with another embarrassed smile. Lyu replied immediately.

“In that case,” she said, “I shall accompany you.”

“You’ll what?”

“It must be difficult carrying so many books. Allow me to lend a hand.”

Lyu couldn’t forgive herself for casting aspersions no matter how suspiciously Bell had been acting. This was her way of atoning. Bell, however, was clearly reluctant to impose to that extent.

“I-I couldn’t ask you to do that, Ms. Lyu. Besides, aren’t you busy helping the tavern right now?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. So long as I finish up before nightfall, there’ll be no complaints. Besides…”

Lyu raised a finger.

“This shall surely be a dangerous quest. We shall wander the streets of the Labyrinth City together in search of the tales you seek.”

The elf’s ad-lib sounded just like a line from one of those stories itself. Having said it, she blushed awkwardly, and Bell blinked, not sure what to say. In the end, though, he couldn’t help but smile at her characteristic odd humor and grinned like a boy whose big sister had just agreed to read him a story.

“Thank you then, Ms. Lyu! Thank you for accompanying me on my troublesome quest!”

“Gladly.”

Lyu smiled as well, and the two set off together. First, they bought two sturdy shopping bags to hold the books Bell had already found before wandering around the east end of town.

The stories Bell was looking for were all rare tales, and no single shop sold them all. One place they went to was a bookstore run by an animal person, another was a man in an alley who displayed his wares on a spread-out cloak on the ground. Others they found at a flea market set up in the marketplace. Sometimes Bell stood on his tiptoes to reach the tallest shelves, and later, the two sat down on a bench to read the books they’d bought. Whenever Lyu spotted one of the titles Bell told her about, the young boy would squeal in delight. Before she knew it, her quest had turned into a pleasant afternoon exploring old bookshops.

As the pair were walking down the street, somebody called out to them.

“Oh, hello, Lyu!”

“Hmm?”

It was a friendly old woman Lyu often did business with when supplying the tavern. She was beckoning the elf girl over, so Lyu excused herself and went over to speak to her.

“I’m so happy to see you’ve found a nice boy at last!” she said.

“Hmm?”

“Oh, don’t be shy! You’re on a date, aren’t you?”

It took a few seconds for Lyu to process the cheerful old woman’s question.

“You’re every bit as pretty as that Syr girl, so I was wondering when you’d find somebody. I was starting to think you’d become a spinster, but it looks like I needn’t have worried!”

Lyu looked back at Bell, tactfully waiting out of earshot.

Then she looked at the matching bags the two of them were carrying.

Then she thought back to just a moment ago when the two of them were walking side by side, chatting pleasantly, after an enjoyable afternoon together.

Indeed, it was easy to see how, if one didn’t know any better, such behavior could very much resemble a date.

Hmm. Hmmmm. This could not stand.

“And oh, isn’t that the boy from the War Game? Little Rookie?

You certainly are aiming high!”

“It’s not a date.”

“Oh? But—”

“It’s not a date.”

“L-Lyu…?”

“It’s not a date. And don’t tell Syr about this, okay?”

“O-okay…”

The little old lady could do nothing but nod when Lyu insisted so intensely.

As Lyu turned and made her way back to Bell, a conundrum emerged in her mind.

It’s definitely not a date, and I never meant to betray Syr, but I still feel so guilty about it. Perhaps I should leave for tonight…Oh, but I can’t just abandon Mr. Cranell after I was so rude to him earlier. That would be the height of shame!

Torn between the prospects of ungratefully abandoning her duty or continuing to guiltily enjoy her supposed repentance, Lyu’s face grew grim.

“Ms. Lyu?” Bell asked. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing, Mr. Cranell. Let us move on.”

In the end, she decided to continue helping with Bell’s quest, even though a small part of her sensed that Syr wouldn’t like it.

After walking around town some more, the pair sat on a bench in the eastern side of Central Park.

“I think that should be enough,” said Bell. “Thank you for your help today, Ms. Lyu.”

“I’m happy I could be of help,” Lyu replied.

The bags at their feet were completely full, and Bell had a big smile on his face after finding such a haul. It was enough to make Lyu smile as well.

“Did you read these kinds of stories when you were young, Ms. Lyu?”

“No,” Lyu replied. “My family were hunters who protected the village for generations. I wasn’t given many chances to read, even after I came here…If you’d like, perhaps you could read one to me?”

The sunlight scattered off the fountain beside them. Lyu’s words caused Bell’s face to light up like an excited bunny rabbit, and he eagerly bent over to fish through his bags.

“I’d love to!” he said. “What would be good, I wonder? *Dungeon Oratoria*’s a classic, but there’s also *The Legend of St. Giorgio*. That’s not as well-known. Hmm…”

Lyu was a little taken aback by how talkative Bell suddenly became as he pulled books out of his bag. At the same time, it felt new, like she was seeing a side of him she hadn’t seen before—one far more appropriate for a young boy his age.

“Then there’s *Argonaut.* That was always Grandpa’s favorite…”

Bell knew many stories Lyu didn’t. He talked about them at length. As he did, his red eyes seemed to sparkle like gems—like rubellites.

Lyu was meant to be listening, but instead, she found herself drawn into his eyes. A gentle wave of calmness washed over her, bathing her soul in a sweet, tingling sensation. Before she knew it, she was smiling.

“I think…I like it when you talk about those stories you enjoy so much.”

She hadn’t really meant to say it out loud, but her words reached Bell’s ear.

“What…?”

Bell blushed, and Lyu felt her own cheeks fire up as well.

“Um…please don’t take that the wrong way,” she said, panicking. “I just think it’s nice. It’s a very innocent hobby. Very childish or…”

“Ch-childish…? Yeah, I guess you’re right…”

Lyu awkwardly tried to rephrase, but Bell was already slumping over, dejected. She knew she’d said the wrong thing, but she couldn’t think of what to say instead. Her cheeks were on fire, and her heart wouldn’t stop racing. Her lips gently parted and closed, over and over, without forming any words.

It’s not a lie.

She closed her eyes, listening to the voice of her heart.

I love seeing those eyes…that glitter with the life of a hundred tales.

Realizing how she truly felt, Lyu lifted her head.

“Mr. Cranell…What I just said…I meant it.”

Without turning to face Bell on the bench, Lyu gazed off at the waters of the fountain.

“So…Please…If we get another chance…I’d like to hear another

of your stories.”

I want to see those beautiful eyes of yours.

Taking her innermost thoughts, Lyu poured them into the few words she managed to get out. She took the book from Bell’s hands and placed it in her lap, which immediately cheered the boy up.

“Of course!”

Bell’s carefree voice tickled her slender ears. Lovingly stroking the book’s cover, Lyu closed her eyes and smiled.

UNTIL NOW, AND FOREVER

Hestia was a goddess.

More importantly, she was the goddess of a familia that had suddenly risen to prominence.

"Mrh…"

And yet, at this present moment, she was sulking.

It was all because she had no time to spend with her very first familia member, Bell Cranell.

It's not just us two anymore…I know that, but still…

Her followers had grown in number, and Bell had become captain in more than just name. Through all their trials, the Xenos incident especially, Bell had seen a need to improve himself, and recently, he had been pursuing his aspirations and goals more than ever, leaving little time for anything else.

It wasn't his fault. Hestia was happy to see Bell grow, to watch him continue writing his own story—the familia myth—inscribed upon his back.

But she felt lonely whenever she thought back to the old days, when the two of them lived together in the cold, dusty basement of a forgotten church. She wanted Bell to dote on her more.

And so she picked a time when the two of them were alone in the mansion lounge to talk about it.

"Hey, Bell! Do you know about familia blues?" she asked, leaning across the sofa toward him. "I'm not saying we're going through a rut or anything, but I was just thinking, our relationship has kind of plateaued lately, and I was wondering if there was any way we could spice it up…"

"Goddess," Bell said all of a sudden. "Do you want to do something together?"

Hestia looked shocked.

"It's just…I feel like we haven't spent much time together lately," he said, an embarrassed smile on his face. His eyes were filled with love, respect, affection—all of it showed how important Hestia was to him.

Hestia was happy. Because Bell had been feeling the same way.

“Yeah! Let’s laze around and do nothing together!”

“We can aim a little higher than that, can’t we…?”

Hestia beamed and sidled over to Bell, who smiled back. The pair of them chatted, teased, and blushed, making the afternoon a peaceful time together.

“All right! Let’s turn this into a Jyaga Maru Kun party! The night is still young!”

This was their life, as it had ever been and as it would always be.

FIVE YEARS AFTER: BELL CRANELL

“Hmm? Where am I…?”

I look around. This is a room I don’t recognize. The walls are elegant and white, and when I look down, I’m wearing a white suit, too.

“What’s wrong, Bell?”

A voice draws my attention. Standing there is a girl in a pure white dress, holding a bouquet of flowers. When I see her, I smile.

That’s right. I remember now…

I’m about to get married. Right now, five years after I met her for the first time.

Outside, I can hear the wedding bells ringing. A clear blue sky stretches out beyond the window. A flock of birds takes flight, almost as if nature itself is celebrating our union.

Soon it’ll be time for us to exchange our vows. In the chapel where we wait, I turn to face her.

A thin, white veil covers her face. I see her smile, and I smile back.

I’ll say it again. I’m about to get married. To this amazing girl I’ve looked up to for so long. To this lovely, golden-haired, golden-eyed—

“I won’t let youuuuuuuu!!”

“Huh?!”

However…

Goddess kicks down the door and marches up to us.

“Quite a cozy atmosphere you’ve got going on in here, eh, Bell?!”

“G-Goddess?!”

As if Lady Hestia’s intrusion wasn’t bad enough, my eyes shoot wide open upon seeing what she’s wearing—it’s another snow-white wedding dress!

“What are you doing here?! And what are you wearing?! Can’t you see you’re interrupting?!”

“Interrupting?! You really think I’m going to sit back and let

you have your happy ever after?!”

“Are you a goddess or a demon?!”

I know it’s rude, but I just can’t help getting angry!

Goddess, meanwhile, tackles the girl by my side and drags her away before standing in the bride’s place herself. Then she wraps her arms around me and squeezes hard like a koala, pressing me into the ravine between her breasts.

I can see the girl I was *going* to marry is quite upset, so I try to tear Goddess away when…

“You can’t just forget about all of us!”

“What…do you mean, ‘all of us’?”

Goddess’s words cause me to freeze, and I lift my head.

Over Lady Hestia’s shoulder, down the aisle, through the open chapel doors, I see…

Lilly *(“Mr. Bell! No picking favorites!”)*, Eina *(“Didn’t you tell me you loved me?!”)*, Syr *(“Hee-hee… Bell’s wife…”)*, Lyu *(“I shall join you to ensure you and Syr are having a modest and proper relationship!”)*, Haruhime *(“I-I don’t mind polygamy as long as I get to be with you…!”)*, Aisha *(“No pussyfooting. Drag him into bed and have his babies before anyone else!”)*, a silver-haired goddess *(“Hmm? I should be first, no?”)*, Tiona *(“Argonaut! I wanna join in, too!”)*, an amber-haired elf *(“Not only Aiz but Tiona as well?! I have to keep my eyes on him!”)*, Chloe *(“Meow his little booty will be all mine!”)*, Cassandra *(“I want you to make my dreams come true!”)*, Daphne *(“Why am I here…?”)*, Wiene *(“Bell! We’ll always be together!”)*, Rei *(“I-I want to be with the human I love…”)*, Aruru *(“Kyuuu!”)*, Mari (*“I love you, Bell!”)*, Mord, also in a bridal gown for some reason *(“Heh. Guess it’s time. You know I’ll never leave your side.”)*, a huge toad of a woman whose dress is bursting at the seams *(“Geh-geh-geh-geh-geh!”)*, a sun god with a crazed look in his eyes *(“Oh, Bell! Let us tie the bonds of love!”)*, a worthy partner whose blood-soaked labrys stands out like a sore thumb *(“It’s time for our rematch.”)*…

“W-WAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH?!”

…Chirping birds announce the dawn of a new day. I sit up in my bed, utterly drenched in sweat.

“…A dream…”

I don’t remember the details, but I feel like it started out

happy, then quickly took a terrifying turn…

What will the future hold five years from now? Ten years? Twenty?

I don’t know. And as I get out of bed and leave my room, I try not to think about it.

…Just as I try not to think about the very last thing I saw in my dream—my grandpa grinning widely and giving me a big thumbs-up.

HAPPY 15TH ANNIVERSARY?

“Bell, what kind of celebration do you want for your fifteenth birthday?”

“Huh?”

It is early afternoon, and I am enjoying a rare day off from the Dungeon. The two of us are alone in the mansion’s living room, sharing the sofa, when Goddess turns to me and asks that question.

“Aren’t you fourteen right now? And it’s been half a year since you came to Orario, so that means the big one-five is just around the corner! We gotta get ready!”

Goddess’s explanation is accompanied by wild gesturing. I sort of understand and don’t understand at the same time.

“…Okay? I mean, I guess that makes sense…?”

“So what kind of birthday do you want?”

“Um…What kind? I guess as long as everyone’s here, it doesn’t really matter…”

“Don’t be shy! You’re the captain of my familia and the very first member! It might not be fair to supporter girl and the others, but I want to pull out all the stops for you! Show you my overwhelming goddess love!!”

Goddess is already getting a little carried away, but I’m not sure what to say.

“I really can’t think of anything I want. The thought is more than enough.”

“Come on, Bell! You must want *something*!”

“…I guess there is one thing,” I say. “It’s not really a celebration or anything, but…”

“Oh?” Goddess turns back toward me, eager to hear what I have to say.

“I want to adventure…just like we always have and always will.”

“An adventure?”

“Yeah. With all the happiness it brings, the fun, the wonder, the

beauty, the mystery…and even the hardship and the pain. As long as everyone's here, we can all face it together."

I think of everything that's happened to me so far. All the people I've met, all the things I've seen, and all the feelings I've felt. Love, excitement, and courage.

With my friends by my side, there's nowhere I can't go. That is what I truly believe.

"Adventure, eh? Yeah, that's such a Bell thing to say!"

Goddess is with me every step of the way. Her face lights up in response to my answer.

"That settles it! Bell's fifteenth birthday party will be adventure-themed!!"

"What?! Did you listen to a word I said?!"

Goddess bounds out of the room, and I hastily follow, an unmistakable smile on my lips.

AN UNIMPORTANT STORY OF A GODDESS

What do I write?

I am a goddess, and yet I always doubt.

Whenever I sit at my desk, pen in hand, and ponder the words she will read.

It is not because I worry I will hurt her. She has flown my nest already and found a new family.

She's moving forward. I don't want to feel like I'm pulling her back.

She says she hasn't changed. She says she hasn't been able to move on, but she has.

Because she has stood up once more. That, too, is a part of moving on.

She is already moving forward to a brighter future.

It's only because she's looking backward so much that she doesn't realize.

I have read every letter she sent. Even an eternal being like me can see how her hand has changed. The thoughts and feelings she expresses have become more caring, and even the shape of her penmanship has become gentler.

She will be okay. I know she will. And even though I am a goddess, I shall pray for her. Pray that her ashen wings will one day be reborn.

…I chuckle at myself. All these thoughts racing through my mind, and I cannot put a single one to paper.

I will have to simply say what I feel. Hold on to your worries, your fears, and your regrets. Never let go. Journey alongside them and, at the end of it all, tell me what you have learned.

The words fresh in my mind, I put pen to white paper, and then…

"Excuse me, is this a bad time?"

There is a polite knock at my door. I turn to face it.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"I have…two reports, my lady. The first is, well…I'm sorry, but

the weapon still isn't complete. If only I had even a fragment of a holy tree branch, I could make it work, but…"

The girl is as inarticulate as always, but that has never bothered me. Besides, I suspected all along the task I gave her was an impossible one.

She is another girl on a journey mired by doubt.

"And what is the other?" I ask with a smile.

All I hear is silence.

She wonders if she should say it. Is that hesitancy?

Or…could this be annoyance?

Just as I am wondering that, she speaks.

"Someone came to see you today," she says. "…An elf."

My eyes widen slowly.

At first, all I feel is shock, which gradually gives way to happiness.

"I don't know how she dares show her face…Should I send her away?"

Hearing that, my doubts are lifted—she *is* annoyed. I smile with amusement and rise from my seat.

"No, I shall meet her," I say. "Get everything ready, Cecille."

I take one last look at the empty letter on my desk. I suppose I shan't be needing it after all.

Very soon now, I shall hear her answer for myself.

And when I see her sky-blue eyes again, I will be able to tell her exactly how I feel.

I wonder if the girl standing at my door notices my smile. She gives a reluctant nod.

"As you wish, Lady Astrea."

ANOTHER DUNGEON TALE, SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

“Bell! Recommend me a story about heroes that you like!”

I am reading alone in the home library when Goddess comes in. She’s enjoying a rare day off from her part-time job.

“A heroic tale?” I reply. “I don’t mind…but where’s this sudden interest come from?”

“I just thought it would be nice to get all excited with you about a common interest like Haruhime does all the time!”

I give a nervous laugh, and Goddess’s cheeks go red, and she smiles like a little girl.

“Besides, it’s exciting, isn’t it? Journeying alongside the protagonist, finding out together what adventures await when you turn the page!”

Hearing her say that makes me very happy.

“All right, then!” I say, getting to my feet, and the two of us head to the bookcases. It’s almost like a real library in here with the amount of books spilling off the shelves. I wander through the forest of books, wondering what would be good to pick when I see it.

“Hmm? I don’t remember seeing this book before…”

One of the books on the shelves catches my eye. I take it and inspect the cover.

“*A Tale of Wand and Sword*…?”

The logo depicts a crossed pair of the two titular items. I tip my head in confusion. I’ve definitely never seen this book before.

“Oooh, a story even Bell doesn’t know? Lemme see!”

Goddess slips the book from my grip and opens it. In no time at all, she’s completely absorbed.

“Hmm…Ohh…I see…So that’s what happens…”

She flips a page, goes, “Oh?” and flips back, rereading the preceding lines, apparently appreciating some tasty foreshadowing.

I’m getting restless. It’s clearly a compelling story, and it’s one I’ve never read before to boot. Then Goddess lifts her head.

“I see! So they’ve gone for the double-heroine formula!”

“D-double-heroine?”

“That’s right! And I’m on team Colette! It’s not right to go after someone far-off no matter how beautiful she is, how much you look up to her, or what promises the two of you exchanged as kids! True happiness can only be found with the girl who’s stuck by your side through thick and thin!! So keep at it, Colette! I believe in youuuuu!!!”

I’m a little taken aback by Goddess’s sudden outburst. Why does she say it like it’s personal?

“L-let me read it, too!”

I’m so curious I can’t take it any longer and eagerly lean in. Goddess smiles and pats the floor beside her.

“Yeah! Let’s read it together!”

We both sit down, holding the book between us.

I wonder what kind of story awaits us. What sorts of people will we meet?

Brimming with excitement, I turn the page…



BONUS SHORT STORY

BELL CRANELL☆RANKING: EVENTS OF A HALF YEAR

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BELL CRANELL☆RANKING: EVENTS OF A HALF YEAR

“Eina, Eina! Take a look at this! They just released this week’s adventurer rankings!”

It was at Guild HQ, a little after noon. Eina had just returned to her desk after grabbing a quick bite to eat when Misha Frot came running over as happy as a kid who’d just been given their favorite candy, holding a sheet of parchment in her frenzied grip.

“You really like those, don’t you?” said Eina with an awkward smile. “You always did, even back at the School District.”

“Because they’re fun!” replied Misha with glee. “Isn’t it great seeing who all the popular adventurers are and seeing if your favorite has gone up or down?”

In contrast to her childhood friend’s playful happiness, Eina’s cynicism only deepened.

The “adventurer rankings” was the name given to a chart of top adventurers curated by the gods primarily for their own entertainment. There was a column based purely on strength, of course, but also categories such as “Best Mage,” “Best Melee Fighter,” and even more idiosyncratic rankings like “Cutest Elf,” “Beautiful Animal-Person,” “Badass Dwarf,” and “Amazon I’d Kneel To.” How they graded adventurers in these categories was anyone’s guess. Apparently, it was a proprietary method that reflected not only how these adventurers were seen by their peers but by the gods and the ordinary people of Orario, too.

The Guild wasn’t involved in the process at all, but they received unsolicited copies of the results nonetheless. Many of the receptionists loved them and would stick them surreptitiously on the back of the quest bulletin board.

I can’t make fun of it too much, though. At the Guild, we often work with facts and figures and generally ignore matters of public opinion. But when I look at, say, their Rookie Rankings, how do I say this? I kind of see where they’re coming from sometimes.

The value of these rankings as another, separate data point in the Guild's considerations was not to be underestimated. Plus, as Misha said, it was fun seeing where her favorite adventurers fell —in Eina's case, that meant the ones she oversaw.

Besides, it was easier to command the tides to turn than to persuade the gods to abandon their precious entertainment, and the Guild had long since given up on making them stop.

Incidentally, despite meeting the criteria, Bell had been declared "not fair" by the gods and was excluded from the normal "Rookie Rankings" as a result. Eina couldn't exactly blame them, though, since he would steal the top spot every single time otherwise.

"Look at this!" Misha squealed. "Your little brother is in all these rankings! Doesn't that make you happy?"

"It does, but…Look, these things are basically just a popularity contest. Bell's still riding the wave of recognition he got from winning the War Game."

Bell had earned both fame and infamy from his recent exploits, including a record-breaking ascension, not only one but two War Games, rumors of his involvement in the events of the Pleasure District, his fall from grace during the Xenos incident, and the subsequent comeback. Stories spread like wildfire, earning Bell no shortage of wild labels and fantastical exaggerations.

To someone like Eina, who had known Bell since his humble beginnings, it often felt like people had very different perceptions, kind of like what the gods called "headcanons." *Bell wouldn't do that!* she often thought. *And besides, don't forget he's still just a fourteen-year-old boy. I can see him making the "Cutest" ranking, but "Hottest"? He's too young! Shut up, tourists! You just don't get him like I do!*

Those were the sorts of runaway thoughts she often had.

So much has happened, and he's become so popular. So much so that I can't hide him anymore, even if I wanted to.

Was it the price of his sudden fame? Or was this just the fate that awaited all adventurers who rose to prominence?

On one hand, Eina was happy that more and more people were learning about the Bell she loved, but a part of her was saddened that he wasn't just hers anymore. She knew it was

petty, but she couldn't help it.

"But look at this!" said Misha. "As always, he's an unbeatable first in the 'Best Future' list, and he's jumped from seventh place to sixth in the 'Someone (Male) I Want to Call Me Big Sis' ranking! He's dropped a bit in the 'Marry Now and Be Set for Life' charts… I guess that's because people are saying he racked up a bunch of debts in the War Game? They say that his payout isn't even going to put a dent in the two hundred million he owes!"

"Misha, are you even listening to me?"

Eina sighed. Her colleague clearly didn't appreciate any of Eina's worries, cheerfully dropping half of the large pile of ranking sheets on her desk while offering her personal commentary.

Well, I can't deny I wouldn't be entirely unreceptive to being called "Big Sis," thought Eina. *You know, if the situation called for it…*She quietly cleared her throat and turned her attention to the stack of leaflets she'd just been given.

Eina's face twitched as she read through the categories. "Ideal Adventuring Partner," "Most Likeable Front-Liner," "Strong Street Cred," "Cutie I'd Stick Animal Ears On," "Upper-Class Adventurer Who'd Look Best in a Dress," "An Aoharu ☆ Boy Who'd Cover Me with His Umbrella Even If He Got Rain on Himself," and so the list went on.

What's more, the first half seemed orthodox enough, but Eina struggled to see how some of the later ones made the cut. Especially that last category. Eina half-suspected a certain someone from the School District had a hand in that one.

"Oh wow! Your boy came *ninth* in the hotly contested 'Adventurers I'd Like to be Friends With' for women!!"

"WH-WHAAAAAAAAT?!"

In some ways the most straightforward category of the bunch, its announcement nonetheless sent Eina reeling.

"I guess that's what happens when you become a Level Five! The world sees you totally differently! You'd better watch out, Eina, or someone might snatch him away!"

But Eina was in no state of mind to even notice Misha's teasing. Completely lost for words, she looked down at the parchment in despair.

"Who writes this junk anyway…?" she muttered.



Q. Which adventurer do you think is cute?

“Hey now, what’s the big idea? I don’t know who you think you are, but don’t you know who I am? I’m Hestia, the head of *Hestia Familia* and Bell’s goddess! It’s obviously gotta be him!!!”

“Hestia, are you chatting on the job again? You’re supposed to be working! Those Jyaga Maru Kun aren’t going to serve themselves! Now hop to it!”

“Erk! I-I’m sorry, ma’am! I’ll do it, I’ll do it. Just please don’t dock my pay!!”

“Can’t take my eyes off her for a second, that girl…Hmm? Which adventurer do I think is cute?”

“See, ma’am, I wasn’t just chatting—it’s a survey! Who do you think? You’re obviously gonna agree with me, right?”

“There’s only one choice for me, and it’s that boy Finn!!”

“You TRAITOOOOOOOR!! How could you, ma’am?! You’re supposed to say Bell! And I didn’t know you were a fan of Finn!!”

“Of course I am! He’s so small, but he’s made a real name for himself! Just look at how cool and cute he is, not to mention tough! It’s got to be Finn!”

“Grh! Curse you, Braver. You’re too powerful! Isn’t there any category my Bell can beat him at?! He’s the polar opposite of our sneaky prum supporter girl! But you’re wrong, ma’am! My children are way cuter than Loki’s!!”

Result of “Cutest Male Adventurer” poll — Bell Cranell: 17th place.



Q. Which adventurer would you like to receive head pats from?

“Huh? Sorry, who are you? Lilly doesn’t remember seeing you around…Oh, you’re not an adventurer, you say? You’re a volunteer from out of town? I guess that explains why I don’t

recognize you. In any case, to answer your question, Lilly hates any adventurer who isn't Bell, so there's your answer…Just to confirm, this *is* an anonymous poll, correct?"

A. Yes. I promise.

"R-really…In that case, I can tell you without a doubt that Bell is the one I want! To feel his warm fingers gently combing through my hair, causing my worries to melt away into nothing and…!"

"Who are you talking to, Li'l E? You sound like a squirrel in heat. We got stuff to buy, remember?"

"Gyaaaaaaagh?! M-Mr. Welf?! No, you don't understand! I-I was just asked to come up with my ideal person on the spot! Th-that's what this is!!"

"What are you talking about? …Hmm? A survey? Heh, sounds fun. All right. Put this in one of your categories and watch. I bet my partner'll shoot right to the top."

"H-hold on, Mr. Welf. Are you sure? I know Bell's hot around town right now, but there's a lot to compete with to make it all the way to the top!"

"Don't worry. I got a good feeling about this one. It's called, 'Adventurer I'd Most Like to Forge a Weapon For.'"

"…!! You mean it's a category only blacksmiths can vote in?!"

"Yeah. Who wouldn't want to craft a weapon for Bell? He's growing so fast that even his personal blacksmith feels left behind, but that's also why it's so rewarding. I want to entrust him with better and better creations, and I'm sure all the other smiths feel the same way. Heh, so long as I've got my contract, though, none of 'em'll ever—"

"Ugh! Cut it out already! I can't stand listening to you go on and on about your special relationship like a proud girlfriend!"

"Girlfriend?! I'm a guy, dammit!! Don't be ridiculous!"

"You started it!!"

Result of "Adventurer I'd Most Like to Receive Head Pats From" poll — Bell Cranell: 41st place.

Result of "Adventurer I'd Most Like to Forge a Weapon For" poll (Blacksmiths only) — Bell Cranell: 8th place.



Q. Which adventurer would you most like to pin you against a wall?

“Oh?! Y-you mean…that forbidden technique of which the gods speak?! Where a gentleman hits the wall with his hand and your face comes so close to his lips and collarbones that you’re almost touching?!”

“Calm yourself, Lady Haruhime! Your face and your ears have gone bright red! Another five seconds, and you’ll pass out!!”

“I-I apologize, Ms. Mikoto! I must take deep breaths and restore my composure! Hee, hee, hoo! Hee, hee, hoo!”

Isn’t that for giving birth…?

“B-but to be trapped in Master Bell’s arms! Simply by lifting my chin, he can take all he desires and press me up against the wall, our bodies becoming one…!”

Nobody mentioned Bell except you, Ms. Haruhime! And as always, her imagination is so scandalous I don’t know where to begin. What should I do, Lord Takemikazuchi…?

“…E-excuse me, surveyor? Would it be okay if, instead of the wall maneuver, I suggested an alternate category…?”

A. Go ahead.

“I-in that case, I’m not entirely opposed to the wall-pinning, but I couldn’t help thinking…And it is really a foolish thought… But what about a floor-pin…? Would that not suit Master Bell better…?”

“That’s basically lovemaking at that point, Lady Haruhime!!”

“L-lovemaking?! With Bell?! Ohh…”

“Oh no! I couldn’t help blurting that! And now Haruhime’s out cold! Stay with me, Lady Haruhime!!”

Result of “Adventurer I’d Most Like to Be Pinned Against a Wall By” poll — Bell Cranell: Did Not Rank.



Q. Please name up to three adventurers you feel are unliked.

"Ain't that a dumbass question!"

"1. Bell Cranell! 2. Bell Cranell! 3. Bell Cranell!"

"Either that or 1. Bell Cranell! 2. Bete Loga! 3. Allen Fromel!!"

"Hey, shut your mouths, dumbasses! If Vanargand or Vana Freya hear us badmouthin' them, they'll skin our hides!"

"A-anyway, that human's the worst of the bunch! We been trying to level up for god knows how long, and he comes along and shows up the lot of us!"

"Now everyone and their mother calls us dumbasses for bein' stuck at the same level! Who do they think they are?! We try to copy that rabbit asshole, and we'll be dead within the week!!"

"This girl Florence I've been sweet on even has her eyes on the rabbit now! I keep tellin' her if Freya couldn't charm him, she ain't got a chance in hell! She might as well try and slay the Black Dragon!!"

"And just a little while ago everyone was callin' him 'Cheatin' Rookie'…I almost wish he *was* cheatin', 'cause it'd make it a whole lot easier to stomach!"

"""""So yeah! We hate Bell Cranell! You got somethin' to say about that?!"""""

A. It appears others disagree.

"""""Well…that's understandable!"""""

"All the other adventurers are stuck-up pieces of shit who'd spit on ya soon as see they see ya, but he's a decent guy. Almost too good to be in this job."

"I dunno what he did to Bors and those guys from Rivira, but they really like him for some reason…"

"That harem bastard's stealin' the hearts of every man and woman in the city! …But then again, he did lend me a potion this one time on the middle floors. What a nice guy."

"And he ain't just talk, either. That magic spell o' his is broken, and he runs as fast as shit…"

“I once saw him on the twenty-fifth floor fighting off a pack of iguaçu by himself! With only a knife!”

“““What a weirdo.”””

A. It just sends your heart aflutter to see him doing his best, doesn’t it?

“I don’t know if I’d say that…but it’s like, you look at him and then us, and it’s like, what are we even doin’, you know?”

“I was all makin’ fun of him when that vouivre came into the city, then the next thing I know, he’s facin’ off against this big-ass minotaur, and I’m right there cheerin’ him on like an idiot…”

“It’s like every time I see him he’s gettin’ beat to shit. Like in the War Game or the other War Game…First Pheobus, then Warlord…”

“Yeah…He beat Freya’s crew, huh…”

“““““*Sigh…*”””””

“…Think I’m gonna head to the Dungeon after this.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Can’t waste the whole day drinkin’.”

“Don’t wanna see his smug face anymore.”

A. Good luck.

“““““Yeah! We won’t let that rabbit show us up!”””””

Result of “Most Hated Adventurer” poll — Bell Cranell: 10th place.

Result of “Would Buy a Drink For” poll — Bell Cranell: 9th place.



Q. Which mortal would you most like to recruit or convert to your familia?

“““Bell Cranell!!”””

“It’s not fair!”

“How come that loli-goddess gets to hit the jackpot?!”

“Why did my followers turn him away when he showed up at our door half a year ago?! They’ve got no sense at all! Seriously!!”

“““Not that any of us knew he was going to go this far!!”””

“They’re calling him hero material already. We have no idea what the next twist will be!”

“Maybe none of this would have happened if he hadn’t ended up with Hestia.”

“Could be!”

“It wasn’t wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon after all!”

“Cut it out. You sound just like Zeus!”

“Oh, what are you all chatting about?!”

“““M-Mommy Demeter!!”””

Q. Which mortal would you most like to recruit, etc.?

“Hmm, I see. Well, if I don’t have to limit myself to being realistic, I think I’d go for Bell as well. He sometimes visits me with Hestia and Miach to help out in the garden.”

“Yes, yes, Mommy Demeter.”

“He seems like a bit of a Dungeon addict at first, but he actually helps out around town as well.”

“I think it’s more like Hestia drags him into it, isn’t it? Otherwise, he really would spend all his time down there.”

“He’s actually rather good at gardening, you know? Even Persephone was impressed.”

“Maybe he used to work on a farm.”

“An old farm boy? From zero to hero…?!”

“Does that mean his ultimate weapon is a gardening hoe?!”

“Persephone seems to like him…I wonder If we could get the two of them together? Not to steal Bell away from Hestia or anything, but more like a marriage union…?”

“““Th-that’s genius!!!”””

Result of “Mortal I’d Like to Recruit” poll (gods only) — Bell Cranell: 1st place.

…Result of “Mortal I’d Like to Matchmake with One of My Followers” poll — Bell Cranell: 19th place.



Q. Which adventurer are you hoping not to see die?

"Too many to say. Too many to count. Adventurers' lives are fragile things. I want them all to come back safe. How can you ask me to pick just one?"

A. Apologies.

"No, it's okay. Just as dying is part of being human, so is the desire to make something special. To classify and compare. To make something stand out among the rest. It's an excitement we all sorely need in our lives…I'm sure everyone out there has something or someone they want to treat specially."

A. Do you also have something you want to make special?

"I wonder. Hmm…All I want is to be able to help those dear to me. I wasn't like this in the past, but now, when I look at all those mementos, I feel like that's all I have to do. I can remember their dreams and their desires even if nobody else does. It's a little haughty of me, but that's what I think."

A. I think there are many baby chicks out there who think you're doing a great job.

"Hoh-hoh. Thank you. I'm happy to hear that. So how about it? Shall I sharpen your weapon for you? It must be fate, us meeting like this."

A. If you insist, please do.

"I guess you saw that boy Bell's weapon hanging up on the shop front? That's why most people come in these days. I have to say I never dreamed he'd go so far. Thanks to him, I have no shortage of customers anymore. And I guess I can feel a little proud that I was once the one looking after him."

A. …

“Hoh-hoh, but what am I doing, talking about dwarven pride to an elf? You must think me a right oaf.”

A. Not at all. I may be an elf, but I have only the greatest respect for dwarves.

“That’s good to hear. Now I’m sorry I couldn’t much help with your rankings. It’s just that I find it difficult to choose just one, you see.”

A. That’s quite all right. It’s very admirable of you, Mr. Dald. Please never change.

“Hoh-hoh. Don’t you worry about that. So long as I draw breath, baby chicks will always be welcome here.”

Result of “Adventurer I Don’t Want to See Die” poll — All of them: 1st place.



This should be enough polls, I think.

I started helping out the gods just out of curiosity, but it got a bit sad by the end there.

Mr. Dald’s mention of making things special really helped me realize something. Rankings are born of our desire to treat things as special, but some of us become unhealthily obsessed with it. Perhaps even that is what the gods find amusing. I wouldn’t know.

I’m a little hesitant to carry out my final survey, but this one is born of my own desire. I cannot stop now. Not if I have already decided what is so special to me. I would be an embarrassment to the elven race.

And so, as dusk light claims the city streets, I turn to my final sheet of parchment and take out the Blood Feather, the quill belonging to my associate, Asfi.

Looking around, I spot a human girl who appears about my age. She seems to have been shopping and is carrying some heavy bags while muttering angrily under her breath.

"Excuse me," I say, calling out to her. "Would you mind answering a question for the adventurer rankings?"

"…The adventurer rankings?" the girl sneers. "Oh, you mean that stupid rating system with categories like 'Someone I Want to Call Me Big Sis'?"

For something she supposedly hates, she's awfully knowledgeable about the categories. Did she do her research?

"Put down ten thousand votes for Rabbit Foot under the category, 'Rabbit I'd Most Like to Kill With my Mind.' Please and thank you."

"There's no such category," I say, as the girl turns to leave. "However, I would like to hear your pick for the category 'White-Haired, Red-Eyed Human Boy Who'd Look Best with a Blond-Haired Elf (14y/o only)' if you don't mind…"

"…Hold on a minute!"

The girl suddenly stops in her tracks and turns around.

She looks like a witch's disciple, with long hair drawn over one eye. She hits me with such a deadly glare that I think I feel my lifespan shortening.

…I think Laurier Swall might just have made the biggest blunder of her career.

"Are you the one they call the Goddess's Attendant?"

"Former attendant, thank you very much. Because of my own foolish behavior, we lost the War Game, and now she's gone…"

The girl ends up dragging me away to a roadside café and seating me opposite her, after which she introduces herself as Hörn, otherwise known as Nameless of *Freya Familia*. Although I spend much of my time outside the city doing tasks for *Hermes Familia*, I've at least heard her name.

I'm a little shocked at what she says, though, and even more shocked when she stands out of her seat and leans across the table toward me.

"Now I'd like to ask *you* the questions if you don't mind," she roars. "What was with that oddly specific category of yours?! It was so restrictive you could only fit one person in it!! Don't think

I don't see your game!"

"And what game is that?" I ask, holding my head high. "The gods made it quite clear that volunteers are allowed to set any categories they wish. I am simply exercising my perfectly reasonable privileges."

Lord Hermes himself is involved in putting together the adventurer rankings. I pulled a few strings and managed to get myself onto the survey team. The reason being, of course, to find out how the world feels about my first love, Bell!

"…Even if I accept this ludicrous argument, what reason did you have to make your question so transparently clear?!" Hörn asks me.

"W-well, that's because if Bell sees the category, he might think of me…and he might remember the promise we made and come to see me!"

"Go see him yourself!! Actually, no. Stay far away from him! But at least don't parade your obsessions around where everyone can see them!"

"Y-you can't ask me to just forget about him! Ever since he saved me, my heart hasn't stopped racing! My head is constantly filled with thoughts of his courageous face and incredible kindness! But I accidentally waited too long, and now it's too awkward to ask! I don't know what else to do before I explode!"

"You malfunctioning elf number two!"

"I'm not malfunctioning! And what's with the two?!"

Hörn speaks with scorn as if she's personally witnessed my descent from a prim and proper elf into an unbearable sight. She wasn't even there for most of it! How rude! So what if there's a grain of truth or three in her complaints?

I quickly counter her by bringing up the noble mission I am currently in the process of.

"I have been investigating the last six months of Bell's life!" I explain. "I couldn't possibly meet him without first understanding what he's done, who he's had an impact on, and what kind of person he truly is! That's right. It would be beyond rude!"

"You would-be stalker! There are late bloomers, and then there's you!"

This is it. The reason I sought the opinions of the people of this

city. It was all to trace the events of that boy's life.

Bell Cranell.

The boy has done more in these six months than I ever could have imagined, and everything I learn only makes me more impressed. He has experienced highs and lows, glories and setbacks, hate, disappointment, and slander, and yet he lets none of it hold him back. His sheer perseverance doesn't silence the doubters—it encourages them to cheer him on instead. If there is one thing I have learned through my surveys, it is that there is no shortage of his adoring fans in this city.

He walks a path of honor and strife, like so many great heroes who came before him. Through all his wounds, he holds his head up high, and people can't help but place their hopes in him.

For him to be the one who saved me in the Dungeon that day…

Why, is this not fate?

"Ms. Hörn, Bell is simply the best. He's kind and gentlemanly, and his ability as a first-tier adventurer hardly requires explanation. His white hair is all fluffy, and his red eyes are like gems. Plus, his embarrassed smile is awfully endearing. Everyone I've interviewed today has said the same. Some want him to pet them, others want to him to pin them against the wall or even the floor. Yes, some opinions are a bit out there, but everyone loves and respects him whether they're adventurers or not. He always tries his best in the Dungeon, but many people also appreciate his other qualities, such as…"

Hörn seems to be like a certain subset of adventurers in that she despises Bell, so I decide this is the moment to launch into my carefully constructed sermon. I wax on and on, barely pausing for breath, with my eyes closed and a big smile on my face. It's an important part of my "fangirl duties," as Hermes would put it.

The more I say, the angrier Hörn seems to grow, and it's not like she was particularly agreeable in the first place. Could it be that my incessant bragging is playing on her nerves?

"But the best part of all," I continue, "is his carefree smile, which—"

"Don't make me laugh."

Hörn interrupts me in a deep, dark voice. The stream of ashen hair that falls down the right half of her face is quivering.

"You don't need to tell me any of that. I've—*we've* been

watching that foolish boy for far longer than you can ever know."

All of a sudden, it's like she's a different person. Her hateful gaze causes me to stop speaking.

She inhales and parts her lips.

"Kind and gentlemanly? Ha! Don't make me laugh. You couldn't be further from the truth! There isn't a single praiseworthy thing to say about that rabbit's actions. He and his chronic indecision were put here on this earth by the forces of evil with the sole purpose of seducing innocent townsfolk and turning them into heart-eyed nitwits like you. And what's so fluffy about his hair? It makes him look like he's going gray. And why is it so silky and flawless? Isn't he supposed to be a man? Why does it spill through your fingers like untouched snow? Disgusting! And his eyes are even worse! It would be better for the world and everyone in it if I were to pluck them out and cloister them away in a secret temple, ensuring that those sinful rubellites never again tempt the hearts of woman and goddess alike! And for your information, that embarrassed smile you find so endearing is nothing but pathetic. The absolute worst part is, when he's *actually* on the back foot, he goes crazy and summons untold strength from gods know where. He's like a rabbit in heat who doesn't care whether he's saving boys or girls! Most people say that unexpected personality of his is what makes him so special, but I call it arrogance of the highest order! You won't catch me getting starry-eyed like his hordes of adoring devotees. They're all just stupid, vapid idiots as bad as he is! And the gods are even worse because not only do they not think to step in and put a stop to this lunacy, but they actively encourage it with these ridiculous rankings you're all so obsessed with! I swear, sometimes, it feels like I'm the only sane one in this entire city. What's so special about him? He's got no initiative, no compassion for all the broken hearts he leaves in his wake, and all he cares about is his single obsession! I'm sorry, but I just don't see the appeal! If I wanted to watch a walking disaster, I'd go to the theater! At least then I might get a laugh out of it! Instead, I'm forced to watch and cry as our entire city pins its hopes on a grinning moron! Listen, here's some friendly advice: Cut your losses and forget about him while you still can. Take it from me.

I've been in your shoes, and I can tell you that every minute you spend chasing after that scum is a minute wasted. Besides, head pats? Wall pins? *Floor* pins? Don't even let him breathe on you unless you want to be utterly tainted physically, mentally, *and* spiritually! All he's going to do is turn your mind and body to mush, just like he did to me! I was using my telepathic link, and he was lying in my lap—just lying in my lap! And I thought I was going to faint! So no. Stay away from him! Not for my sake, you understand. Please don't get the wrong idea. It's for your own good! For the sake of all good, law-abiding girls in this town! I've said it before, and I'll say it again: He's no hero. In fact, he's pure evil! A wicked rabbit formed out of pure lust, created to trick innocent women! He shouldn't exist! We ought to exterminate him without delay or, at the very least, seal him away where he can do no harm! Yes, that's it. I'll have to do it. I'll have to be the sacrifice! It has to be me! It's the only way to stop him from churning out any more brokenhearted maidens like us! I have to —oh. Sorry, I got a little distracted there. What I'm trying to say is that this whole city has fallen in love with an illusion! I mean, what kind of mere mortal is immune to the charms of a goddess of beauty! Don't you see? It's because he's a demon of temptation! That's why he's impervious to his own tricks! It's all a trap! His childlike innocence, his infuriating persistence, his self-aggrandizing generosity, his suicidal stubborn streak—all of it! Oh, and as for his 'carefree smile,' it's more like the naive grin of an idiot! Like a rootless flower in a field of snow. All it does is irritate me every time I'm forced to look at it! Do you get it yet? You should stay as far away from that human as you can! In the meantime, I will make sure that one day, you never, ever have to look at him again!"

Breathe!!

Her madness—what Hermes would term "brain rot"—eclipses even mine, and as she speaks on and on without pausing, I begin to feel sick.

C-could this be what the gods were talking about…?

I'm being "gatekept" by an "early fan!"

And what's more, she's the most annoying type of all—the type that hates to hear other people badmouthing her favorite but will complain about them herself all day long!

The most terrifying thing of all is that I can see the spark of rationality in her eyes, which means she's not possessed or anything! This is just how she normally talks! It's just another day for her! Are these the kinds of paranormal creatures I'll have to do battle with in order to win over my beloved Bell?!

The setting sun casts long shadows across the witch's face, but just as I'm breaking into a cold sweat, I hear a voice.

"…M-Ms. Hörn?"

I turn to see a painfully paling young boy. I-it's Bell!

"Wh-what are you doing here?!" screams Hörn, leaping out of her seat, red-faced.

Bell is shivering in the street. "I-I was just passing by," he says, his voice quivering. "I heard something about exterminating me and sealing me away so that nobody ever has to look at me again…?"

It seems Bell was just returning from a shopping trip when he overheard the witch's curse. He's terrified! I have to do something!

"…Bell! Do you remember who I am?!"

Ignoring the dead-eyed Hörn for the time being, I stand up and call out to him. Bell's despair-filled, rubellite eyes regain a spark of life, and he turns to me in surprise.

"Ms….Laurier, was it?"

Thunk!

An arrow through my heart! He remembers my name even though we only talked once!

"Yes! Laurier Swall! You rescued me, remember? I can't thank you enough! S-so…I was wondering…if you remembered what we promised…?"

"Yes, I do…I made it as vague as possible, just like Master told me…Erm, I mean…we said we'd go shopping or something?"

He remembered!! He really is my white rabbit of happiness!

I leap into action right away before my body and my mind have a chance to overheat.

"D-do you want to make good on that promise right now?! Let's go somewhere else! Right now!"

"Wh-what…?!"

I want to take him as far from the source of his distress as possible. But as soon as I reach out to pull him along by the hand,

the light truly leaves Hörn's eyes. There's a flash of black, and a steel knife appears in her hands, which she thrusts at Bell!

"Die, you filth!!"

"Waaaah?!"

Bell screams as the knife bears down on him…but it is deflected at the very last moment by my own trusty blade!

""…?!""

"Go on without me, Bell! I'll take care of her!"

Bell is surprised for a second time when he sees me fighting on his behalf as a crowd of puzzled onlookers gathers around us.

"If I manage to make it out of this one," I say, "I'll come find you. Then…we can go shopping together, just like we promised."

"Ms. Laurier?! Why are you making it sound so tragic?!"

"You! He's corrupted you with his poison already! I told you to stay away from him…and you refuse to listen!!"

"Ms. Hörn?! Why are you speaking like an evil villain?!"

Meanwhile, I channeled magic power into my trusty blade. Like the lady of the lake in that one legend, with this act, I would finally join the ranks of loyal knights!

"In the name of my chivalric honor, I come now to lay down my life!"

"Stand aside, elf! I can't kill that human filth with you in the way!!"

"Wh-wh-what's going ooooon?!"

In streets bathed in the light of the setting sun, I fought on with the voice of my beloved at my back. The fight seemed to last an eternity, and at times, I wasn't sure whether I would win or lose. Before I knew it, the two of us had thrown down our weapons and begun sparring only with our words—firing off passionate, stirring, and oftentimes bizarre verbal assaults centered around different aspects of Bell's personality.

Incidentally, our war was still raging long after Lady Hestia came by and took Bell away.



"Eina! They just released this week's adventurer rankings!"

It was a bright and sunny day, and Misha's cheery voice could

be heard all over Guild HQ. Just like the week before, she dropped a pile of parchment sheets onto Eina's desk.

Here's another bunch of strange categories, Eina thought, noticing that her own pupil had made the cut in a surprising amount of them to varying degrees of success.

But it was one item at the very end of the list that caught her eye.

Result of "Love Them to Death" poll — Bell Cranell: Off the Charts.

"Seriously, who writes this junk anyway…?"

Eina stared glassy-eyed out the window, suddenly realizing how much turmoil the boy could cause at the drop of a hat.




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Afterword

The collection of short stories you hold in your hands contains articles published in Volumes 1–17 of the main story as well as those found across other media as of 2022. “Episode Miach,” “Plight of the Prophet,” and “Events of a Half Year” were newly written for this collection. They have been compiled in this anthology to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the series’ first printing.

I sometimes think it’s amazing that such a clueless author like me was able to work my way up and produce such a prolific volume of work.

Long-form writing comes with its own struggles, but the difficulty in writing short-form content is fitting the whole flow into such a short space. Looking back over them now, I can see, “Oh, here I had no plan and was just writing based on feel,” or “I already reached the punch line but didn’t manage to fill the page,” or “I’m just leaning on classic romcom tropes now!” Of course, I don’t find it easy nowadays by any means, but I can’t help but feel I was writing rather more by the seat of my pants in the earlier days. Maybe that’s partly because I now have the benefit of being able to reuse material I couldn’t fit into the main story or tearfully had to cut for other considerations…It’s not fair to compare, is it?

I think short stories will continue to be as much a part of my job description as longer ones, so perhaps I should take a leaf out of my old self’s book and try to approach them with a more devil-may-care attitude and try to come up with the best stories I can while following our main characters and seeing where they go.

Incidentally, my favorite story in this collection is “Blue Twilight.” I would love to hear which ones all of you readers

found interesting if the fates ever permit it.

And now for the acknowledgments. To my editor, Usami. Thank you once again for all your hard work and effort in bringing this book to publication. The end of this series is not quite in sight, so let us be ready for the challenges ahead. To nilitsu, who also helped with the illustrations on *Familia Chronicle*. Thank you for once again adorning this work with your fabulous creations. I hope we have the chance someday to show everybody all the drafts that we weren't able to include! I also extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in the publishing side and, of course, a big thank-you to all of my readers, too.

I understand there will be a part two in which short stories from *Sword Oratoria*, *Familia Chronicle*, and other assorted works will make an appearance. It would make me very happy if you considered picking that up as well.

Thank you very much for reading this far—and until next time.

Fujino Omori

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