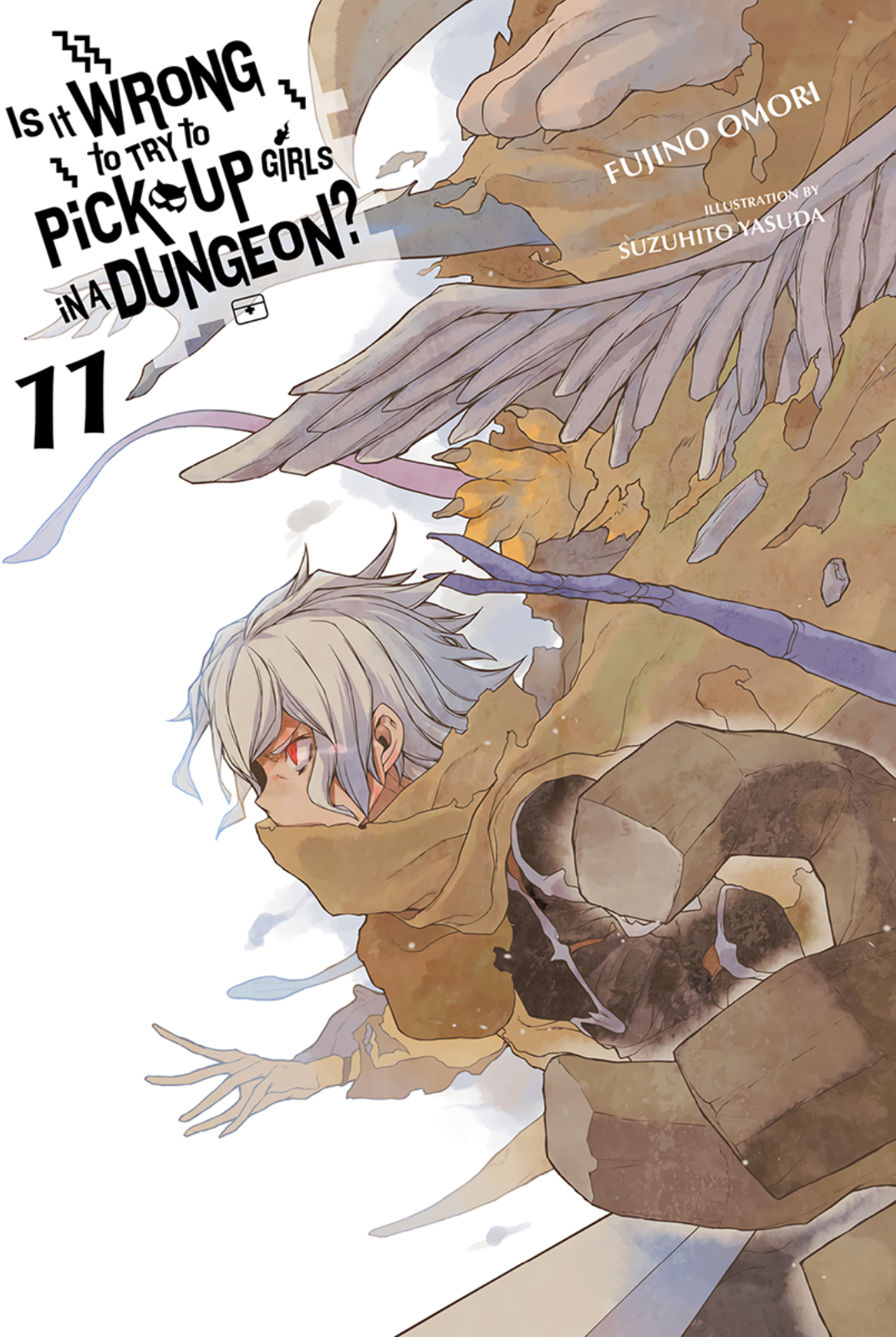
Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?

11

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA





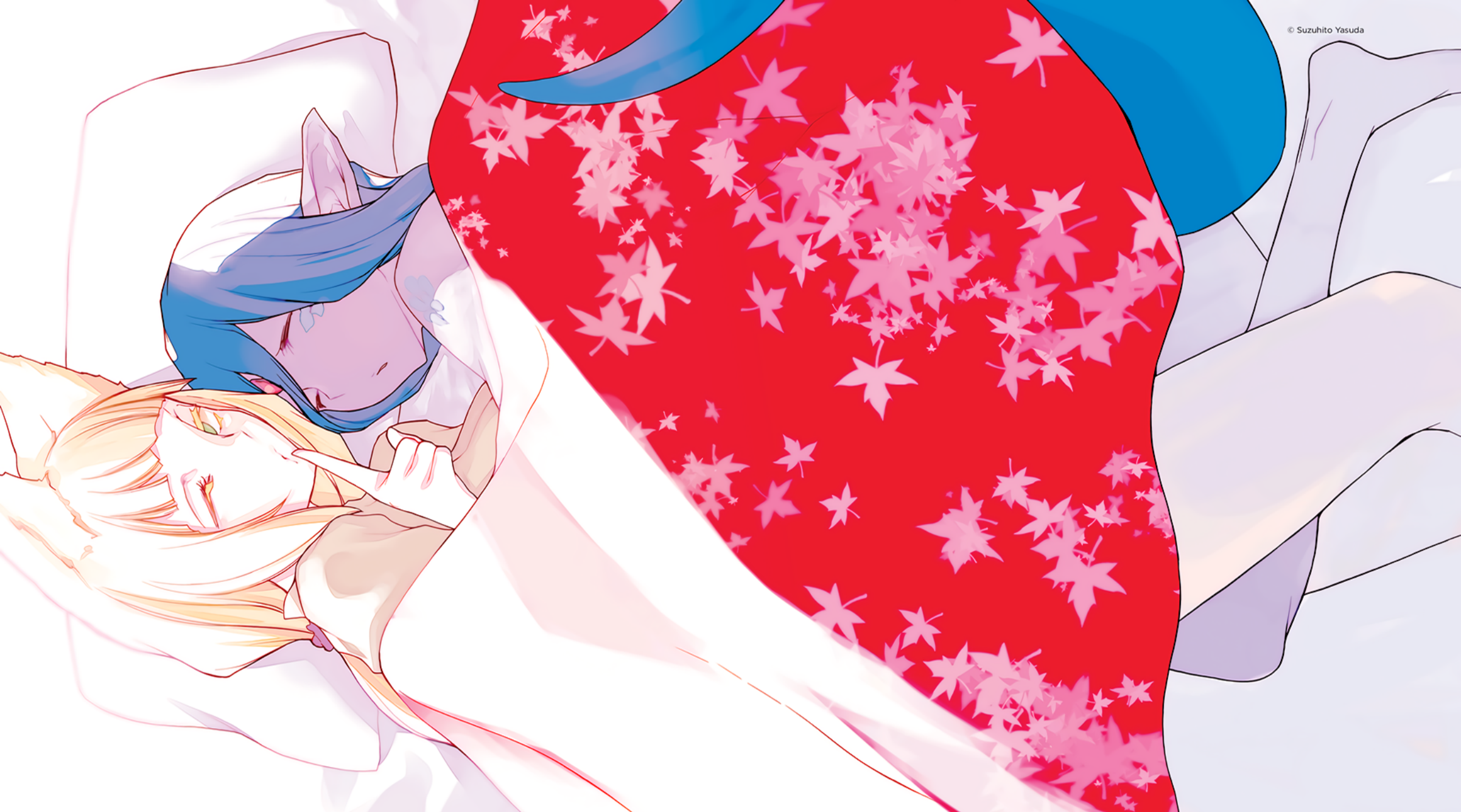
Is it WRONG to try to PICK UP GIRLS in a DUNGEON? 11

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

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VOLUME 11

FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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 best-known 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 MK-V). Belongs to *Hestia Familia*.





MIKOTO YAMATO

A girl from the Far East. She feels indebted to Bell after receiving his forgiveness. Former member of *Takemikazuchi Familia* who now 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

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



CHARACTER & STORY

The Labyrinth City Orario——A large metropolis that sits over an expansive network of underground tunnels and caverns known as the "Dungeon." Bell Cranell came in hopes of realizing his dreams, joining *Hestia Familia* in the process. After being saved by the Sword Princess Aiz Wallenstein, he became infatuated with her and vowed to grow stronger. As he ventured into the Dungeon, he fought fierce battles beside the supporter Lily, the smith Welf, the girl from the Far East named Mikoto, and the renart Haruhime as a member of *Hestia Familia*. Now Bell faces his greatest trial yet. In return for saving the Xenos who went berserk on the surface, the dragon girl, Wiene, the young adventurer has lost the trust of the people. Hurt and despondent, can Bell Cranell overcome this and continue on his chosen path…?

TSUBAKI COLLBRANDE

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

BETE LOGA

A member of a race of animal people known as werewolves. He laughed at Bell's inexperience one night at The Benevolent Mistress. However, he recognized the boy's potential after witnessing Bell's battle with a minotaur.

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*.

OTTAR

An extremely powerful member of *Freya Familia*.

LYU LEON

An elf and former adventurer of extraordinary skill, she currently works as a bartender and waitress at The Benevolent Mistress.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA

A very gifted creator of magical items. She is the captain of *Hermes Familia*.

OUKA KASHIMA

The captain of *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

WIENE

A vouivre girl Bell meets in the Colossal Tree Labyrinth of the Dungeon. Can speak.

REI

A beautiful siren, she's Xenos's third in command.

FELS

A mage shrouded in mystery who answers to Ouranos directly.

SHAKTI VARMA

Human captain of *Ganesha Familia*. She excels at hand-to-hand combat.

HEPHAISTOS

Deity of Orario's most well-known and respected familia of smiths, *Hephaistos Familia*. She has loose ties with Hestia dating back to their time in the heavens.

LOKI

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

RIVERIA LJOS ALF

High elf and vice commander of the most prominent familia in Orario, *Loki Familia*.

TIONE HYRUTE

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

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."

SYR FLOVER

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

HERMES

The deity of *Hermes Familia*. A charming god who excels at toeing the line on all sides of an argument, he is always in the know. Is he keeping tabs on Bell for someone……?

TAKEMIKAZUCHI

The deity of *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

CHIGUSA HITACHI

Another member of *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

LIDO

A friendly lizardman, he leads the Xenos.

OURANOS

The god in charge of the Guild, he also manages the Dungeon.

GANESHA

Patron deity of *Ganesha Familia*. Though many consider his good looks to be wasted on his personality, his followers have unshakable trust in him.

PROLOGUE THE LOST ONES

© Suzuhito Yasuda

PROLOGUE
The Lost Ones

In the passageway dominated by darkness, lights gleamed at regular intervals.

The shining points continued along the walls into the distance, just bright enough to dimly illuminate the walkway. Every so often, a cool draft wafted through the gloom, making the lights flicker.

A line of figures advanced down the corridor.

One after another, strong shoulders and muscled arms bearing sheathed knives passed before the weak glow. The clanking of the fasteners on their armor blended with the pounding of their shoes and boots.

They were adventurers.

There were perhaps ten or twelve in the group, led by a dwarf with a helmet pulled low over his eyes. Each held a magic-stone lantern and used it to search the surroundings carefully.

They were not in the Dungeon.

The tunnel-like hallways they walked through were made of rock, hewn by human hands. Magic-stone lamps nearing the end of their life spans were affixed to the walls, while water rushed down the center of the passageway with a hiss.

It was an underground sewer.

“Prey is always first come, first serve. No hard feelings, right?” said an animal person in the group.

“Just try touching one of my kills and see what happens,” an Amazon responded.

The armor of each adventurer was engraved with a different familia’s emblem; they were a mixed-faction party. It was clear from the extreme lack of unity that the group had been formed in haste. The animal person responded to the uncompromising Amazon with spit and a curse.

These rough, poorly behaved individuals were all experienced adventurers.

Among them was Mord Latro, as well as the two human companions who always accompanied him.

“Hey, Mord,” called one.

“Are you sure this is okay?” asked the other.

“What are you talking about? The guys from the Guild are leaving no stone unturned on the surface, but they haven’t found a thing. They must be in the sewers.”

Mord had a rugged build and a fierce visage, with scars on his forehead and cheeks. He looked every bit an overbearing scoundrel. In fact, about two and a half months earlier, he had even tried to give a certain extremely fast-growing rookie an adventurer’s baptism.

He withdrew a scroll from his pocket.

“We’ll kill these monsters before anyone else can catch up. The prize money is gonna be ours!”

The illustrations on the scroll depicted armed monsters, drawn based on what was known about them. Among them were

a fiendish lizardman and a gargoyle.

Three days had passed since the monsters appeared on the surface as a result of the disturbance instigated by *Ikelos Familia*. After shaking off the adventurers pursuing them, the escaped monsters scattered across Orario. Even now, they were hiding somewhere in the city.

Guild Headquarters took the situation very seriously, ordering several familias to quickly subjugate the monsters and placing a bounty on their heads as an incentive. Tempted by the generous reward, adventurers abandoned their exploration of the Dungeon and were currently in a frenetic search for the monsters believed to still be on the surface.

"No, that's not what we meant, Mord."

"These armed monsters look really strong. I heard they even got away from *Loki Familia*..."

"It won't be a problem. The Sword Princess beat them up pretty good from what I hear. They're probably so tuckered out they can't even move right now. For a bunch of monsters that only know how to go on a rampage, they've been awfully quiet. I'd say that's proof enough. It'll be an easy win."

As Mord loudly guffawed, the men accompanying him exchanged uneasy glances.

A group of upper-class adventurers from a different familia was also talking among themselves.

"By the way...Did you hear the latest about the Little Rookie?"

"Yeah. Townsfolk seem to be giving him the cold shoulder. He's really done it now, eh?"

They laughed as if they were recalling the scene.

“He must have gotten a hankering for his vouivre friend. What an idiot.”

“I think it’s because he let all that special treatment and flattery about being a record holder go to his head. Serves him right!”

The adventurer had become a laughingstock—no more than an amusing subject for ridicule.

Other adventurers listened to the disparaging conversation and joined the sneering.

That was when Mord broke in.

“…Hey, you! What’s so important you can afford to forget the business at hand?” he said, his scoundrel’s face twisting into an even grimmer expression than usual. “Right now, we’re a lot like him ourselves, I’d say! So stop picking on the Little Rookie!!”

“Hey now, Mord!”

“What’s the matter all of a sudden?”

His companions rushed to stop him, but he flew at them, spitting.

His outburst threw the party of unfamiliar adventurers into confusion.

“That little brat attacked other adventurers because they were killing a vouivre. I’d say that’s going too far!”

“Yeah, it’s…I know, it’s the debt! It’s all because of that unbelievable debt his familia has!”

Their voices were choked with a mixture of scorn and hostile criticism toward the boy. Mord turned his back on them emphatically and began walking forward again.

“What’s with him?”

“Yeah, what’s his problem?”

Mord could hear the murmurs behind him, and he snorted with irritation.

Just when the atmosphere of the group was growing perilously stormy, the dwarf at the head of the line yelled out.

“Stop.”

The upper-class adventurers reacted in unison to his tensely spoken order.

The dwarf was glaring straight ahead.

Deep in the gloom, a pair of yellow eyes glinted.

Then, with a fat, undulating tail covered in scarlet scales, the monster showed itself.

“It’s…the lizardman!”

“Finally showed yourself, eh!”

No sooner had the adventurers moved into battle formation than the monster, clad in armor, charged toward them.

“UOOOOOOOOO!!”

The sturdy dwarf had braced his shoulders in an attempt to absorb the shock, but he was thrown backward by the frontal attack.

“What…? What’s going on?”

The shocked voices of Mord and the others rained down on the dwarf, who had become entangled with the adventurer behind

him as he fell backward.

Oblivious to whom he was attacking, the lizardman rampaged through the group.

“Swoooosh!!”

“Ooooooof?!”

Along with its flashing longsword and scimitar, the creature also swung its tail about like a flail.

Unable to defend themselves against their foe’s terrible battle prowess, the trampled party let out a series of screams. The tail hit an animal person, knocking him into the air so that he lost his footing and fell into the waterway.

A spray of liquid blasted the adventurers, sending them running without a single backward glance.

“Guess he wasn’t so weak after aaaaaaaaall!!”

With a chorus of wretched screams, Mord and the others fled at full speed.

“…Mmmm.”

A pair of pointy, misshapen ears quivered at the sound of low screams echoing in the distance.

The dragon girl fluttered her ashen eyelids and slowly opened her eyes. She could just make out a dark stone ceiling above her.

“Where…am I…?” she mumbled to herself.

“Are you awake, Wiene?”

The gentle voice had come from right beside her. Slowly turning her eyes in that direction, Wiene saw a beautiful siren with a

relieved expression on her face.

“Rei?...?!”

As soon as she uttered the name of the siren, her fellow Xenos, the vouivre leaped up.

“Bell! Where is Bell?!”

“Please calm down, Wiene. Bell is fine.”

Rei wrapped her wings around the frail body of the girl, speaking slowly to calm her frantic worry over the boy’s safety.

“Really? Oh, I’m so glad...But when I was at his side, didn’t I...?”

“Fels brought you back to life.”

Wiene unconsciously touched her hand to the red stone on her forehead, tilting her head in confusion at Rei’s words.

“Maybe it would have been best if she’d slept a little longer.”

“Gros...?”

It was the gargoyle, standing by their side, who had spoken.

Wiene looked confused. A moment later, Lido appeared.

“I’m back!” he announced.

“Lido!”

“Oh, you’re up, are you, Wiene? I’m so glad!”

“Yes. Where were you just now?”

“...I chased off some adventurers.”

With that, he turned to speak with the black-clad mage Fels, who had come to greet him.

“Are you okay, Lido?”

“I am. Thanks to your magic, my body is perfectly healed. I can move around just fine. The adventurers came rather close, though. It would be best to move from here.”

“Oh, I see…”

Wiene did not know what to make of this grim conversation between Fels and the others. She looked around. They were not in the Dungeon or in Knossos, the man-made labyrinth that the hunters had brought her to. Instead, they were in a forgotten chamber of a sewer, where she could hear the sound of flowing water.

About fourteen of her brethren were there with her, including lamias, trolls, and Lido. Even to Wiene, the group looked small. Timidly, she spoke up, her profile illuminated by the light of the half-broken magic-stone lanterns.

“Where…are we…? And where are the others?”

“…Let’s explain. Listen well, Wiene,” Fels answered.

As the girl’s amber eyes shifted uneasily, the mage explained clearly and concisely that they were on the surface, where townspeople were chasing her and the other Xenos in an attempt to kill them. For that reason, they were moving around Orario so as not to be found. In the process of fleeing from the adventurers, some of the Xenos had been separated from the group.

“Asterios, too, was unable to make it back to us.”

“If only he were here, we may have been able to do something, but…”

Hearing the unfamiliar name, Wiene followed the gazes of Lido and Rei. When she saw what they were looking at, she froze.

A powerful jet-black limb had been set on the floor. It was a severed arm, the massive muscles practically as thick as Wiene's torso. Now it was encased in ice to keep the flesh from decaying. The vouivre gulped at the sight, which spoke to not only the violence of the battle that had nearly cost Lido and the others their lives but especially to the importance of the minotaur's presence.

"To survive, the only choice is to return to the Dungeon. But the entrances to Babel and the labyrinth are all shut tight, so as matters stand, there's currently no way to get back," Fels said from the depths of the torn hood.

Alone and unaided, surrounded by enemies on all sides. They were in the worst situation imaginable.

The mage paused for a moment, then continued.

"If we have one hope, it's..."

The whispered words melted away into the silence.

Surrounded by her brethren, who were also now hushed, Wiene slowly looked upward into the darkness that enveloped them.

"Bell..."



He was born hungry.

The first thing he did when he set foot there was to massacre everyone.

Countless members of his familia were present. They tried to

attack him, and he was hungry. They showed him no mercy. He thought of them less than the morning dew. He beat them to death with his hands, stomped them to death with his feet, crushed them with his body. Within the boundless maze, he threw himself into endless battles.

He didn't know exactly when he first became aware of himself. There was a sense that it had been when he was born, but he also felt like it was long, long before that. That his self had hovered within some sort of dream. The one thing he remembered very clearly was the scene so vivid it had made him conscious of his self.

He was still hungry for that feeling.

Always hungry. Always fighting.

Even when his skin was torn, his bones crushed, and his flesh melting, rotting away, he continued to move from one place to the next, slaughtering his familia members.

The turning point came when he finally fell to his knees, bereft of energy.

The figures that appeared before him at that moment were not his familia members but his brethren.

They protected him and rescued him from the jaws of death. After bringing him to their home, they soothed his body.

As they had helped nurture something within him other than hunger, he saw the brethren as a positive presence. They were also widely knowledgeable and taught him the true nature of his hunger.

"It is a powerful *yearning*," the fighter who was kin had said. "It is what you desire."

His yearning? He didn't really know what that was. But he understood that it was his "desire."

In the dream that visited him incessantly, there was no sound or smell, only light. A will so strong his body shook from it, an ecstasy that filled his empty shell, *something* that affirmed his very existence.

He learned many other things from his brethren. Wisdom, strength, and the use of weapons. Eventually he separated from them and once again threw himself into the place where he had been born. The far graphite depths of the Dungeon.

This is not it. This is not it.

Having learned the true nature of his hunger, he could no longer feel satisfied. Even if he honed his strength and massacred his kin, he would never be able to reach his dream. At some point, he even began to feel irritated. Perhaps you could call it impatience. His hunger grew and grew. He carried on the search for his dream and remained lost on his way.

"AH—AAAAAHHHH?!"

The hunter fled, screaming.

A number of other hunters lay on the ground, their arms and legs twisted at impossible angles. A pool of blood had formed around them. They had very cleverly discovered his hiding place. So he destroyed them. The victim destroyed the would-be aggressor.

This is not it. This is not it.

The hunters resembled the *something* he searched for. Yet they were completely different from it.

That thing—the dream—would never have run from him in

terror.

These hunters had fled after taking a single step toward him. He had caught up with them and grabbed them around their necks with his groaning, powerful arms before slamming them against the wall. Countless fissures had spread through the decrepit ruins. Spewing red liquid, the hunters' eyes rolled back in their heads. The sound of breaking bones came all too easily from necks he grasped like twigs in his palms. He remembered the promise he'd made to his brethren and withdrew his hands.

After the last of his enemies had collapsed onto the floor, he left the ruins where he had been hiding.

It was not deep in the Dungeon but rather close to the surface.

Feeling no emotion whatsoever toward the night sky covered in its thin blanket of clouds, carrying just a single weapon, blood dripping from his entire body, he continued to wander lost, with resolute steps.

He kept searching.

To find the dream. To meet again.



CHAPTER 1
THE WHITE RABBIT BROUGHT LOW

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CHAPTER 1
The White Rabbit Brought Low

A Menace Let Loose: Monsters Scatter Across the City.

Dungeon Post Town Rivira Destroyed. Were Monsters on the Surface Involved?

The Secret Maneuvers of Ikelos Familia *: A Second Door to the Dungeon?*

Several news publications were spread out on the table. Hestia and Lilly stared grimly at the headlines, written in Koine.

"This is getting really serious..."

"Yeah, these stories are all over town. The locals are sick with worry."

It was the fourth morning since the incident involving *Ikelos Familia*and the Xenos that had turned the city upside down.

Hestia and Lilly were standing in the living room of Hearthstone Manor, their home, looking down at the reports.

Lilly had gathered them from around town, each a scroll of several leaflets sold by a familia or a merchant. They were full of countless bits of information and conjecture about the monsters' appearance on the surface.

For Hestia and Lilly, who were privy to the details of the situation, even the ones that appeared at first glance to be gossip, were

no laughing matter.

"And look at this one..." Hestia said glumly, shifting her gaze to another of the notices.

The article she examined was small and squeezed into a corner. The headline read: *Violent Rampage by War-Game Champion Little Rookie: Lost Hope, Lost Prestige.*

There were similar articles in other notices. Some included his portrait.

Hestia stood at the table beside the much shorter Lilly in stony silence, her brows knit. Just then, Haruhime and Mikoto walked into the living room, dressed in maid's outfits.

"Lady Hestia. Lady Lilly. We're back."

"Apologies for taking so long. Many of the stores were closed."

They were returning from a shopping trip, and they set down paper bags full of vegetables and dried meat.

"Welcome back. Nothing was wrong in town?"

"...Nothing obvious. But the way everyone looked at us, compared to before..." Haruhime said evasively. Mikoto spoke more clearly, although with a troubled expression.

"Some of them were very cold. As we suspected, Sir Bell's actions seem to be having a broader effect...because we're in the same familia as him. It feels like the pressure has been building over the past few days."

Hestia sighed and looked at Lilly.

"No change with Welf today?"

The young armor smith had not shown his face since the dis-

turbance.

"No. He's been shut up in his workshop ever since. He's hopeless…but when I leave food in front of his door, it always disappears, so he must be alive in there," Lilly grumbled.

Hestia looked toward the corner of the garden where the workshop stood behind the main building. At that moment, the living room door swung open.

"Oh…Mr. Bell."

The boy walking toward Hestia and the others looked almost the same as usual. That is, aside from how preoccupied he seemed.

"…"

He started to say something to Lilly, Mikoto, and Haruhime, then looked away. The words were stuck in his throat, but he eventually turned to Hestia and forced himself to speak.

"Um, Goddess…please let me go into town."

Lilly and the others reacted with surprise.

"…What on earth are you going to do outside?" Hestia asked.

As the leader of the familia, their goddess had strictly forbidden Bell to leave home. She hadn't ordered him to stay inside until the excitement cooled down, but she thought it best for him to lie low at least in the immediate aftermath of the incident. It was for his own safety. Bell's position at the moment was that perilous.

"If you want to collect information, the supporters or I can do it. There's no need for you to personally go, right?"

"But…"

“You might get hurt again.”

Bell stiffened, perhaps recalling the hostility and disappointment many residents and fellow adventurers had directed at him the other evening when he had walked down Daedalus Street in the battle-scarred city.

With a shuddery breath, Bell met Hestia’s gaze and answered her.

“Sitting here doing nothing, just letting time pass…That’s the scariest thing of all right now.”

He could not remain still any longer.

In response to his pleading look, Hestia closed her eyes for a moment. Finally, she nodded.

“Okay. You may go.”

“Goddess…”

“But—only on the condition that I go with you.”

Bell had been relieved for an instant, but his eyes widened. Lilly and the others reacted much the same.

“Lady Hestia, I don’t think—”

“Supporters, I’m counting on you to keep collecting information and guarding our home! Today, I will serve as Bell’s bodyguard!”

Hestia gave them a thumbs-up. Lilly, who was leaning forward in surprise, pouted and grudgingly murmured, “I can’t believe it.”

The goddess may have been messing around, but she had made her divine will known.

As a goddess, she was the one who could best protect Bell now.

"We'll try to be back by lunchtime! Let's get going, Bell."

"But, Goddess…"

Hestia walked to his side and peered up at him. Finally, giving in to his goddess's stare, Bell nodded.

"Okay, let's go…"



We set out, leaving home behind. As promised, I am headed to town with the goddess.

For these past four days, I've been under house arrest—or at least, that's how I see it. But thanks to Lilly and the others who have been gathering information, I at least have an idea of recent developments in the city.

Once word got out that the monsters had breached the surface, the eight city gates were completely sealed. The Guild, in an attempt to get things under control as quickly as possible, issued a bounty for the Xenos. Many adventurers and resources are now devoted to searching for them.

I want to know where Wiene and Lido and the others have gone, too. When I heard the rumors and imagined the Xenos being driven out, I couldn't bear to stand idly by.

"…"

The sky above Orario is overcast.

The rain that had been falling since the incident has stopped, but the sky is shrouded in clouds, as if expressing the city's current mood.

The streets in town are quiet. Perhaps because everyone is afraid of the monsters, the few people who are out and about rush off quickly. The small children I always used to see on my way to the Dungeon are nowhere to be found. Is this really Orario?

"My shifts at the Jyaga Maru Kun stand have been canceled as well…" the goddess murmurs despondently as I gaze around this unfamiliar Orario in bewilderment.

We head to West Main Street, past many shops shuttered and locked up tight. As expected, there are more people on the main thoroughfare, but most are Guild employees, who normally wouldn't be walking around, along with their adventurer guards. They are probably on patrol or actively searching for monsters.

The vitality of the town has vanished, replaced by an atmosphere of nervous tension.

"…Hey, you!"

"Look, over there!"

The stern expressions are directed at us.

Without a doubt, they are staring at me.

"The Little Rookie…I heard all about him and how he caused *Loki Familia*so much trouble."

"It's probably his fault that the monsters got away."

"Just a typical adventurer in the end."

"Hey now, don't put us in the same category as that guy. At least we know the time and place for that behavior."

A chorus of voices tangles in my ear.

Even without improved hearing due to my Status, I would be

able to make out quite clearly the buzz of voices around me. Ordinary citizens, shopkeepers, fellow adventurers…all manner of people stare at me in revulsion as I walk down the street.

My face feels cold…I realize the blood has drained from it.

It's the same experience I tasted that evening in Orario. Criticism is bearing down on all sides.

"They say it was for money…But I think the truth is he was protecting the monsters."

"Monster fetish, eh?"

Now and then, I hear the worst insult in the world hurled at me, someone who protected a despicable vouivre. The words pierce me to the core.

I knew going in that this would happen. I have to accept it. As I struggle desperately to withstand the onslaught, another thought enters my mind.

All the daggers of criticism seem to be directed at me and me alone.

I heard that *Ikelos Familia*has been destroyed and its leader, God Ikelos, banished from the city. In this place smothered by fear and anxiety, I seem to have become the sole outlet for people's feelings…Perhaps I am an easy target for their blame.

An enemy to all people.

The tips of my fingers freeze at the phrase, which has begun to feel real. As I desperately try to quiet my ragged breathing—the goddess spins around.

"If you have something to say, say it to our faces!"

She jabs her finger toward the people around us.

Both they and I are struck dumb by the goddess's sudden reaction.

"Bell behaved recklessly because of the debt that I accumulated. You could even say he did it because of his deep love for me! So if you're going to pass out blame, don't forget about me and my sins!!"

As she delivers this speech to her surprised audience, the goddess emphasizes the word *debt*. And very subtly, the word *love*...

People begin to huddle together after watching the goddess press both hands to her broad chest and speak with such conviction.

"The Loli goddess..."

"Yes, it's her!"

"It must be true that she borrowed two hundred million valis..."

"A natural disaster has befallen us!"

"The curse of the Loli goddess..."

"If she's in that situation, then her followers must also be..."

The goddess throws her hands up, her anger flaring at the whispers.

"Shut your mouths! What total nonsense!" she shouts.

As I rush to restrain her, it dawns on me. The malice permeating the atmosphere a moment earlier has dissipated in the confusion.

I've gone and let the goddess protect me after all. I've made her tell a lie.

Belatedly, I realize what she meant by the word *bodyguard*. By becoming a buffer, the goddess has made it difficult for mortals to openly blame me. But in the course of protecting me, her follower, she has become the target for the people's animosity herself.

I hang my head.

"Goddess, I'm so sorry…Because of me—"

I was about to say, "You're in this mess," but she cuts me off before I can finish.

She turns and stares up at me, then starts laughing at my dismay.

"Bell, let's hold hands."



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She clasps mine in hers.

Pulling me along, she and I start walking forward together once more.

"Um, G-Goddess…"

"I know it's unwise of me, but I feel a little happy. Lately you haven't needed any looking after. You've bolstered my reputation, you see."

Her deliberately teasing tone is like a pat on the shoulder.

She squeezes my hand. Normally I would feel embarrassed, but now…I just feel miserable. I'm ridiculously spineless for relying on the goddess's protection and causing her so much trouble.

At the same time, despite myself, I feel happy.

I know I shouldn't let her spoil me…but against my best intentions, I squeeze her warm hand back. Only a little.

People continue to give us judgmental looks. But I don't feel as cold as before.

"…Goddess, can we stop here for a moment?"

"Sure, but what for?"

Having asked her permission, I pause in front of a building on the central thoroughfare. Even for West Main Street, the stone structure housing The Benevolent Mistress tavern stands out as unusually large.

"You come here a lot, right? This is actually my first time," the goddess says.

"Really? You've never been?"

Even with everything going on, The Benevolent Mistress is open for business. As we walk up to the entrance, a waitress appears, perhaps having noticed us standing outside.

“Lyu…”

“…”

The pretty young elf stares into my face.

She saved me during the mission to the eighteenth floor, so I came here today with the intention of thanking her. But now that I’m standing in front of her, I find myself unable to speak.

Fear wells up inside me…What if she feels the same as the townsfolk?

As I stand there with the words stuck in my throat, Lyu sighs softly and walks down the entryway stairs.

“Mr. Cranell. I am not going to snub you just because I heard some rumors in town.”

“!”

“I believe what I see with my own two eyes,” she says, smiling ever so slightly, as if to put me at ease.

The tension drains from my body at the encouragement from the upright and dependable elf. The corners of my eyes are wet.

Lyu bows slightly to the goddess.

“Goddess Hestia, it is good to meet again.”

My goddess raises a hand in happy greeting.

“Little elf!”

I quickly wipe my eyes.

“Um, Lyu…Thank you for saving me on the eighteenth floor,” I say.

“Please think nothing of it.”

I give her a once-over.

“Uh, are you all right? I heard that the mission party suffered horrible casualties.”

Lilly told me that the party from *Ganesha Familia*, which had originally received the mission, risked total destruction at the time. I’m worried about Lyu, who fought in the battle against the Xenos.

“As you can see, I am fine. My body has recuperated. But—”

She pauses for a moment.

“There was a monster.”

She narrows her sky-blue eyes as if recalling the hair-raising experience.

“That creature…It was a black minotaur, and it inflicted terrible casualties on *Ganesha Familia*and us.”

My breath catches in my throat.

The black minotaur…Could it be the new Xenos who Lido encountered in the Hidden Village? I haven’t come across it myself yet…

My goddess, who has been listening to our conversation, tightens her jaw as if she also just remembered something. Lilly or Mikoto mentioned it as well, I’m certain.

That incredibly strong Xenos who gave *Loki Familia*so much trouble—that was a monster as well, they'd said.

"I've heard that same black minotaur was seen on the surface. And you, too…If your group was on the eighteenth floor, why did you appear in Daedalus Street?…There are so many things I'd like to ask you."

"…"

"But now isn't the time, is it? I'll have to ask you when next we meet."

There must be many things Lyu wants to know about my experience during the episode and my encounters with the armed monsters. But seeing the pallor of my face and considering the circumstances, she refrains from asking any more. I wanted to ask her about the Orb of Knossos, but for the time being I avoid bringing it up.

"Speaking of which, how is Syr…?" I ask instead.

"Syr is taking some time off. She said she has some things to do."

"Oh, I see."

I look past Lyu. From inside the tavern, I can hear the catgirl waitresses Ahnya and Chloe asking me the same questions over and over with unrestrained curiosity.

"Young man, tell us your story, meow!"

"Are the rumors true, meow?"

Runoa, the human waitress, attempts to restrain them.

"Mind your own business, you two dumb cats."

Conscious of the stares that continue to come our way, I move to leave. It won't do to bring the commotion into the tavern.

"...Well, Lyu, we'd better be going. Thank you so much," I say.

As we walk away, Lyu calls out to me.

"Mr. Cranell, keep your spirit strong. I do not fully understand your actions...but if they were the result of a decision that you made, you must not be discouraged."

Surprised, I turn around.

Lyu herself pursued justice when she was a part of *Astrea Familia*, to the point that she was blacklisted. Her words resonate with me, perhaps because they hint at empathy for my situation.

Our eyes meet, and I bow to her. The goddess and I walk away from the tavern.

After continuing down the street for a few moments, the goddess turns to me.

"...What next, Bell? Is there somewhere you want to go?" she asks.

The truth is, there isn't. I have no idea where Wiene and the others are or even where I might find some information about them.

Normally when I'm at a loss, I go to the Guild, but now...

Eina's teary face and confused words flicker across my memory.

I don't believe you...! I could never...believe you...!

I haven't seen her since then. I've been too ashamed.

Still pitifully unable to muster the courage to see her, I mentally cross out the option of going to Guild Headquarters. The weight of my thoughts pushes my gaze downward, but I lift my head.

"Goddess…Please let me go to Daedalus Street…"

Surprise crosses her face. She locks eyes with me for a moment, then nods.

On the way from West Main Street to East Main Street, we pass Central Park, which has been encircled by adventurers. More accurately, Babel itself has been surrounded.

Members of *Ganesha Familia*and other factions have joined together with Guild staff to prevent monsters from passing through the great hole that leads to the Dungeon. Even Lido and his group will not likely be able to force their way through security this tight. If they do, the Xenos will certainly suffer losses.

In addition to the adventurers, a lot of gods are walking around the streets. Some are accompanying parties of adventurers, and some are on their own. In contrast to the townsfolk of Orario, it seems they are secretly enjoying the current situation and searching for excitement in a totally different sense of the word than we are. When they see me, the laughing gods seem to want to cause trouble, but thanks to Hestia's growled warnings, we manage to pass through without incident.

Finally, we arrive at Daedalus Street.

"There are so many adventurers here as well…"

I've passed through this entryway with the goddess before, at the Monsterphilia. Now, as we enter, I see that the chaotic residential district is packed with adventurers. Animal people with double swords slung at their hips, elves carrying bows and quivers of arrows, dwarves hefting sledgehammers over their shoul-

ders—these figures wearing gear fit for the Dungeon are far more brazen than the adventurers we saw on our way here. They seem prepared for a monster to leap out at any moment. Some are even stopping townsfolk who walk by and pressing them for information.

"Have the traps been laid?"

"Are you closing in on the Xenos?"

As if to answer my unspoken thought, the goddess turns toward me with concern.

"Even if they don't know what it is, exactly, everyone seems to realize that something fishy is happening here in Orario…"

Is it that they vaguely sense the connection between this place and the Dungeon?

It's sensible, but it also makes me anxious. The only hope for the Xenos who remain aboveground is to return to the Dungeon. But with so much security between Babel and Daedalus Street, where Knossos is located, the prospect of Wiene and the others sneaking through seems hopeless.

Most adventurers are probably after the huge bounties…But still, as I watch them pass by, it's difficult to breathe. I bring my hands to my throat.

"Um, Goddess, what do you think about the bounties? The ones that the Guild—that Lord Ouranos has offered…?"

"Well, Ouranos has his own position to consider. If he didn't do something to get the situation under control, I think he'd lose his authority."

I'm worried that Ouranos, who is something like the god of the Guild, has forsaken Wiene and the others. But my goddess crosses her arms and insists that my concern is unfounded.

“To the contrary, by offering a bounty, isn’t he preventing adventurers from cooperating too closely?”

By setting them in competition down to the last man, Ouranos is preventing familias from combining their strength while also ensuring that they don’t share intelligence. I have to agree that the scariest thing for the Xenos would be if the various factions freely exchanged information to form a seamless net around them.

On the other hand, by offering a large bounty, the Guild gives the appearance that it’s fully committed to the cause and will stop at nothing. Even within the Guild, it must be difficult to doubt Ouranos’s intentions.

Listening to the goddess explain all this in a quiet voice, I feel everything begin to make sense.

“…”

We continue to search blindly for information, wandering along Daedalus Street, which is a complex multilevel tangle of up, down, left, and right—much like the Dungeon.

From the shadows along the streets and the windows of the buildings, countless dark stares pierce me. I have been glared at and slandered plenty before arriving here…But now it feels stronger. The malice. The hostility.

It even feels as if the residents of Daedalus Street—the Labyrinth District—hate me. They suffered direct harm during the incident, and I am the adventurer who intentionally threw the fight to control the monsters into chaos. Of course, they don’t go so far as throwing stones…

“And to think, he once killed monsters that rampaged through our neighborhood.”

“The Little Rookie turned out to be nothing but another typical adventurer after all, didn’t he?”

I hear despairing voices around me. New grudges seem to be emerging with every passing moment. Concerned for me—I’m still pressing my hands to my chest—the goddess reaches out to squeeze my hand. That’s when it happens.

“!”

I run into the one person I least want to see.

“Miss…Aiz…”

The golden-haired, golden-eyed Sword Princess has just rounded the corner with a number of lower-level members of her familia.

As we bump into each other unexpectedly, Aiz, who I respect so much, gapes for an instant with surprise. Then she looks me squarely in the face.

Is *Loki Familia*investigating Daedalus Street, too? No, they must be—

The events of the other day suddenly come back to me.

Those two golden eyes looking down on me as I protected Wiene. My knife confronting her sword.

How does she see me now? What will she say?

I stand next to the surprised goddess, as if Aiz’s stare has pinned me in place.

“…Little Wallen-something-or-other! Bell and I are on a date right now. Let us pass, will you?”

The goddess uses her back to shield me from the obvious dis-

trust and hostility from the other members of Aiz's party.

Aiz glances briefly at the goddess, then returns her gaze to me.

"…"

In contrast to my own unease, neither her blank expression nor the look in her eyes has changed. After what feels to me like an eternity of silence, she slowly parts her lips.

Right then, a cheerful voice rings out.

"Heeey, Aizu! What're you guys doing standing around over there?"

It's the goddess Loki, leader of Aiz's familia. Poking her head around the corner from another street, she's found Aiz and the others stopped next to Hestia and me. She widens her narrow eyes.

"…Aha, you're with Itty Bitty!"

She turns up the corners of her mouth, smiling like a child who's just discovered a toy.

"You have some business with Finn, don't you? You'd better hurry up!" Loki says to Aiz and her companions.

Aiz looks indecisive for an instant, then accepts Loki's suggestion with a docile "Yes." Just before she disappears with the others, she looks once again in my direction.

"…What do you want, Loki?"

My goddess stands firmly in a corner of the street boxed in by dark bricks, cautious now that Loki's cleared the area. But Loki walks straight toward her and slips smoothly past.

"Young man. You really did something funny this time, didn't

you?" she says.

Ignoring Hestia's shouts, she brings her face within a hair-breadth of mine as I stand there in shock.

"Beats me why you did it, but now ya know what happens to people who protect monsters, huh?"

"!"

"All those guys who used to make such a fuss over you are giving you the cold shoulder…How do you feel now?"

Like a snake, her thin arm slithers around my stiff shoulders. She peers into my face.

Her actions seem to lack any malice. It's pure curiosity. Nothing more, nothing less.

All I can do is stare at my feet as she grins and whispers in my ear.

"Loki, get off him! What the hell do you want?"

"Ha-ha! To mess with him, obviously!"

Outraged, Hestia tries to pull Lady Loki away from me, but she dodges and takes two or three steps backward.

Then she sticks out her tongue, as if she couldn't care less about the red-faced goddess.

"The deities've got their eyes on you in more ways than one," she says to me. "'Oh look, the White Rabbit's done it again!' That's what they say. There's no shortage of gossip when it comes to you, young man. Of course, my Aiz can beat ya any day!"

"…"

“But actually, I’m interested in you these days, too. You’re pretty feisty for one of Itty Bitty’s kids.”

Loki continues squinting at me with her vermilion eyes. She sees me as no more than an amusing child. I’m certain that one phrase sums up her opinion.

My unsettled emotions confuse me. I feel I’m once again witnessing the gap between the unfathomable deusdea—the gods and goddesses—and the residents of the mortal plane.

“You’ll be destroyed if you take an interest in him! You’re already making enough trouble for other deities. Keep your hands off Bell!” my goddess shouts.

“You’ve got some nerve talking to me like that! You’re real low-class for a goddess, ain’tcha.”

I can hear the goddess breathing heavily next to my shoulder.

“Goddess, are you all right?” I ask, trying to calm her down. As I do, I notice something out of the corner of my eye.

What’s that?

Several figures are crossing the end of an alley. I recognize them from somewhere.

My attention divided, I find my gaze jumping back and forth between the two goddesses and the alley where the figures passed.

The goddess notices my behavior and seems to guess something has caught my attention.

“Bell, if something is bothering you, go ahead and check it out. I’ll wait for you here.”

“B-but…”

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to get into a fight…Anyway, I want to talk to Loki.”

The goddess looks up at Loki, her attitude completely changed from a moment before. Loki tilts her head with a questioning look. I hesitate briefly, then give in to the goddess’s indulgence.

“Excuse me, then. I’ll be right back.”

I nod to them both and dash off down the alley so I don’t lose track altogether.

*I’ve been here before.*As I chase after the figures—who I can now see are young children—I think back on the events that took place in this very same Daedalus Street.

Finally, I arrive at a plaza where a large church stands.

“Uh…big…brother.”

The fountain is broken and dry, and several of the church windows are shattered.

In front of this desolate orphanage in the depths of the Labyrinth District, I once again find the children I’ve met here before.

“Lai, Fina, Ruu…”

I murmur the names of the three children, who by now have noticed that I followed them.

“Big brother…”

A brown-haired human boy, his face covered in scrapes and scratches.

A chienthrope girl with long, straight cream-colored hair.

And the youngest of the three, an androgynous half-elf child.

They are the orphans whom I met about a month earlier, the time I followed Syr. They look surprised to see me. Perhaps returning from an errand for the orphanage, since I can see packages of food in their arms.

“B-big brother…” says Fina, the chienthrope.

“…”

She tucks her tail between her legs and steps backward.

The half-elf Ruu, who is usually lost in a daydream, shifts his gaze nervously back and forth.

They’re afraid of me…Could things get any worse?

As I stand there silently, Lai, the human, leans forward as if to protect the other two.

“…Why are you here?” he asks.

His sharp look and words reveal a newfound hostility.

I can’t breathe or even move a finger.

The three children live here in Daedalus Street. They probably know what I did. They may even have watched with their own eyes as I protected a monster and attacked other adventurers.

“Why did you do it?” Lai asks me, his voice full of the same judgment, hatred, and disappointment as the other townsfolk.

“Our neighborhood was a wreck, and…I thought adventurers were supposed to kill monsters!” he spits out. “Traitor!”

I can practically hear my heart splitting open. Lai’s words hit me harder than any of the other criticisms I’ve heard today. That,

and the sad look on Fina's and Ruu's faces as they stare at the ground.

I've tainted their memory of me and betrayed their youthful admiration for adventurers. The choking sensation in my throat and the excruciating pain drilling into my heart are almost too much to bear.

A sense of true loss floods every corner of my body.

"I'm out of here," Lai says. He turns and walks into the orphanage.

Fina and Ruu glance at me. Then, without a word, they follow Lai.

The door of the church slams shut with a bang, as if to throw their rejection in my face while I stand there frozen. As if it's telling me not to come in and never to come back.

I'm drowning in unthinkable misery and a bitterness that cuts into my very flesh. This despondency goes beyond simple lethargy, and my knees buckle under it. I collapse like a marionette whose strings have been cut.

I have never felt more dejected.

The sky, thickly blanketed in clouds, stares down on my miserable self.

"...Bell?"

The words abruptly break my train of thought.

That door that I thought would never welcome me again has opened, and someone is walking toward me.

I slowly look up—and see Syr.

"I've been talking to Maria and some others about whether they might be able to evacuate from Daedalus Street."

I am sitting with Syr on a brick bench in a little garden near the orphanage, where a few bushes and flowers have been planted.

"Because of what happened in the Labyrinth District…Well, it would be dangerous if the monsters showed up again."

Lyu had said Syr was taking some time off work, and apparently she has been using that time to discuss her options with Mother Maria, the head of the orphanage. She tells me the two of them have been visiting the other orphanages in the Labyrinth District and urging them to evacuate.

For the past few days, she says, Daedalus Street more than anywhere else in the city has been full of adventurers coming and going, and the air is charged. It's easy to see why she's worried the area will end up as a battleground again.

Whatever my reasons were, the fact that I caused all this weighs heavily on my heart.

"I guess it would be rude…to ask what happened," Syr says.

"…"

"Lai and the others have been pushed to the limit. Sometimes they're quiet; sometimes they put on a brave front…I think they're at a loss for what to do."

I haven't made any attempt to speak, so Syr has been talking nonstop. She's wearing a white dress I've seen her in before.

She looks straight ahead, a smile on her face, and does not pry in the least. Even though she must know what I did…

Maybe it's because she looks so completely unchanged that I

can't help blurting out a question.

"You're really not going to ask me anything…?"

"I will if you want me to," she says with a pleasant smile.

"No, no…" I say uncertainly.

"Are you trying to make up your mind about something?"

Am I?

No…What I must do is clear. I have decided. I will save Wiene and her fellow Xenos.

The scales have already tipped. I will lend my strength to Lido and the others who even now are in such danger, even if it means making many more enemies.

Even if people I care about, like Lai, hate me for it.

So this is not indecision I am feeling after all…It is terror of being completely isolated.

"Something really seems to be bothering you…It's better not to keep your troubles to yourself, you know!" Syr says.

"…"

"You have a familia, don't you, Bell?"

Her words shake me. I don't care what happens to me. I'm afraid, and I will probably tremble when it happens, but I made the decision myself. It doesn't matter if people throw stones. I have to take it.

But the members of my familia…that's another story.

Before the goddess and I left home, I stood by the door listen-

ing to her conversation with Mikoto and the others. Because of me, they're being treated as a disappointment.

My chest feels like it's about to explode.

I will not regret my decision. I must not. I know this, yet I'm on the verge of being crushed by self-reproach.

It's how I felt when I met Aiz and also when I saw Lyu. I'm…

"…I'm afraid to ask," I blurt out, unable to keep the thought to myself. "I've gone and acted so selfishly, caused so much trouble for everyone…I'm afraid to ask what Welf and the others think of me…"

Now that this pitiful confession has spilled from my mouth, all I want is to disappear.

As I hang my head in extreme self-loathing, Syr reaches out and cups my face in her hands.

"Huh?"

"Pardon me."

When she pulls my head, my listless body is unable to muster the least resistance, and I topple over sideways.

In other words, my head is now on Syr's lap.

"Um, uh, wha—?"

"This is in return for the lap pillow you gave me before."

Forgetting all about my internal conflicts, I panic and try to jump back up. The hand resting on my head holds me in place.


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At the sensation of her soft thighs, my cheeks immediately turn bright red.

“In return?! You forced me to do it that time…!” I say.

“Hee-hee…Was that what happened? Well, let me force you this time, too,” she says playfully, lowering her voice.

She begins to comb her fingers through my hair.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t lose your path. You may have lost some things, but other things remain by your side.”

Her tone has shifted to one of gentle remonstration, and I stop struggling.

I lift my gaze, as if something is pulling my eyes upward. Syr’s smile greets me. Her eyes are brimming with the same affection I saw when she was looking down on the children asleep at the orphanage.

I flip onto my back on the bench. Raising one knee, I return her gaze. Eventually, she lays a hand gently over my eyes.

“I…I like how you always keep on running,” she says with a sigh. Her voice is so quiet it’s practically a whisper.

“What?”

When I push away the hand blocking my view, Syr smiles cheerfully, her cheeks flushed.

“…I mean I like you how you usually are!”

Her huge smile cheers me up, as if it’s telling me not to worry.

Amazed, I get up from Syr’s lap and look around. I realize that her smile, unchanged from before, has relieved some sort of ten-

sion within me.

"...Somehow it seems like you're always cheering me up these days."

She giggles.

"Next time, should I hold you in my arms?"

"Uh, no thank you!"

I blush at her teasing and force a weak smile.

The sky is still covered in ashen clouds, but my heart feels a bit sunnier now.



"That's why I'm saying you need to get the hell out of Daedalus Street in short order! How many times have I told you? Why do I have to come out here myself?!"

In response to the raving, spit- and sweat-spewing Guild head Royman Mardeel, Finn Deimne, captain of *Loki Familia*, remained coolly composed.

"If we withdraw, which familia will you assign to defense?"

" *Ganesha Familia*, obviously! It's the divine will of God Ouranos!"

"I've heard *Ganesha Familia*is not functioning at full capacity right now, due to the damage from the mission."

"They're still better than you undependable rascals! Breaking the standby orders the other day and doing whatever you damn pleased...Unbelievable!"

The spot where Finn and Royman were talking was remote even for Daedalus Street: a section of Main Street that had been reduced to ruins in the battle with the monsters four days earlier. All around them, Guild employees were working on the repair and reconstruction effort, and *Loki Familia*members were on security patrol.

Standing near the rubble created when the vouivre destroyed a wall, the rotund elven Guild head flew at the leader of the prums, his belly flab shaking.

"Let's stop the probing, yeah?" Finn said, looking up at Royman with his wise blue eyes. "What you Guild people are so worried about is the entrance to the Dungeon down below us…Am I wrong?" he continued.

"…!"

"We learned a few tidbits from God Ikelos before we handed him over to the Guild. He told us about Knossos, among other things," Finn said, lowering his voice at the word *Knossos*.

It was none other than *Loki Familia*that had captured the leader of *Ikelos Familia*, now expelled from the city. The god had answered their questions with a sly grin.

"I can understand why you'd want to monopolize the information about Knossos and block any leaks, but I think you should reconsider the situation. The other familias already suspect the truth. They've guessed that this place is connected to the Dungeon."

Finn continued explaining to Royman, whose voice seemed stuck in his throat.

"Royman, please put your own interests aside for the moment. These monsters defeated even *Ganesha Familia*. Who's going to be able to suppress them here in the city?"

"...You let them get away yourselves, if I'm correct. If that hadn't happened, things would be a lot different right now...!"

"There's no excuse for that. But next time we will take them down. We understand the enemy's strength now."

Finn shrugged, and then, shifting the mood, he broached a new topic.

"The key to Knossos that Ikelos told us about...If we find it, we'll give it to you."

"!"

"In exchange, I want you to let us continue our work here. We, too, want to get the monsters under control as quickly as possible so the townsfolk don't have to keep living in this fear."

Royman, who had been watching Finn as if evaluating his suggestion, finally opened his mouth.

"Are you moving forward with investigating this dungeon we've been talking about?"

"Yes. Gareth and Tiona managed to dig through the adamantite wall and get in. But an orichalcum door blocked the far side of the room they found, and as you'd guess, they weren't able to break that one down. It takes time and labor to destroy things made of adamantite...and we decided we shouldn't pointlessly demolish anything until we know what is hidden in Knossos. After all, we wouldn't want to bring trouble to the surface."

"...We'll need all the information about Knossos. The structure as you understand it so far, the location of the orichalcum door... Can you promise to report to us every detail you know?"

"I can," said Finn.

Royman, who had launched into negotiation mode after hear-

ing Finn's explanation, waited for a moment, then nodded.

"All right, then, I'll accept your conditions. I will inform Ouranos…But! Don't even think about deceiving me! I'll cut you scoundrels off without a second thought if you try anything funny!!"

"I understand," Finn replied, a smile playing around his mouth.

The Guild chief snorted and walked off with his bodyguards.

A moment later, Riveria was standing in his place. The high elf vice captain had come from giving orders to the other members of the familia.

"Whew…Seems like that guy hasn't changed."

"Ha! I don't trust Royman, but I give him credit. He'll negotiate for mercenary reasons; that much is easy to figure out."

Riveria sighed at the thought of her unattractive, corpulent brethren. After listening to Finn recount their conversation, she responded with a question.

"Are you certain? Knossos intel aside, you even promised to hand over the key."

"The god Ikelos said there was more than one. We'll be fine if we keep one for ourselves," Finn said, as if he could see into the future.

"So you're saying the Guild may have its own interests, but we can count on them to cooperate?"

"At the very least, I think we can count on Royman. But just like with the mission, I smell something fishy going on. When it comes to what's happening right now, I don't think we have enough information yet to trust the Guild wholesale.

"The Guild isn't monolithic," he added, licking the thumb of his right hand. "And speaking of which, Riveria, how's *Freya Familia*?"

"Seems they're still serving as porters for the city. Their explanation that it's due to these extraordinary times is reasonable… But they seem to be merely watching and waiting, which is unusual for them. They say they don't want to get involved just now."

As Finn and Riveria were discussing *Freya Familia*—Orario's other biggest faction, which together with *Loki Familia*was often likened to one of the city's two heads—the girl with the golden eyes and hair approached them.

"Good work on your rounds, Aiz."

"Thanks…"

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

"…That kid, Bell, came to Daedalus Street."

Finn narrowed his blue eyes at the news.

"He's stepped out, has he?"

Riveria, who had been watching Aiz out of the corner of her eye, asked the question that was on the young girl's mind.

"Finn…Are you suspicious of Bell Cranell?"

"I am certain he's a key witness in this incident. The adventurer I faced on that day was not the Bell Cranell I know," Finn replied, looking out at the street where he and the boy had confronted each other.

"God Ikelos said he had been capturing and smuggling monsters in order to sell them off to 'monster lovers.' But was that re-

ally all he was up to? Armed monsters, high intelligence levels, mutant subspecies like that black minotaur…Wouldn't you say there's a special *something* about them?"

Finn thought back to the way Ikelos had smiled slyly just before they handed him over to the Guild. He hadn't been lying, but he hadn't shared the heart of the matter with them, either.

Standing before him, Aiz seemed to be recalling something, too. A shudder passed through her shoulders.

"If there *is* something different about those armed monsters… and Bell Cranell was led astray because he knew what that something was, then the events of that day begin to make more sense. And moreover, it means he was left with no choice but to oppose us," Finn said.

He noticed that Aiz was holding her tongue, and he laughed dryly.

"Aiz, it's not that I'm labeling Bell Cranell an enemy without letting him tell his side of the story. This is my way of saying I believe in him. As a person and as an adventurer."

"…"

"But this time, things are different. I need to know for sure…if he is our friend or if he may become our enemy."

Speaking now as a faction boss, Finn looked toward the section of Daedalus Street where tall buildings clustered.

"Riveria, I'm handing command here over to you. I have something to do on my own."

"Why alone?"

"I don't want to stand out or raise any alarms. Aiz, did Bell Cranell come to Daedalus Street by himself?"

"...No, he came with his goddess."

"Ah, I see. And can you tell me where you saw him?"

The prum adventurer continued, even as Aiz and Riveria fixed disbelieving stares on him. "I'm off to meet with Bell Cranell."


CHAPTER
2
DIVERGING STRANDS, INTERSECTING PLANS
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CHAPTER 2
Diverging Strands, Intersecting Plans

After saying good-bye to Syr, I head back alone toward the spot where I left the goddess.

Here again, everyone I pass on the street is emanating hostility. Syr may have cheered me up, but this just isn't the kind of thing you get used to.

I hurry along, my eyes on the ground.

"Bell Cranell."

Someone is calling my name. I've been mocked plenty, but so far no one has tried to stop me on the street. I halt in my tracks, surprised.

When I turn around, I see...

"—!! Mr....Finn?"

It's the golden-haired prum.

Wearing armor and carrying a long spear, *Loki Familia*'s captain is staring at me.

"Only a knife for self-defense, eh...? That's pretty light weaponry you have there, given your current predicament."

My heart skips a beat at his comment, which he delivers with a smile that crinkles his blue eyes.

I am wearing no armor whatsoever, because I know the Xenos are not dangerous. But the other adventurers wouldn't understand that. Given how careless I must appear to everyone around me, I wonder what Finn is thinking.

It's not that I didn't have time to properly prepare—I was just being stupid. I'm wincing at my blunder, but Finn continues as if nothing is wrong.

"You're by yourself, I see. I'm glad, because I wanted to talk to you in private about something."

I, along with the demi-humans who have been watching our encounter, start in surprise.

The next moment, they're giving me strange looks. Some even direct critical gazes at Finn, but the upper-class adventurer just smiles at me.

But…is it wrong that I'm steeling myself against that outwardly friendly smile?

"What do you say?" he asks.

"…Oh, uh, okay," I answer in a voice that's stiffer than I intended.

The look in those blue eyes makes me feel like "no" isn't an option.

I follow the prum's small figure as he searches for a place free of passersby. Eventually we arrive at a blind alley that seems to be some kind of storage area piled with wooden boxes and barrels.

"…"

We've been in a similar situation before. Last time, the prum captain asked for my advice about his marriage proposal. This time, things are completely different.

Why would he want to talk to someone like me who treated him like an enemy?

As if guessing my thoughts, Finn faces me and begins to speak.

"I intend to turn a blind eye to what you did that day. The priority now is resolving the current situation. I want to have a productive conversation," he says, looking up into my surprised face.

"A conversation…?"

"Yes. You know *something* about those armed monsters that we don't know, right? To take it a bit further, I'd guess you know everything about the recent incident."

I feel like the point of his spear has skewered me through the heart.

Finn Deimne, Braver. Aside from his fighting ability, he is famous for his levelheaded leadership abilities even when facing the Irregulars of the Dungeon's depths—in other words, for his sharp mind.

Just how much of the truth has he discerned already? What does he know, and what information does he want? Is he an enemy, or might he be an ally?

My wildly beating heart prevents me from thinking clearly. Flustered, I stare at him.

"I consider what happened the other day to have been a small misunderstanding. If we'd been sharing information, things probably would have gone differently."

I rub my right hand over my chest. Finn is right that there might have been a wiser way to approach that situation. If I had told the members of *Loki Familia* everything during our encounter, the outcome might have been different.

But the instant I decided to rescue Wiene, my body moved of its own accord. *Instinct*is the only word for it.

And no matter what anyone says, I'm certain Finn was the one who butchered her during her rampage.

Mercilessly, deaf to any pleas.

When I saw those blue eyes looking down on us from the roof as he threw his long spear, I immediately discarded the option of negotiating.

As a captain, Finn is a different breed. Even more of a realist than Lilly, he is able to objectively assess any situation and arrive at a decision without letting his personal feelings get in the way. He weighs his options neutrally, ruthlessly, and cruelly.

If it was in the interest of a greater cause, he'd discard me without a second thought.

"Plus, things are different now," Finn says.

He's right. Things *are*different now.

There is no out-of-control Wiene. No imminent threat to ordinary civilians. We have no reason to oppose each other. Putting aside the rest of *Loki Familia*, if only Finn would show me in some way that he understands the Xenos…

I'm beginning to realize that Finn holds complete control over our current conversation. Still, I trust him, and I'm wavering over whether or not to open up about the Xenos.

"Bell Cranell. If you know something, I want you to tell me."

"I, uh…"

If I can ask for his cooperation…wouldn't it be okay to tell him?

My lips that have been sealed shut begin to crack open…when we are suddenly interrupted.

“Hey, Bell! What a coincidence!”

““!””

The cheerful voice echoes down the blind alley.

“Lord Hermes…?”

“Yes, yes indeed, it is I, Hermes. What are you up to back here? Lost, perhaps? Or maybe young Bell is out collecting information in Daedalus Street as well?”

Wearing his winged traveling cap, Hermes approaches us with a sprightly step.

“Oh ho, Braver. Were you two in the middle of something?” he says, as if he’s just noticed Finn hiding in my shadow.

“…No, no, we’re just finishing up, God Hermes,” Finn answers, searching the god’s smiling face.

After a moment, he sighs as if he’s given up on something and starts to walk away.

I feel flustered as he passes in front of me. As he leaves, he looks toward me.

“Bell Cranell. Do you have the key?”

“…?”

At first, I don’t understand what Finn means. But an instant later, I shiver in surprise.

The key…Does he mean the Orb of Knossos?

An image of the magic item floats before my eyes. As I think of the ball inscribed with the glyph *D*—which I don't have access to at the moment—my expression grows tense. Finn smiles at me.

"Never mind if you don't know about it. Forget I said anything," he says, and walks out of the alley.

I watch his small form disappear into the tangle of streets, then turn to Hermes.

"Lord Hermes, what are you doing he—?"

"Bell."

Before I can finish my question, he puts a hand on my shoulder and brings his face close to mine.

"It would be best if you didn't tell *Loki Familia*about the Xenos."

"!"

I am doubly surprised, first by the word *Xenos*coming out of his mouth and second by the nature of his advice. He continues in a low voice.

"Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it won't make a difference even if you do tell them. Even if they know the Xenos are intelligent, in the end *Loki Familia*will inevitably choose to annihilate them."

"…!"

"And even if they ask for your cooperation, I suspect they'll just end up using you."

He continues with a firm voice and a serious face.

"On this one point, you will not see eye to eye with the *Loki*

*Familia*Braver commands. I'd be willing to bet on it."

I gulp at the god's declaration.

Having said what he needed to say, he steps back and smiles kindly if ambiguously.

"You know, I've been involved in the Xenos incident myself, at Ouranos's request," Hermes says.

"…! At Ouranos's request?"

"Yes. I'm trying to track down where the Xenos have gone."

My shock does not subside. Hermes seems to be showing all his cards.

"At the moment, Asfi and the others haven't been able to track them down—though I've heard they were spotted in the sewers. The downfall of the Sage, I suppose you could say."

The downfall of the Sage…How can I question Hermes when he even knows about Fels? I decide that he must share my knowledge of the situation.

"But when…?"

"For quite a while. I think I knew about the Xenos before you did. We've been acting quietly behind the scenes up until now."

"So, then…What did your familia do when they found out about the talking monsters?"

"As you might guess, some were quite shaken by it. But now, they consider it part of their work. As long as they profess to be neutral, the word of the client is absolute. More than anything, though, it's because their leader—me—is a certain type of guy."

As I stand before the foolishly grinning Hermes, I imagine Asfi

letting out an exhausted sigh. I can't help a tight-lipped smile myself.

"We're working independently, but you can consider us allies," says the still-smiling god with a wink.

At the word *allies*, a sense of extreme relief washes over me. I suppose it's a sign of just how far I've been backed into a corner…

"Oh, Beeeeell!"

The goddess is calling me.

"You're all the way back here, are you? You never came back, so I had to go looking for you. Was everything all right?"

"Uh…Sorry, Goddess. I'm fine."

"Oh, what a relief. I was worried…but why is Hermes here?"

The relieved goddess, who has walked up to us, looks at Hermes quizzically.

"Ha-ha-ha! So sorry, Hestia, I was just borrowing young Bell for a moment to have a conversation." He laughs as if he was just joking around. "Well, I'll let you take over the role of guard. Hestia, keep him safe!" he says and walks off.

"…Bell, what were you talking with Hermes about?"

"Well…"

As I explain our conversation, the goddess strokes her chin.

"I'd heard that Hermes and his familia had received a request from Ouranos, but…"

"Oh really?"

“Yes. So I guess they’ve been working to help the Xenos…”

The goddess’s words trail off, and she looks in the direction that Hermes disappeared. She appears to be suspicious of the god for not even trying to have a proper discussion with her. I follow her gaze, myself.

As we stand there, a single bead of water falls onto my shoulder.

An instant later, the blanket of clouds covering the city bursts into the sound of rain.

The droplets begin descending, each to its own destination, changing shape as it falls.



“Ugh, rain again…”

The werewolf Bete snorted and shook his head at the patter of raindrops.

“If only it hadn’t rained after the commotion, the animal people might have been able to use their noses to find the monsters by now,” said the Amazon Tione.

“This damn rain has totally washed away the scent…Shit,” Bete replied.

“Werewolves are always useless just when you need them most.”

“We’re better than Amazons, who just stand around doing nothing.”

““What did you say?””

At their encampment in the Labyrinth District, members of *Loki Familia*paused for a moment as the downpour began. The faction's leaders were gathered there for a meeting.

The dwarf Gareth sighed at Tione and Bete, who were glaring at each other with unveiled irritation. Next to them, Tione's sister, Tiona, was flopped down on the stone pavement with arms and legs outstretched, soaking in the shower.

"What's with you, Tiona? Are you worn out or something?"

"I'm not worn out, but my hands and arms are killin' me from banging on that adamantite wall for so long. Then, as soon as we dug through it, we got ordered to fill it in again! Finn's a real slave driver."

"That's just the kind of situation we're in. Put up with it," Finn said. He had returned to the encampment just as Tiona was waving around her red hands and complaining about him.

"How did it go, Finn? Were you able to talk to Bell Cranell?" asked Riveria, who had been waiting for him.

"Yeah. We met, but we were interrupted before we finished," he answered, walking into one of the tents that had been set up.

"He wouldn't say anything…but I'm fairly certain he's hiding something. He knew about Knossos, although he doesn't seem to have the key."

The question-and-answer session may have ended unsuccessfully, but Finn had been watching Bell carefully, and now he spoke with confidence. Unlike the still-green captain of *Hestia Familia*, the prum was able to make off with quite a bit of information after even a short exchange.

"There's no question he's at the center of this mess," he declared, addressing the faction leaders gathered in the tent.

"…"

The golden-haired, golden-eyed Sword Princess Aiz responded with stony silence to the words of her leader.

"So…" Riveria said.

"Yes," Finn answered with a nod as the others looked on intently. "As we planned, please watch Bell Cranell's movements."

"The Xenos, and then Knossos…"

Outside the windows, rain veiled the street. The Amazon Aisha glanced at the unceasing downpour before returning her gaze to inside the room.

"So you're saying the mess with those two things forms the crux of the events that took place four days ago?" the elf Lyu asked.

"Yes, exactly," answered the human Asfi, her aqua-blue hair shimmering as she nodded.

The three women were alone in an outbuilding of The Benevolent Mistress that served as Lyu's room. Asfi had arrived with Aisha in tow, saying she had something to talk to Lyu about. Since Lyu didn't have any customers needing her attention at the moment, she had asked permission of Mia, then led them to the room where they currently sat. Asfi had begun by telling the other two about the events on the eighteenth floor that instigated the disturbance.

"But what about those circles under your eyes…Are you okay?" Aisha asked her, noting the impressively large, dark puffs.

"…I'm fine. It's just that our selfish deity is always driving me so hard. He's even doing it right now! Don't worry, Aisha, you'll get used to it," Asfi replied, a nihilistic smile momentarily spoil-

ing her beautiful face. Uneasy at her exhausted appearance, Aisha backed away slightly.

Lyu had been observing their exchange.

"So why are you telling us this now?" she asked in order to move the conversation along, looking grave.

"Hermes is making unreasonable demands again…Ahem, in any case, he wants to calm down the current situation, but he doesn't have enough people to do it. He wants your help."

"Why didn't he tell us everything during the mission?" Aisha said with a mixture of disgust and dissatisfaction. Asfi's reply was straightforward.

"With regards to the Xenos, he just decided that was extraneous information. At the time, the monsters were wild with rage, and even the clients were unable to control them or figure out what was going on. Even if a confrontation was inevitable, the clients didn't want anyone to be killed because knowledge of the creatures had distracted them. As for the latter…We only found out about it after the incident."

After all, the second entrance to the Dungeon was the product of Daedalus's obsessive determination.

As Asfi discussed Knossos, Aisha and Lyu listened silently. They both seemed at the very least shocked by this news of talking, intelligent monsters. Aisha, however, frankly expressed her feelings—which were in line with the aversion to monsters latent in all humans.

"…Those Xenos—is that what you called them? They may be able to talk and they may be intelligent, but I still can't understand why someone would save a monster. They're not the kind of creature a person wants to empathize with…especially ones like that black minotaur," she spat out provocatively.

Aisha rubbed her left arm and her ribs. Although she was fully recovered now, the bones in her arm had been pulverized in the incident, and her ribs had also been broken. She narrowed her eyes sharply. They revealed no terror of the glossy black creature that had dealt her a crushing defeat, only anger and humiliation.

"...It is the desire of the clients, who are also our source of information, that we aid the Xenos. As long as you are a member of Lord Hermes's familia, please comply without a fuss."

"I'm not a very quick study, you know, and if I don't like something, I just may throw a fit. And by the way, who are these 'clients' you keep mentioning?"

"Let's just say they are part of the Guild," Asfi replied to the rebellious Aisha. She squeezed one eye shut as she spoke, her head aching.

"By the way, these monsters that we're talking about...Bell Cranell has also taken pity on them," she added.

"...Ah, I see," Aisha said, tugging at her long black hair as if Bell's name had led her to a realization. The reason for his ejection from the mission team and his actions on Daedalus Street all suddenly made sense.

"Understood. I'll do as you say," she said with a sigh. The Amazon still felt she had not repaid her debt to the boy.

Asfi stepped closer to Lyu, who had been absorbed in silent thought.

"Leon, I have a bargain to make with you."

"..."

"If you cooperate with us, we will give you information on the remnants of the Evils."

"!"

"It seems the last dregs have been hiding out in Knossos. As soon as the current situation is resolved, we'll search the Dungeon and collect the information you want."

"...Can you really do that?"

"Sooner or later, Lord Hermes will order a survey. I assure you we will do it," Asfi answered, pushing her silver glasses up with one finger.

Lyu considered her offer, then nodded quietly. She believed Perseus.

Asfi looked hard at Lyu and Aisha.

"I will provide detailed instructions very soon. For the time being, please wait."

"—Yes indeed, I am Ganesha!"

The god in the elephant mask struck a bizarre heroic pose as he made this announcement.

"I know that, Ganesha," replied Shakti Varma, sounding fully accustomed to her god's eccentric behavior. The beautiful indigo-haired woman was sitting up in bed in a room in *Ganesha Familia*'s home, known as Iam Ganesha. She took the basket of fruit her god was holding out to her in his chosen pose and placed it on the sideboard.

"How are you feeling, Shakti?! I've come to check on you!"

"I'm already fully recovered. I believe you know that, Ganesha."

Shakti had been spending her time in this room ever since the

recent string of incidents. She had been seriously injured during the mission to the eighteenth floor and was still recuperating.

Or at least, that was what she had told the others.

“I can move just fine. Why don’t you tell me why you’re keeping me in this place for days on end?” she continued.

“Because all you’ve been doing lately is working! I don’t want people to think my familia is some kind of labor camp. So this time, I thought you’d better do some extreme recuperating—”

“Ganesha,” Shakti said, interrupting her leader’s peculiar words.

At the captain’s quiet voice, Ganesha dropped his joking attitude.

“…I felt like you needed some time to sort things out. Especially after I told you about the Xenos,” he said.

Shakti was one of the few familia members he had told about the Xenos. When the Guild ordered her to tame the monsters during the mission, too, she had obeyed only after taking into consideration the divine will of her god.

Ganesha sat down on a chair and looked Shakti in the eye.

“I’m sorry.”

He placed his hands on his knees and bowed deeply.

“I made an unreasonable request, and it’s been a burden on you.”

Shakti shook her head.

“Ganesha, don’t apologize. We were the ones who fell short. We were unable to stop the monsters when they were out of con-

trol."

Ganesha raised his head and looked at her from the depths of the elephant mask.

"What did you feel when you faced the Xenos?"

"…Fierce anger, and also sympathy," Shakti explained frankly, returning Ganesha's gaze. "After I heard *Ikelos Familia*was capturing monsters and selling them off, I understood it very clearly—the nature of that unfamiliar sympathy I had felt in the midst of trying to tame them, I mean."

"…"

"Those monsters are capable of rage over what's done to their brethren…just like us, like people."

Perhaps it was her long experience as a tamer that allowed her to understand the monsters' feelings and sympathize with them.

Shakti looked out the window into the rain.

"Ganesha, you were right that I needed time to sort things out. I'm upset right now. About the very existence of such monsters. And then the fact that when Ilta and her group learned about it, too, they faltered over what to do…That moment of hesitation cost our friends their lives…It scares me."

She accepted Ganesha's attitude of friendship toward the Xenos, but still, she was frightened. She was right to be at a loss.

Should they abandon the Xenos or save them?

If she were forced to choose, she would of course pick the former. She was not a fool.

Ganesha had been quietly watching the faint reflection of his familia member in the mirror as she lowered her eyes. Now he

spoke.

“The road to Neo Ganesha, mastery of man and monster, is a difficult one.”

“…What are you talking about?”

Her serious reflections were abruptly interrupted by an absurd phrase she’d never heard before, Shakti turned toward Ganesha as if she had just woken from a dream.

His mind elsewhere, he continued in a solemn voice.

“I am still Ganesha, man of the people.”

Shakti widened her eyes.

“I regret doing this to Ouranos, but at the moment, the safety of the children is the absolute priority.”

“Ganesha…”

“We will no longer participate in the search for the Xenos. Instead, if violence erupts between them and the adventurers, we will protect the civilians. We will protect the smiles of the children.”

Ganesha rose from his chair, walked over to Shakti, and looked down at her as if to ask whether she was ready to go. She nodded energetically and stood up from the bed.

“We’ll increase the number of people working security to cover the whole city. I will join them as well! I will dispel their worries with my happy-go-lucky appearance!” Ganesha exclaimed.

“No, Ganesha, we’ll be fine without you. Ilta and her group are still at home, right?”

“Yes. When I left them to their own devices, they very proudly

announced they were going out to chase the Xenos again! I told them, 'Since Shakti is resting, you guys rest, too!' I said if they broke their promise, I'd magically remodel our home again!"

"So that's why they've been so quiet…"

Shakti and Ganesha left the room and walked around the home shaped like a giant, peculiar elephant. As they checked to make sure the familia's core force were all present, including the first-tier adventurer Ilta, they discussed their next moves.

Suddenly, Ganesha lifted his head and gazed out the window of the hallway they were walking down.

"What concerns me is how the other gods and goddesses are taking the current situation," he said.

"Do you think the other deities are aware of the Xenos?"

Miach turned his back to the rain outside the window as he addressed Hephaistos and Takemikazuchi.

The three were in *Hephaistos Familia*'s weaponry store on Northwest Main Street. Leaving the information-collecting to their familia members, Miach and Takemikazuchi had come to see Hephaistos in her third-floor office.

"Perhaps not clearly…I don't think they've realized yet that these are monsters with intellect. But they do sense that they are out of the ordinary…"

"Or rather, they're expecting to find *something* different about them…"

The three gods had learned about Wiene, along with the main events of the past week, from their friend Hestia. Now all three were frowning and speaking in concerned voices to differing degrees.

"What if they do learn about the Xenos?"

"If you think about it in terms of who's currently in Orario…"

"Not many of the deities are as inflexible as Ares, but then again not many are moderates like Hestia, either. I'm thinking twenty percent will call for expelling them, ten percent for protecting them, and the other seventy will stir up trouble," Miach said.

Takemikazuchi and Hephaistos continued to frown.

"Who knows what they'll do in pursuit of their personal entertainment. There's a high likelihood that things will spiral out of control. It may be best to conceal as much information about the Xenos as we can…"

"I see…You're saying it would only invite unnecessary chaos."

The implication was that very few deities in Orario actually acted the part—although these three didn't go so far as to claim they were model gods, either.

"Damn," Hephaistos grumbled as she rubbed her eye patch. Next to her, Takemikazuchi slumped wearily, and Miach sighed.

"Bell is a source for worry these days, too. To have gone and acted that flagrantly…I'm sure the other gods know he knows something, and they're watching him," Miach fretted. The other two deities shared his concerned expression.

"Probably so…"

"It's a bad situation…"

The red-haired, red-eyed Hephaistos pushed aside her bangs.

"I'll be honest with you. I'm reluctant to come down on the side of saving the Xenos," she said, abruptly changing the mood

in the room.

"Hey now, what are you saying?"

"Admit it, I'm right. Knowing Hestia's personality as I do, I can understand how she couldn't leave that orphaned vouivre to die. But as long as they're on the surface, the Xenos are a poison, plain and simple. At this very moment, they're doing nothing but causing chaos, right?"

"That's—"

"Come on, Takemikazuchi, you haven't talked to your followers about the Xenos, have you?"

Takemikazuchi had interrupted Hephaistos in a surprised voice, but now he pressed his lips together.

Any movement to integrate the Xenos would ignite strife—even more so among the children. Takemikazuchi knew that, and that was why he hadn't shared the truth with Ouka or Chigusa.

On the other hand, Hestia's children—who had accepted the presence of the Xenos—were mavericks, and that was precisely why they were on this precipice.

"Honestly, I don't even know if the Xenos *are worth saving*!" Hephaistos said, not concealing her feelings about the irregular Dungeon monsters whose existence not even the gods had foreseen.

Miach, who had been listening with eyes closed, spread his hands and looked at the other two.

"...Hmmm. Well, let us come to some conclusion."

He shook his waist-length sea-blue hair, his voice melting into the sound of the rain.

“Our decision is—”

“So you’ve assigned it to *Loki Familia*, have you?”

The elderly god’s stern voice echoed through the altar.

At the sound, the plump figure kneeling before him curled up like a piglet.

“Y-yes, sir, that is what I did! I took the liberty of determining that they were the best suited to protecting Daedalus Street at the moment!”

The sound of the rain did not penetrate the underground temple built beneath Guild Headquarters. In the Chamber of Prayers, illuminated by four torches, Ouranos sat still as a statue while looking down on Royman, head of the Guild, who was dripping sweat onto the stone floor.

“With regards to Knossos, I made him promise to not only prevent any leaks about its existence but also provide us with information! Braver will keep his word! It is practically as if he is under our control!”

“…What are you hiding from me, Royman?”

The elf gave a start at the words of the Guild’s true master, who had so easily seen through his deception.

“Is it the key?”

“…I—I forgot to mention it. I have ordered them to hand the key to Knossos over to the Guild if they find it…”

Royman was drenched in a cold sweat, but Ouranos’s voice did not change.

“Make sure they give you all the information about Knossos.

Once we have the key, we will find the right time and then organize a survey. It is the Guild, not individuals or familias, that oversees the heritage of Daedalus."

"Yes, sir!"

"I will overlook the matter of *Loki Familia*. Now exit!"

The quivering Royman complied.

As he walked unsteadily out of the room, a god with hair the color of flames descended the stairs leading from the surface. He patted Royman on the shoulder as they passed each other.

"Royman is a shrewd one, eh?" Hermes said once he had entered the Chamber of Prayers.

"He possesses twice the greed of anyone else. But he's capable, and his desire to see to the city's development is sincere," Ouranos replied matter-of-factly with a slight smile.

"So it seems *Loki Familia*will be remaining in Daedalus Street, eh? Well, as long as Lady Freya is encamped in Babel, the obvious choice for Braver and his people is to stay and wait for the Xenos on their only alternative path of retreat."

"Yes…And as long as things remain in this state, Ganesha will probably act to protect the lives of the residents before all else," Ouranos said. Although he did not say it out loud, he had accepted that it would be impossible at this point to rearrange the various groups.

Because he was in a position of leadership, issuing too forceful an order for *Loki Familia*to withdraw would undermine trust in him. His continued reign was a symbol of peace in the city, so he needed to avoid such a situation.

Furthermore, if the monsters that had emerged onto the sur-

face needed to be brought down, no one was more suited for the job than *Loki Familia*.

"Well, for now I'd like you to report on the current situation, since you have taken on the task of suppressing the disturbance."

Hermes proceeded to the center of the altar, where the deity of the Guild sat on a chair, and removed his traveling hat.

"The Xenos are currently moving around in the sewers beneath the city. Reports of sightings are increasing, but…thanks to the bounties, the adventurers are not cooperating with one another. That may be our only bit of luck."

"What about the Xenos who were separated from Fels?"

"I haven't found out anything about them—not even how many were separated. Some of them may have been captured already by adventurers or less scrupulous gods."

As long as no one came forward saying they had done so, it would be impossible to know for sure.

"Well, a number of adventurers found the black minotaur and intended to kill it, only to be attacked themselves…But even now that they've recovered, they're still trembling as if they've had a terrible nightmare, and it seems they won't tell their full story."

Sighing, Hermes held up two fingers.

"Options are limited for the Xenos."

Under the current circumstances, the runaways had two goals. First: meet up with their brethren who had been separated from them. Second: get to the Dungeon entrance. The latter was the most important. If the Xenos were to survive, they somehow had to return to the Dungeon.

There were two possible routes to get there.

The first was through the center of the city to Babel, where they would use the large pit leading to the Dungeon. The second was through Daedalus Street in the southwestern part of the city, where Knossos was located.

"If they head for Central Park, there will inevitably be a battle with the adventurers…and no one knows how *Freya Familia*will act. Fels probably won't let them choose that option."

"I tried to negotiate with Freya myself in various ways, but as you'd suspect, she didn't seem inclined to listen to what I had to say."

Hermes sighed and smiled bitterly at Ouranos's mention of the silver-haired queen reigning over Babel.

"In that case, the Xenos will likely head for Daedalus Street, where they can use the terrain to their advantage…"

"But *Loki Familia*will block their way to Knossos."

In other words, if they made use of the Labyrinth District—which was fully as convoluted as the Dungeon—they perhaps would be able to avoid the watchful eyes of the adventurers. But once they had passed through, the greatest difficulty would be waiting.

"I knew it before, but this is a really tough situation," said Hermes with a detached laugh.

"And what can you tell me about Knossos?" Ouranos said, directing Hermes back to his report.

"According to adventurers in Rivira, the monsters who attacked on the eighteenth floor joined up with the monsters who appeared on the surface. Many of the familias have realized there is a second entrance to the Dungeon."

“And adventurers are gathering in Daedalus Street?”

“Yes. Some of them seem to be taking initiative to search for the entrance on their own, but…Well, that area is Daedalus’s creation, and so far only *Loki Familia*has found it.”

“Hermes, what about your familia…?”

“We have already thoroughly investigated the matter.”

“!”

As if to offer proof, he pulled out a book.

“It’s called Daedalus’s Notebook.”

For the first time, the normally self-possessed Ouranos widened his eyes.

“Before I got Ikelos to let *Loki Familia*catch him, I had him give this to me. It has a drawing of the layout of Knossos—including, of course, the location of the entrances.”

“…”

“I had my children investigate to make sure the information in the drawing wasn’t incorrect. They had to use both the Hades Head and the stink bag…Asfi complained to me that she was afraid for her life dodging *Loki Familia*to do the survey. She even hit me.”

It was Hermes who had sniffed out Ikelos from his hiding place. According to him, he had cornered the other deity and compelled him to give in to a number of demands, one of which included handing over Daedalus’s Notebook. Over the four days since the incident, his children had been surveying the area around Knossos on his orders, keeping quiet and staying in the shadows so that *Loki Familia*wouldn’t notice them.

Having explained matters up to this point, Hermes drew closer to the wizened god. Then he held out the book.

"I'll leave this with you. You need it, don't you?"

"..."

Ouranos squeezed his eyes shut as Hermes narrowed his own yellow-orange ones.

The flames in the pine torches crackled fiercely. Surrounded by a swirl of sparks, the wizened god reached out to accept the ancient volume, along with all the consequences it entailed, and slipped it into his pocket.

Hermes flashed a smile and backed down from the altar.

"Hermes...What do you plan to do now?"

"Well. As I said before, my concern is with Bell."

Hermes had brought up the matter with Ouranos two days earlier in this very room. At that time, he'd stated very clearly his divine will as a deity. He felt it would be wrong for Bell to lose his name and honor and then withdraw from the action, and therefore Hermes was betting everything on the boy. People's disappointment in Bell and their labeling him an "enemy of the people" would only get in the way of his progress down the noble path.

That was why Hermes was acting now behind the scenes.

"I've ordered Asfi and the others to do a number of things. Beyond that, it depends on how the boy reacts..."

Hermes was certain Bell would be unable to sit by and do nothing. He laughed lightly, as if he were watching the situation from afar.

"Let me ask *you*a question, Ouranos. The Xenos, and the ru-

ined Sage who is leading them…What do you think they will do next?"

"…"

Ouranos at first said nothing in response to the question about the assistant with whom he had spent countless centuries. Finally, after a long pause, he answered.

"As for what Fels will most likely do next…"

"Lido, can I have some of your blood?" Fels asked.

Even in the subterranean dimness, the black-clad mage could hear the sound of the rain.

"Blood?"

"Yes. If I were physically whole, I wouldn't need to ask you, but…"

"Well, you are a skeleton, after all."

"Don't say that," the mage responded with a sidelong glance. Lido scratched his arm with his sharp claws.

Fels withdrew a feather pen from his pocket and dipped it in the red blood from the ragged wound.

As the blood soaked in, the feather turned red, and a similarly colored liquid oozed from the tip.

"Is that a magic item?" Lido asked, watching Fels's movements with interest.

"Yes, although I didn't invent it myself."

Fels began to write on a sheet of parchment with the item, which enabled blood to be used in place of ink.

“Who was separated from us?”

“Aruru, Helga, Lett, Fia, and then Asterios…Fia was with us, but when things got too intense, she fell from the sky…and Lett went after her,”the siren Rei said, listing the names of the al-miraj, hellhound, red-cap goblin, harpy, and minotaur.

She was sitting on the floor at a slight distance from Lido and Fels, talking to Wiene. They were in a sewer tunnel. Beyond its crumbling walls, the tunnel connected to what seemed to be a long-forgotten well, with broken barrels, buckets, and frayed ropes scattered in a corner. A gentle rain fell through the hole that connected to the surface. Other Xenos who had been wandering the city were resting nearby.

“So…you don’t know where Fia and the others are?” the vouivre asked, concerned for her brethren.

“No. We’ve walked this sewer from end to end, but there’s no scent of them…They may be hiding somewhere on the surface,”the gargoyle Gros replied.

Wiene’s stomach made a cute rumbling sound.

“I’m hungry…”

“It’s only natural. We’ve hardly eaten anything for the past few days…”

Naturally, monsters became hungry, too. For the Xenos, who would never eat a human, their current situation meant they hadn’t been able to eat properly at all. Wrapped in a robe that one of the fleeing adventurers had dropped, Wiene rubbed her slender bluish-white stomach.

Gros turned toward the black-clad mage, worried over their fading strength and missing brethren especially with no sign that they would be able to reunite.

“Fels. We’re not getting anywhere running from place to place like this. We need to…Hey, what are you doing?!”he exclaimed.

“I’m writing a letter,” Fels replied without stopping the crimson pen.

The mage finished his work without further explanation. The moment it was complete, a shadow rushed down the old well hole, just as if Fels had planned the timing.

Lido and the others instantly took up defensive positions, but Fels reached out an arm and restrained them.

“So you’ve finally managed to find us.”

An owl with one false eye had landed on the mage’s outstretched arm. It was a familiar spirit.

“If only my oculus hadn’t been destroyed in that battle, I would have summoned you sooner…”

Expressing his regrets over the fierce combat with *Ikelos Familia*in Knossos, Fels tied the completed letter around the owl’s foot.

“Fels, is that letter perhaps…?”

Fels nodded in response to Lido’s question and let go of the familiar. The owl stretched its wings and took off into the rainy sky, scattering white down from its wings.

“Our last hope.”



Like a late monsoon season, rain falls in unceasing sheets on Orario. But I doubt even this rain can wash away the tangled and hopeless mood gripping the city.

I gaze out the window of my room at the streets stretched beneath an ashen sky.

"..."

Though I've returned home with the goddess, I still can't escape a certain feeling.

Like I'm being watched.

The moment I left home, I sensed many eyes on me. At first I thought it was the townsfolk...but as I grew more sensitive to the gazes, another possibility began to whisper into my ear.

Something far less organic than either anger or mockery... Could it be surveillance?

Am I being watched? If so, is it me they're interested in? Or *Hestia Familia*as a whole?

I've been standing by the side of the window in order to conceal myself, but now I lean halfway out and scan the area around the building. Outside the iron fence enclosing our home, I glimpse a figure darting around the street corner and out of sight.

"Agh."

I step away from the window and leave the room. I hope I'm mistaken. My heart pounding unsteadily in my chest, I head for the place where the goddess and the others are gathered to tell them what I've been feeling.

"...?"

After hurrying down the hallway, I'm greeted by an unexpected sight.

Outside a window facing onto the courtyard, drenched in rain but nevertheless apparently waiting for someone, an owl is

perched in the middle of the garden.

The owl looks up as I stop in the hallway, and I see its eye. I start at the glitter of the quartz orb.

I turn on my heels and run down the stairs. As I step into the courtyard and walk up to the owl, it flutters onto my arm.

"What in the world…?"

A letter is tied to the owl's leg.

"A secret message from the Xenos…"

The clock on the living-room wall shows an evening hour. The entire of *Hestia Familia*has gathered here to look at the letter I received from Fels's familiar.

"The code is incredibly difficult to decipher, but…there's no mistaking it; this letter is a call for help from Fels and the Xenos."

Lilly is holding a dictionary pulled from the library in one hand. As she says, the letter is peppered with demi-human words, and at first glance, the sentences seem to be incoherent. They can be deciphered only by rearranging and recombining words from two different languages: the language of the prums, which includes the word *irregular*, and the language of the renarts, which includes the word *fool*. Only someone who knew the nature of the Xenos and Fels would be able to read the code.

With serious, tense expressions on their faces, the goddess, Lilly, Welf, Mikoto, and Haruhime gather around the table and look down at the letter.

"'We will try to reach Daedalus Street tomorrow night.' It seems they've been driven to take extremes…" says Welf, who has just emerged from the workshop, where he's been holed up since the incident.

“And, well, I am quite certain that right now, Daedalus Street…” says Haruhime, pressing her hand to her chest. Mikoto confirms her fears.

“Yes, Miss Haruhime. It’s full of adventurers, not to mention it’s *Loki Familia*’s encampment.”

The letter, whose red handwriting has not bled despite the rain, begins with an apology, then goes on to explain the situation that Fels and the Xenos are currently in and their plan for returning to the Dungeon. It ends with a call for help. The final sentence entreats us to somehow find a way to assist them again.

At first, Haruhime, Mikoto, and I are relieved to read that Wiene safely regained consciousness…but now we are all silent.

We stare at the letter on the table.

“…It’s like an invitation to destruction from some evil god,” Lilly mumbles dramatically. But it’s no exaggeration.

Given the situation in Orario right now, saving the Xenos is synonymous with turning every familia in the city against us.

I feel as if the momentary hush falling over the room is going to crush my heart.

The goddess breaks the silence.

“Let’s come up with a clear response right now. Are we going to save the Xenos or not?”

“…!”

She looks not at me but at Welf and the others. Before anyone else can open their mouth, I fire my words at the goddess’s averted face.

“Goddess!!…This is something for me alone to—”

“Bell, this isn’t just your problem anymore. The moment you, our captain, took action, it became the familia’s problem as well. So that’s enough double-talk from you.”

I feel like my heart seizes up at her apparent criticism of my behavior as leader.

She shifts her gaze from my frozen form and poses her question to Lilly and the others once again.

“Everyone, please make your choice. Will we be allies of the Xenos and live as outcasts? Or will we abandon them and return to our ordinary lives?”

This is the same choice I was faced with as well. I was caught between Wiene and *Loki Familia*, forced into a binary choice. Now the goddess is putting that choice to the others.

I don’t want them to choose either path. That is the true feeling in my deplorable heart.

I stand there like a criminal waiting for his verdict to be handed down, and my memories of the Labyrinth District mix with guilt over acting immorally.

“Lady Hestia,” Welf says, raising his hand. “Can I add one more option?”

“What would that be?”

“We move sneakily to bring those guys back to the Dungeon. That way we don’t get scolded or mocked.”

At first, I’m so stunned by his words I don’t comprehend them.

Welf is grinning, and the goddess, too, is smiling as if she’s just grasped everything fully.

“Look here.”

Welf draws a dagger from the sheath at his waist, his flame-red hair bouncing.

“This is a magic blade. I have three more in the workshop.”

“I thought that’s what you were up to when you were holed up in there all that time…” Lilly says, heaving a sigh. She looks at the deep-aqua blade as if she already knows all about it.

“I knew what we’d have to do, and I knew we didn’t have much time. In order to save the Xenos…Yes, I had to put aside my foolish pride. If we don’t have something like this, we won’t be able to get around the other adventurers.”

I am still frozen in place—although now it’s because of sheer surprise.

I can’t believe that Welf has announced so clearly he intends to save the Xenos.

“What’s with the strange face, Bell?” Welf says with a questioning look.

“Wh-what do you mean, what…?!” I can’t help shouting. “I abandoned you and did all that stuff without asking any of you!! And I caused our familia all kinds of trouble and pain as a result!! I…was so sure that all of you detested me…”

All the feelings and doubts I’ve kept locked up inside until now spew out uncontrollably.

I’m sorry. It’s not that I expect to be forgiven, but I’m sorry.

As I desperately try to get out those words, Welf beats me to it.

“Bell, I told you before. Don’t apologize.”

A memory springs to mind.

This is what familias do, right? Support one another.

Stir up all the trouble you want. I've got no room to complain.

That was what Welf said to me in this very room during the mission to escort Wiene to the twentieth floor. As I recall them, I can't help but feel moved.

"But if you'll let me scold you a bit…Next time, don't leave us behind, okay?"

Welf grins. Next to him, Mikoto crinkles her blue-violet eyes.

"Sir Bell, there's nothing wrong with you. Because no matter how much we thought it over, we definitely would have come to the same decision as you…All you did was get a head start on the rest of us."

I have no response to that. Next, Haruhime sneaks up quietly beside me.

"You were suffering this whole time, weren't you? My deepest apologies. I should have spoken with you sooner."

"Haruhime…"

"Thank you very much for rescuing Lady Wiene. I am truly happy," she says with wet eyes, her smile and words unfolding like cherry blossoms.

Their expressions are a mirror image of the tearful smiles Lido and the others showed me as they held the sleeping Wiene in their arms and thanked me.

Lilly has been watching as I talked with Welf and Mikoto and exchanged heartfelt looks with Haruhime.

"—Geez, you are all so softhearted!! I'm not ashamed to say it

—I feel differently than you! I am still completely against rescuing the monsters!!" she screeches, as if she has reached the limit of her tolerance.

Her face was turned away, but now she slowly widens her eyes and looks up at us.

"But…there's nothing to be done if the majority has decided otherwise."

"Lilly…"

A smile spreads over the prum girl's face like a sunflower.

"The idea of deserting Mr. Bell or of Mr. Bell deserting any of us…Well, I just don't like it. Anyway, I'm used to being an outcast. I'm not afraid of a bunch of disappointed stares," she says.

"…"

I haven't been able to look at them straight since the day I went behind their backs, and I now slowly turn to each one. Lilly, Welf, Mikoto, Haruhime.

Syr was right.

I have lost some things, but other things remain.

A single tear slides from my eye.

How many times have they saved me? How many times have I felt this way?

I'm so happy I met them…and that we became a familia.

"I'm sorry…Thank you," I say in a hoarse voice, pressing my arm against the flushed tip of my nose.

"…So it's decided. We will save the Xenos, all of us together!"

Our goddess, who has been watching us with kind eyes, brushes away the sentimental atmosphere with her bright announcement. We all nod in unison and smile as she gives voice to her divine will.

"I'll just say, though, that the situation isn't any better than it was before. Getting around the other adventurers, not to mention *Loki Familia*…Well, it's going to be even tougher than clearing a deep level in the Dungeon."

"So you're saying if we can do this, conquering the deep levels will be a piece of cake, right?" says Welf with a grin.

"Don't get carried away now," Lilly responds, glaring at him.

And with that typical exchange, the old *Hestia Familia*is back.

"We've got ourselves some fine opponents, that much is certain…In fact, they may be a bit too powerful," says Mikoto.

"Anything for the sake of Lady Wiene and the Xenos," replies Haruhime.

Both of them look resolute.

Everyone is already aligned toward the same goal.

"Okay, Bell, get us in the mood! Give us a few words, and speak up when you do!" Welf says, turning to flash me a fearless smile.

Piggybacking on his mood, the goddess is suddenly excited.

"Yeah, Welf, good idea! Let's all get in a circle!"

"Uh, that kind of thing is embarrassing…" says Lilly.

"Ha-ha, Supporter. This is an order from your leader. You must obey!"

“Of course, now of all times…!”

Mikoto and Haruhime giggle at the sight of the smug goddess and the grumbling Lilly.

As for me, I’m well past my bout of crying. I wipe my face and rush over to join the circle.

The goddess extends her arms into the middle, and everyone else does the same, overlapping their hands in the center. I follow their lead.

“Okay, then…Go ahead.”

I hesitate for just a second before deciding what I’ll say, then nod at the smiling faces turned my way. Under the eye of the owl perched on the back of a chair, my voice swells along with my thoughts.

“Let’s save Wiene and the Xenos!”

“Yeah!!”

The endless rain has lifted.



“We head for Knossos, where we’ll move in accord with Bell Cranell and his familia.”

Fels was addressing the Xenos, who were gathered in the crumbling sewer tunnel leading to the well.

“The adventurers…and *Loki Familia*may well discover us, but the only possible route is to infiltrate Daedalus’s legacy. We could probably also take the underground route that leads out of the city, but that is most likely a single road with no forks. *Loki Familia*will unquestionably have strengthened their defenses, and if

they are lying in wait for us, we will be helpless."

"You say we'll move in accord with Bell, but will that really be possible? I don't think we'll be able to just wing it…"

"If they agree with what I wrote in the letter, then sooner or later Bell Cranell and his familia will link up with us. For now, I want you to trust in my decision and theirs."

"And what about those who were separated?"

"All we can do is send them a signal. The adventurers may have already guessed our plans, but we will send out a message and all push toward Daedalus Street at once."

As the siren Rei, the gargoyle Gros, and the other Xenos questioned Fels about the plan that would determine their collective fate, the mage responded to each without hesitation.

During this exchange, Lido alone stood staring glumly at his feet.

"Lido…? What's wrong?" Wiene asked, noticing his dejected mood.

"It's nothing; I just feel bad because we're depending so heavily on Bellucchi and his familia…We're causing them so much trouble," he said, then adding in a murmur between his fangs, "I feel so ashamed."

"Lido. I understand how you're feeling, but so long as Ouranos is unable to act openly, there are very few people we can go to for help. All we can do is cling to *Hestia Familia*…" Fels said.

"I know, I know…but still."

"Lido."

Wiene stretched out a hand and stroked the lizardman's arm,

her fingers gently catching hold of the scarlet scales.

"You know what Haruhime told me? On the surface, there's a story called 'The Grateful Snow Spirit.'"

"Grateful…?"

"Yes. To thank the people who saved her, the spirit brought them all sorts of things. So one day, we, too…"

The garnet-like red stone in her forehead flashing, Wiene beamed with joy.

"…we, too, can give lots of help to Bell and the others who help us, right?"

Lido looked in surprise at the innocent eyes that smiled up at him. The girl who had cried incessantly after being separated from Bell was nowhere to be seen.

"Wiene…you've changed."

"?"

Turning to ash and falling into the abyss of death seemed to have awakened her—albeit unconsciously—to the cruelty of mankind and also to the equally powerful beauty of their potential for kindness. She had been held and fulfilled by the humble dream in the heart of the boy. She had been saved by the kindness—perhaps the foolish kindness—of a single person. The vouivre had been pulled from the dream she had held through many lives and found a new desire—a wish to take the kindness that had enveloped her and give it back to someone other than herself.

Yes, she had changed since meeting the boy.

Standing before the puzzled Wiene, Lido squinted his brilliant yellow eyes as if blinded by light.

“Yes, you’re right…If we get through this, we’ll have a lot of favors to return to Bellucchi and his familia!”

“Yes!”

Rei, Gros, and the other Xenos watched gently as Lido and Wiene smiled at each other. Even Fels’s black robe shook, as if the skeleton within were laughing.

“…Let’s get back to talking about how to get to Knossos,” the mage said, withdrawing a magic item engraved with a *D*from the dark robe’s depths.

“Our only advantage is that we possess this key.”

Fels held up the Orb of Knossos, embedded within the ingot and passed down through the Daedalus lineage.

This orb would allow them to open and shut the orichalcum door.

“Is that the one I stole from the man I killed…?”Gros asked.

“If Asterios is alive, he should have the other one…”says Rei.

The key that Fels held was the one that had belonged to Glenn of *Ikelos Familia*. After Glenn threw the cursed spear at Wiene during her rampage, Gros killed him and Fels took the key from his hand. The other key—the one Bell had taken from Lyu’s pouch—had made its way back to the black minotaur.

“The hunting adventurers and *Loki Familia*have probably not been able to get their hands on one of these.”

“In other words…”

“Yes. As long as we know the location of the entrances, we can enter Knossos from any of them. And once we close the door behind us, even *Loki Familia*will not be able to follow us.”

In other words, if Fels and the Xenos made it to Knossos, it would be their victory.

Illuminated by a dim ray of light that pierced the darkness, a lamia and a troll clapped excitedly.

"All that remains is to do as I said at the beginning. Rely on Bell Cranell and his familia to help us reach Knossos."

"When you say *help us*, do you mean they'll meet up with us?"

"No—Bell will act as our decoy."

The instant Fels said so, the Xenos—among whom Bell's popularity was currently sky-high—raised their eyes toward the mage one after another. Lido, Rei, and even Gros frowned, and tears came to Wiene's eyes.

"Fels. Do you plan to use Bell and his familia again…?"

"What scum."

"You dirty old bag of bones."

"I hate you, Fels!"

"Wait a minute, stop slandering me! My bones have nothing to do with it!! And, Wiene, your tears are killing me, so will you please listen to everything I have to say first?!" the living skeleton shrieked. The scorn of the siren, the harsh words of the gargoyle and lizardman, and more than anything, the tearful glare of the vouivre were too much to bear.

A more detailed explanation of *decoy*soon followed.

"Due to the recent string of events, Bell Cranell stands out too much. Even now he is the target of criticism and envy throughout the city, and probably suspicion as well. But we will use that to our advantage."

"...By creating a diversion?"Gros murmured.

"Yes. By acting independently of us, he'll draw away the attention of the adventurers."

The gods and some of the other forces in the city most likely had sensed that Bell Cranell was at the center of the current affair, Fels explained. While their attention was turned toward the young adventurer, Fels and the Xenos would move stealthily toward Knossos.

Lido and the others seemed satisfied with this explanation, but Wiene looked sad.

"So does that mean we won't get to see Bell?"

"It does. Please find some way to accept that, Wiene," Fels urged her.

The mage in black then explained the core of the plan.

"We will shift the attention of *Loki Familia*to Bell Cranell."

"...And that's probably what our opponent is thinking."

Leaders and lower-level members of *Loki Familia*alike had gathered in their encampment in a corner of the Labyrinth District, where Finn was conducting a meeting.

"The armed monsters will probably use Bell Cranell as a diversion and attempt to enter Knossos, so we'll pretend that we've fallen for their trick and lay a trap in a different location. But the important thing will be to pay attention to what's happening in the opposite direction of Bell Cranell."

Now that the rain had lifted, the curtain of night had fallen over Daedalus Street. The faces of the adventurers were illuminated by phosphorescence from the magic-stone lamps they had

hung around the campsite. As Finn explained their next moves, a buzz passed through their ranks.

"Hey, Finn, is that mangy rabbit really working with the monsters?" the werewolf Bete asked with a sour look.

"In a bad mood, eh, Bete?" Riveria said.

"Shut your mouth!"

Finn watched Bete as he snapped back at the high elf. Though he was staring at him, however, he worded his response with the silent Aiz in mind.

"At the very least, Bell Cranell is in a position to be used, whether of his own free will or because they're fooling him. In any case, Bell Cranell cannot be our ally this time…Please be aware of that."

Aiz and Tiona—both of whom had accompanied Bell during his special training for the war games—appeared to believe that would be difficult. Sitting beside the mute golden-eyed, golden-haired Sword Princess, the artless Amazonian girl locked her hands behind her head.

"Uh, I didn't really get that, but basically you're saying that if we let the Argonaut distract us, everything goes down the drain?"

"Yes. Of course, we can't just let him do whatever he wants, so right now Cruz and a couple of the others are watching him."

"Better yet, Captain, why not capture him before he has a chance to do anything?" Tione suggested with her typical Amazonian penchant for wild ideas.

Finn responded with a wry smile.

"Well, despite how everyone is treating Bell Cranell like a villain right now, there's no definite proof against him. If we did

something like that, I think we'd end up getting criticized ourselves. The Guild already has its eye on us. It would be scary if we got on the wrong side of the goddess Hephaistos, as she's friends with *Hestia Familia*."

Tione frowned before continuing undeterred.

"Seems like a complicated mess. But, Captain, one more question. I know the armed monsters are highly intelligent, but are they really smart enough to come up with a strategy like that…?"

"They've got a leader of some sort…Isn't that right, Gareth?"

"They do indeed. When the battle took place here, I watched from the top of a building. I saw someone wearing a black robe. I'm not sure if it was a monster or a person…but it seemed to be some kind of tamer," Gareth responded to Finn's question. This answer satisfied Tione.

Suddenly, Tiona spoke up as if she had just remembered something.

"Speaking of which, are you sure we don't need to search the sewers? The other adventurers have caught sight of the monsters down there a few times, you know."

"That would divide our forces. If our defenses here in Orario are too thin and the monsters break through, it will all be over. They've probably been letting people see them intentionally over the past few days with precisely that goal in mind."

The wise prum leading *Loki Familia*had correctly analyzed Fels's plans. For the monsters, his power of intuition was a nightmare.

"More than anything, we must be wary of the black minotaur… Even if he has been wounded, we cannot let our guard down," he continued. This was his deepest concern.

At the mention of the beast, the mood in the room grew tense. Bete and Tione raised their eyebrows, and even Aiz stiffened.

"Well, if you hadn't lost your temper, Tione, we could have brought it down real quick," Tiona grumbled to her sister, who had gone into a frenzy during the battle, completely undermining any attempt to work together.

"What?!" Tione barked.

"Its techniques are nothing to write home about. If we can just get close enough, we'll have no problem fighting it. But…it is far and away more powerful than any monster we've crushed in the past."

Bete ignored the bickering sisters and spoke with irritation.

He judged the minotaur's strategies and techniques as underdeveloped but admitted that its wild latent power far exceeded theirs.

The monster hadn't cared one bit about their counterattacks; indeed, the more desperately they fought, the more overwhelming its response had been.

"You're right. Its ability to withstand our offensive was incredible. No matter how hard Tione and the others struck it, it showed no sign of being hurt. Only that direct hit from Aiz's wind finally did something," Riveria said calmly.

"If we assume it's one of those black-rhino subspecies, then its skin will be tough, to start with. And if it's been enhanced, well then, it's extraordinarily dangerous. I think we should consider it a floor boss, not just an ordinary monster. But if we handle it right, as Tione says, we can take it down," Gareth added in an equally calm and objective tone.

Finn nodded his agreement.

"But…"

Aiz had finally spoken up.

"That monster…It's going to get even stronger."

Every member of *Loki Familia*'s leadership clamped their mouth shut. Her words expressed what all the first-tier adventurers had intuitively sensed: The black monster was still in the midst of its development.

The other adventurers gulped audibly.

"We'll kill that black minotaur if it's the only thing we do. If it's still developing, then it's quite dangerous. Sooner or later it will become a menace," Finn announced to the group before licking the pad of his right thumb.

"Considering the route the enemy took, from the eighteenth floor to the surface, there's no question that they have a key. We will defend to the death all entrances to Knossos that we have discovered," he commanded, looking up.

"Familia members will be stationed throughout Daedalus Street. This is how we lay our trap."

"…That's probably what Braver and his familia are thinking right about now."

In the torch-lit Chamber of Prayers beneath Guild Headquarters, Hermes was addressing Ouranos, who sat on the dais in the underground altar.

"So if they make the standard moves, they won't be able to outfox Braver. He's just a little too smart. If it were a question of *experience*, then the original Sage would win…But unfortunately, they've fought different types of battles," he said.

“Fels is a civilian official, in a manner of speaking. The truth is, on the battlefield, the Sage is a poor match for a military leader like Braver,” Ouranos replied.

Hermes pulled the chair next to him over to the altar, sat down, and began whittling a chunk of wood. In a manner of minutes, the skillful god had carved two chess pieces: a prum with a spear in his hand and a robed mage. He placed them on a chessboard that sat on a pedestal. He had taken the liberty of bringing the board with him from his room at home.

As he talked with Ouranos, he carved one chess piece after the next.

“The Guild has collected the remains of the golems, but Braver probably realized they weren’t monsters,” Ouranos said.

“When Braver develops his strategy, he will take into consideration the fact that the mage is assisting the Xenos. Braver’s intuition is so good it even gives us deities the chills.”

Next to the prum, Hermes set a fencer holding a sword, a fairy brandishing a long wand, and berserkers raising scimitars and huge knives. Around the mage, he placed a lizardman and a gargoyle.

Finally, the human and monster encampments on the chessboard were complete. As if looking down on their children from the heavens, Hermes and Ouranos gazed at the opposing forces and unerringly assessed the situation.

“The sage has a number of magic items that go beyond what Braver will be expecting…If there’s a way out for the Xenos, that’s it.”

“And if there’s one unpredictable element…it’s probably Freya, wouldn’t you say?”

After thinking for a moment, Hermes ceremoniously carved a long-haired woman and set her off to the side of the board.

"However..."

As the elderly god gazed at him, Hermes suddenly narrowed his yellow-orange eyes.

"In the end, the one who really matters is *him*," he said, beginning to carve a final piece.

"We've discussed many things, but in the end, it all rests on the boy."

In a corner of the sewer tunnel where even the darkness of night did not penetrate, the jet-black robes of a fallen sage rustled.

"If anything is going to provoke Irregulars, it's him. Do not let down your guard, and do not overlook him. That adventurer will leap far beyond our expectations. He's done it in the past, and he'll do it again."

In the momentarily hushed Labyrinth District, the brave prum narrowed his blue eyes.

"Everyone is looking at you. So dance—cheerfully, humorously, just like they're all expecting. I'll be there for you."

As sparks flew from the pine torches on the ancient altar, the god set down the carved rabbit in the center of the chessboard.

—Yes, he held the key.

In different places but at the same moment, the fool, the hero, and the god raised their voices in unison.

""""Bell Cranell."""""

CHAPTER 3
THE NIGHT BEFORE BATTLE

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CHAPTER 3
The Night Before Battle

Behind the breaking clouds, a hazy moon shone faintly.

The rain had lifted, but the sky remained overcast. The city was as dark as the bottom of the sea. Normally the streets sparkled like a spilled jewelry box, but tonight fewer than usual magic-stone lamps had been lit, and the usual lively hustle and bustle was nowhere to be found.

The silver-haired goddess looked down on this quiet Orario from Babel, the huge limestone tower that stood in the center of the city. She was standing in front of the enormous sheet-glass window on its top floor.

“Lady Freya. May I ask you a question?”

“What is it, Ottar?” she said, responding to the voice coming from behind her.

“What are your views on the information that God Hermes presented to us?”

“About the Xenos? Well, it does match up with what Alfrik and the others told us. I am inclined to think we can trust it.”

Two days earlier, Hermes had visited the tower and told Freya everything he knew about the recent incidents. He’d talked about the Xenos and Knossos and said that Bell would be in great distress if they did not save the monsters.

She had been startled, but that was all.

The beautiful goddess's concern, as always, lay solely with the boy. Compared to him, the fate of the Xenos and the opinions of Ouranos mattered little to her. She had said nothing since learning the full story from Hermes.

She had simply been observing the situation from her perch at Orario's highest point, so much so that other forces in the city were starting to find it ominous.

"Hermes had his own reasons for telling me everything, of course…"

After sounding out Freya, the god had looked her straight in the face and made a request.

"Lady Freya, I am anxious for Bell. I have a few plans myself, of course, but I'd like to ask your assistance."

"Have you forgotten what you did to me during the dispute with Ishtar?" she had replied, with a smile so beautiful it could win the hearts of a thousand men.

Hermes had frowned and thrown up his hands in surrender, perhaps because he had not expected much to start with.

"Well, in any case, I hope you will find some way to watch over him."

*Is this something that can be left to Hermes?*Freya wondered.

Bell was the one point where her interests overlapped with Hermes's. That was why he had come to sound her out. Even if he slipped up, he would not allow things to develop in a direction that Freya found displeasing. And if that was the case, she felt she might as well leave things be. But at the same time, she was the only one who should be toying with the boy, and recently she hadn't been able to pay him much attention. Probably what she was feeling now was jealousy toward the god…No, that couldn't

be!

Her expression unchanged, Freya twined a lock of hair around her hand.

"What do you plan to do about Bell Cranell?" Ottar asked again, guessing at what was troubling her. "The townspeople have turned against him, and his strength seems to be fading. If things continue like this…"

"Considering it's that boy, he'll rise up," Freya said, interrupting her boaz servant in a tone of complete confidence.

Just then, she happened to glance down at the city streets far below—and she caught sight of a figure illuminated by a clear ray of sun. Freya smiled like a young girl who had been pining for something.

You see? It's come. I've been waiting.

The time had come to end her period of quiet watching. Freya closed her silver eyes.

Xenos, the intelligent monsters; the boy who threw himself into the fight even if he was hurt; the sparkle of life that smoldered somewhere even now; and—.

Emerging from the fountain of her reflections, Freya swept her gaze over the city and parted her glistening lips.

"Ottar, I would like to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"I am going to act now. However, what I am about to ask you to do may all be in vain…I cannot foresee how events will unfold."

"Be that as it may, I will carry out your divine will."

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at him in the reflection of the glass. Then the beautiful goddess relayed her orders.

“Please communicate to Aren and the others what I am about to tell you.”



Late at night on the day we renew our commitment to saving Wiene and the Xenos, we quietly begin to act.

You are being watched from every corner of the city. Never forget that, Fels warned us. We engrave those words in our hearts and, following the instructions in the letter, head out into the dark city streets.

Lilly and I leave home and head northwest. Instantly, numerous “watchers” follow us. I can feel them observing us, but I make an effort to pretend I notice nothing as we head to Northwest Main Street, the so-called Adventurers Way.

The main boulevard is lined with shops with their shutters pulled closed. We turn down an alleyway and enter several of the more questionable shops that are open for business as usual despite the circumstances, where we purchase various potions and other items. Pretending to check our gear, we stop in front of a certain shop. It’s at the end of an abandoned alleyway and down a flight of stairs, below street level. I can just make out the words on the sign that hangs on the beat-up old door: THE WITCH’S HIDEOUT.

Fels’s letter instructed us to come here.

The shop is underground, where the eyes of the watchers cannot penetrate. Pushing open the creaking door, I see an ancient human with a hook nose sitting behind the counter.

"…And what have we here? I thought I did not know this face, but hee-hee, it is the Little Rookie who has been causing a stir of late. You are neither a sorcerer nor a mage…What could an adventurer like you want in this shop?" she says.

From robes to pointed hat, she perfectly fits my image of a witch. I remember the words in Fels's letter.

There will be a shopkeeper named Lenoa at your destination. Say this password to her.

I do as instructed.

"Does Altina's cat dream of eternal life?"

It works right away. The witch, who looks like she has more than a few quirks, opens her eyes wide and fixes them on Lilly and me as we wait nervously.

"…An errand for the Honorable Fels, is it?"

The *Honorable*Fels…?

We have no idea what to say in response, because Fels has not told us how the two are connected. She shakes her head slightly.

"No, no, I'll stop my prying. The truth is you've come here with those words, and there's nothing more to it. Come."

Lilly and I follow the old woman as she retreats into the back of the shop. We pass jars containing snakes and scorpions, strange pots bubbling with bloodred liquid, and sickles and chains hanging from the ceiling. Finally, we arrive at a giant bookcase.

The witch runs her wrinkled finger along the white spine of a book, and I hear a *click*. One of the shelves seems to stick out, but then it slides horizontally—revealing a storeroom hidden behind

it.

“Th-this is…”

“What the letter mentioned!…And these are all the magic items…”

Pairs of twin crystals, a silvery-white cup made from a unicorn’s horn, a treasure chest filled with precious stones of every color, a leaf-decorated music box crafted from elven tree wood… The cavernous room is overflowing with magic items I have never seen before, each carefully constructed by the Sage. Lilly and I are struck dumb by the hidden storeroom, which brings to mind a treasure house—no, more like a secret magician’s room of the sort I read about in childhood fairy tales.

The first request Fels made in the letter was that we visit this hidden storeroom, entrusted to a guard for use under extraordinary circumstances, and retrieve several magic items.

“The Honorable Fels only has time for those twisted gods and goddesses. That immortal being has no love for those who wither and die. In all the generations that my family has watched over this storeroom…you are the first to have come bringing words from the Honorable One,” the shopkeeper whispers slowly from behind us.

She speaks to us as if we are nobles worthy of the greatest esteem and affection. Her words are suffused with compassion. Then she retreats, leaving us alone in the storeroom.

“Take whatever you wish…I hope you will be able to help the Honorable One in some way,” she says on her way out, without turning around.

Lilly and I nod at her back.

Time is short. We search through the storeroom, hastily stuff-

ing our backpacks with magic items.

"Mikoto, are you sure we're not being tailed?"

"Do not fear, Lady Hestia. Most of them seem to have followed Sir Bell and Lady Lilly."

Hestia and Mikoto had waited for a while after Bell and Lilly left home, then snuck out as well. They planned to carry out another of Fels's requests while the bulk of surveillance was focused on Bell. Evading the few people shadowing them with a stealth that would put ninjas to shame, they arrived at a dim street with a sign reading FOURTHSTREET. Hestia had seen it before.

"I'm sure I was brought somewhere nearby…and the letter said it was around here, too…Oh!"

As Mikoto peered cautiously around, Hestia found what she had been looking for: a certain wall near an alleyway. She manipulated the pattern carved into it as the letter had instructed and then pushed. Without a sound, an opening leading underground appeared.

"Okay, Mikoto, I'll be back!"

"All right, I'll be waiting for you."

No sooner had Hestia slipped through the hole than the stone wall closed behind her. She recognized both the stone passageway before her and the chill air floating through it.

"I never thought I'd be back here," she mumbled.

Holding a magic-stone lantern in her hand, she proceeded down the man-made passageway as if the mage had kidnapped her and was pulling her along. At the end of the corridor, she again followed the instructions in the letter, unenthusiastically chanting the words "Open sesame." As the wall slid open, she saw

a large altar on the other side.

"...Oh, Hestia, is it?"

"Hello, Ouranos. I hope you don't mind that I took the secret passageway."

She was standing in the Chamber of Prayers beneath Guild Headquarters as per Fels's instructions.

"Oh, has someone been here?" she asked, noticing the displaced chair and chessboard.

"...Yes. Hermes," Ouranos replied.

She was puzzled but, wanting to finish her errand quickly, said nothing more as she approached him.

"I have a message from Fels. The mage says to speed up the evacuation of civilians from Daedalus Street. You're probably already doing that, but apparently the battle is going to begin very soon."

"I understand..."

"In addition, you're to give us the map of Daedalus Street that Fels drew up before...along with all the information you currently have about Knossos."

Ouranos closed his eyes. Then he slowly opened them and pulled out an old volume. It was Daedalus's Notebook, which Hermes had given him.

"..."

He looked down at what he grasped in his hands, then held it out to Hestia.

"Take this. It is Daedalus's Notebook."

"Hey…Are you sure we're doing this right?" Welf asked, not hiding his unease.

"I—I don't know, but…all we can do is trust Fels and wait…" the flustered Haruhime answered.

Bell, Lilly, Hestia, and Mikoto had returned home and were currently gathered with Welf and Haruhime around a crystal set on the table. They had been waiting with bated breath in a back room of the building, with no change in the crystal—when suddenly it began to glow with a faint light.

"Can you hear me, Bell Cranell?"

"Fels!"

At the sound of the mage's voice, Bell let out a joyful greeting. The image in the crystal showed Fels and a number of Xenos gathered in a dim space that appeared to be a sewer.

"First, let me express our gratitude. Goddess Hestia, we deeply appreciate your generous compassion," Fels said.

"Let's skip the formalities, Fels. This is only the second time we've talked, but there was no way I could leave Wiene and the others to their own devices. Anyway, it was Bell and the other children who decided."

Suddenly, the vouivre poked her face out from beside the black-robed mage.

"Bell! Haruhime!"

"Lady Wiene!"

Then Lido was there, too.

"Bellucchi! And Lillicchi, too! I'm so sorry to ask your help like this again…"

“That ship has sailed.”

They were using one of Fels’s oculi, which were the most important magic items of all, according to the letter. When Bell and Lilly had returned from retrieving it and a great many other things, they had given one of the twin crystals to the owl familiar to deliver to its master.

As Hestia spoke to the image of Fels in the crystal, Haruhime and Lilly talked to Wiene and Lido. The excited voices of the Xenos echoed from the oculus.

“Quiet down! We’ll be discovered!”the gargoyle Gros scolded.

The emotional reunion via the crystals was brief, however. Soon, Bell and the others began to discuss their plans for the coming hours and days.

“We have six possible routes,” Fels said, holding the brightly shining oculus.

After asking Bell to aim the crystal at the plan of Knossos in Daedalus’s Notebook, Fels had carefully copied it out onto a parchment, which was spread on the stone floor so that the mage could use it in explaining the plan to the Xenos and *Hestia Familia*.

“According to the Notebook, there are six entrances to Knossos, which lie below the central zone of Daedalus Street: northeast, northwest, west, southwest, southeast, and east,” the mage said, one black-gloved finger tracing a circle on the map as it moved from orichalcum door to door. The Xenos stood motionless, gazing down at the map.

“We will break through to one of these six doors and head for the Dungeon.”

“By ‘break through,’ you mean…?” Lilly asked, her voice echo-

ing through the crystal.

"Yes," Fels responded. " *Loki Familia*is tightening their defenses. We probably won't be able to avoid battle with them."

A heavy silence fell over the group on Lilly's side of the oculus.

The Xenos were equally hushed. The monsters and humans shared a single terror as each imagined the coming fight in Daedalus Street and the dreadful battle prowess of the city's largest faction.

"…If we're going to do this, first we have to get as many *Loki Familia*guards off the route as possible—is that what you're thinking?" Welf asked.

"Precisely," Fels said. As Welf had implied, they would need to keep the scale of combat as small as they could.

"Bell Cranell, I want you to distract *Loki Familia*," Fels continued.

"M-me?" Bell replied, staring at the oculus that flashed as the mage spoke.

"Given your current situation, you are the most suited to this role. I'd like you to draw as much attention as possible."

"Um, pardon me, but may I suggest something? In that case, it seems Bell will not need to go to Daedalus Street…" Haruhime interjected shyly.

"No, I want him to come here. If he's off in some distant corner of the city, *Loki Familia*will send as few people as possible to pursue him. But if he goes right to the heart of their position, it will be a different matter. Moreover, if he's very conspicuous about it, they will not be able to ignore him."

All eyes on both sides of the crystal were fixed on Bell. His palms were slick with sweat.

"Can we count on you, Bell Cranell?"

"...Yes. I'll do it. Please allow me to do it."

He pushed the air from his lungs and nodded. As Hestia, his other familia members, and the Xenos all continued to watch him, he squeezed his palms into tight fists.

"Bell, I'm sorry...We are always hurting you..."the siren said.

"It's all right, Miss Rei. I've already made my decision. I've decided to help you and the other Xenos..."

"Bell..."

"Rei? Why is your face red? Does something hurt?"

"W-Wiene?!"

The siren's pained whisper had set off a sudden flurry of activity on the Xenos side of the crystal, starting with Wiene's question. As a different sort of excitement from before descended over the monsters, Gros shouted at them for a second time.

"I said, shut up!!!"

The image in the oculus wavered furiously, and Bell felt his hands getting clammy with sweat.

"Ouch?!" he yelped. Hestia and Lilly had pinched his behind.

"Bell Cranell, please refrain from unnecessary outbursts," Fels said.

"But that wasn't my fault...Oh, never mind. I'm sorry..."

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand…Not all the news is dark. We have the plan of Knossos. There is a high likelihood that *Loki Familia*is unaware of the entrances we know about.”

Ignoring Bell’s slightly dejected expression, Fels pointed out this single ray of light for their side. Daedalus’s Notebook thoroughly explained the structure of Knossos; just like the ariadne that pointed the way through Daedalus Street, it might show them an escape route.

As Lilly, Mikoto, and Haruhime listened, hopeful expressions spread over their faces.

“But to think that Ouranos actually obtained a copy of Daedalus’s Notebook! It’s extraordinary…I had hoped he at least knew the locations of the entrances to the labyrinth, but this has allowed us to improve our plan significantly,” Fels said.

“It seems that Hermes was the one who obtained it. He said he got it from Ikelos.” Hestia related what the elderly god had told her about the notebook.

“Ah, I see…I do recall that God Hermes came into contact with God Ikelos at the time.”

Fels sounded quite satisfied by this explanation.

“There are things I’d like the rest of you to do as well,” the black-clad figure continued, laying out the strategies currently open to them.

“Mr. Bell will be in danger, but it seems Lilly’s role is also fairly risky…!” Lilly noted when the mage had finished, pressing her hands to her head.

“Do your best. We’re counting on you, Li’l E!” Welf laughed.

“Grr…don’t act like this has nothing to do with you…!”

“Sir Welf, our position is not easy, either…We must focus our attention,” Mikoto said.

“Haruhime and I will be acting behind the scenes, but our task will be difficult in its own way,” Hestia said, her arms folded.

“True, but I am ready to take on the challenge!” Haruhime replied, pressing her hands to her chest.

“Bellucchi, everyone…I am truly sorry. And truly grateful.”

“Lido…”

“There is much I would like to say to you…But let’s meet up after we escape from this and have a proper conversation.”

“Yes!”

The face of the monster floated in the center of the crystal. By now, Bell had learned to tell whether he was happy or angry or sad.

He smiled back into the crinkled yellow eyes of the lizardman.



Day and night, a whirlwind of activity consumed Guild Headquarters.

Staff members were constantly running up and down the hallways, while pretty receptionists attempted to calm residents at the front desk. Some of these visitors were even sprawled on the floor in a corner of the lobby they had taken over, perhaps unable to control their anxiety. However, this overwhelming crowd included very few of the adventurers who usually populated the lobby, aside from the few who came to get information. Instead, it was packed with ordinary citizens, making for an unusual scene.

And the current situation was a lull in the storm. The ensuing chaos and noise after the armed monsters appeared on the surface had been even worse than the aftermath of the destruction of Rivira, the town on the eighteenth floor. Each time an adventurer reported a monster sighting, the news had fed the flames engulfing the Guild.

Now, after an interval of several days, the staff finally had time to chat. Many were unhappy with the management's gag order on information about the existence of Knossos, and speculations were constantly flying.

These comments often expressed criticism of or animosity toward the Little Rookie.

"—It's just so weird!"

The moment Misha Frot returned to her desk in the office, she couldn't help a frustrated outburst about a conversation that she had overheard in the hallway. Some of her coworkers had been blaming the boy for the current situation.

" *Ikelos Familia*'s members are the ones to blame! Why are they acting like Eina's little brother…I mean Bell…is the criminal here?!"

Her voice was totally disproportionate to her tiny 150-celch frame. Her peach-colored hair shook as she spoke. The other staff and receptionists on break in the office all pressed their lips together uncomfortably.

"Frot, calm down," her animal-person boss said. Misha's patience had reached its limit over the past several days, however, and she ignored the request.

"But Section Chief! Bell's actions may have been questionable, but everyone knows it was *Ikelos Familia*who was capturing monsters!"

Her boss recognized the truth in what she was saying but tried to explain the other side.

"If you think back to the war games, the Little Rookie has drawn too much attention, both good and bad. The current loss of hope is a sign of just how much the townsfolk liked him before and probably also their reaction to having their expectations betrayed. Then add envy of the adventurers on top of that, and you get an eventual explosion."

In other words, it was not only a case of disappointed expectations but also of long-held resentment toward the "super rookie" coming to the surface. That was the fate of an adventurer who made a name for himself as a record holder too quickly.

"But more than anything, the town has been damaged," her boss continued.

"…"

"Frot, you saw it with your own eyes, didn't you? That one part of Daedalus Street was reduced to a burned-out wasteland. When something like that happens—even if Bell didn't cause it himself—it's going to aggravate people. Ouranos is now personally directing the evacuation of civilians and the repair of the streets, and yet…"

Indeed, the sight of those smoking piles of rubble gave people plenty of reason to harbor dark feelings.

And if Misha was honest with herself, she, too, had been unsure how she felt about Bell's actions. He seemed to have lost his head and acted imprudently.

But she had seen her coworker and friend Eina in such low spirits ever since that day, and Misha had begun to question whether he'd really done anything wrong. Now she found herself rushing to defend the boy.

“Eina…”

She looked toward her half-elf friend. She was sitting at her desk, head bent over her work. Her bangs hid a face devoid of its normal brightness, while the hand that moved the feather pen shook as if struggling to endure something. Unable to stand the sight of Eina in this condition any longer, Misha approached her, while the other staff looked on.

“Hey, Eina, cheer up…” Misha said, watching her sadly.

“…hasn’t…”

“What?” asked Misha, unable to make out the faint whisper.

“He hasn’t come…”

This time, the half-elf formed the words clearly. She looked up. Her face was full of anger.

“Why? Why hasn’t he come to see me?”

“E-Eina?”

“I did hit him, after all, and at first, I was miserable about it! But…but…what am I supposed to make of the fact that he hasn’t shown his face here once, let alone explained to me what happened?! It’s weird, isn’t it? Totally weird. What does he think I am?!”

“M-Miss Eina?”

“And to think I’d never cried in front of a guy before!”

With emerald eyes opened wide behind her glasses and her cheeks flushed scarlet, Eina vented all the indignation and dissatisfaction that had been building up inside her. She sounded just like a woman criticizing a lover she’d quarreled with.

Misha reflexively took a step backward. The other staff, too, was taken aback by the sudden change in the half-elf, who was normally kind and sociable.

“Ugh, it’s driving me crazy…”

Eina violently scrawled her name across the bottom of the parchment she’d been working on, then leaped up from her chair.

“Section Chief, I’m going to patrol the city!”

“?!”

Everyone reacted with a start. The entire staff in the office looked distraught.

“W-wait a minute, Tulle! What about this mountain of papers…?!”

“Yeah, Eina?! I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but calm down!”

“If the absence of one employee brings the entire operation grinding to a halt, we’ve got a problem on our hands! Maybe it’s time for some reorganizing!”

“S-sorry,” the animal person stuttered, overwhelmed by Eina’s intensity.

“You’re right!” Misha said, pressing her hands to either side of her head.

All Eina’s disconcerted coworkers could do was watch as the talented receptionist stormed out. Driven by her emotions, Eina slung a pouch containing patrol supplies over her shoulder. Then she cut across the lobby, her leather shoes slapping the floor. The startled townspeople opened a path for her, and a moment later, she was out on the street.

“If he won’t come to me, then I’ll go to him, damn it!”



Through the narrow gap in the curtains, I look up at the night sky. Delicate, fanlike clouds still linger. In the faint moonlight that slips through, I sense that the rain is gone.

“…Time to go,” I whisper in the darkened room.

I am the only one left at home. As Fels instructed, Hestia and the others have headed for Daedalus Street first, after spending the day making preparations. I’ll lock the doors, but no doubt someone will break in while we’re gone. They’ll find no clues to our recent activities, however. Lilly and the goddess have hidden everything of value in Welf’s workshop or the basement.

Normally when we’re away, we ask Miach and his familia to watch the building for us, but in this case, they might end up getting pulled into things. It would be wrong to rely on them now and get them involved.

“…”

I stand up from my chair and look at myself in the full-length mirror. I am wearing my familiar armor and pouch, and over that a mantle that will blend my figure into the darkness. The goddess said it looked good on me, but that was probably an overstatement. I’m armed with the Hestia Knife and Ushiwakamaru. Which reminds me, my crimson dagger is still lying in Knossos, where I lost it during the fight with the hunters. Maybe I can get it later.

As I leave the room, I rub the oculus set in the top of my gauntlet, where the ruby normally is.

The building, cloaked in darkness, bids me farewell as I pass through the gate. A figure is standing on the other side.

“Lord Hermes…”

“On your way, Bell?” he asks with a smile and a tip of his traveling cap. He seems to have been expecting me.

“Yes,” I reply with a nod.

“Ah, I see…Well, I’m rooting for you. Do your best.”

“…Thank you.”

After this brief exchange, I slip past Hermes. I can feel the eyes of the watchers as I head toward Daedalus Street.

“…”

Hermes kept an eye on Bell as he disappeared into the night-darkened alleyway, a smile lingering on his lips.

As he turned to leave, he caught sight of a figure approaching Bell’s home. This was no ordinary criminal preying on an uninhabited building. The figure conscientiously rapped the metal door knocker, then scowled up at the darkened structure. He made out the profile of a beautiful half-elf, eyebrows raised in anger. Dressed in the uniform of a Guild employee, she made a beeline for Hermes.

“God Hermes. Do you know where Bell…I mean Mr. Bell Cranell has gone?”

“E-Eina? What’s wrong? You seem to be in a bad temper.”

As the leader of a neutral faction, Hermes sometimes received requests from the Guild, and he knew all the pretty receptionists by name. He recoiled slightly at the unfamiliar expression on the popular receptionist’s face. But then his yellow-orange eyes narrowed.

“Eina, I believe you are Bell’s adviser, are you not?”

“Yes I am. And that’s why I would like to know where he is going.”

“I do know where he’s headed. Apparently, he is off to Daedalus Street.”

“Thank you,” Eina said curtly. Hermes called after her as she turned to leave.

“Wait a minute, Eina. Will you give this to Bell?”

“This…?”

Hermes withdrew from his pocket a bracelet with a purple stone set in it. Careful not to raise her ire by touching her skin, he very nonchalantly placed it on Eina’s wrist.

“Bell dropped this. I wanted to return it, but I missed him on his way out. Sorry to ask a favor of you, but could you return it?”

At first she looked suspicious, but after hearing the god’s excuse, she consented.

“…All right. I’ll do it.”

Hermes smiled slightly at her back as she walked away. Then he, too, vanished into the night.



From our home in the southwestern section of the city, I head to Daedalus Street, in the southeast.

The instant I step into the tangled streets of the Labyrinth District, the other adventurers all stare at me.

“…!”

They've been peering around the streets suspiciously, and now they direct those suspicious glares at me.

...No, it's okay. This is fine. I'm not afraid.

I wander aimlessly down the street, succeeding in my goal of attracting attention.

"Hey, Little Rookie! If you know something, how about telling us?"

"...I don't know anything."

"My god won't shut up about it. Keeps on saying you must know something about monsters."

I'm drawn into several exchanges with ill-bred adventurers whose names I don't know. My response to them is always the same.

All of Daedalus Street is on edge. Perhaps it's because now, five days after the monsters appeared on the surface, adventurers are tired and irritated after their efforts have led to no noticeable progress.

Or perhaps they sense something.

Perhaps they know something is about to happen.

After surviving several quarrels with other adventurers without incident, I approach an elven archer.

"Um...What's going on with the civilian evacuation?"

"...Not a soul is left around here. The Guild moved them all out. Those who haven't evacuated by today seem to have gathered on the northwestern side of Daedalus Street," he answers courteously, although with an uncomfortable look on his face. The Labyrinth District is located in the city's third section, squeezed

between East and Southeast Main Streets. As far as I can tell from the elf's responses, the bulk of the civilian residents have evacuated to a section of East Main Street.

Pain pierces my heart as I think of Lai and the other orphans, but at the same time I'm relieved. Most likely, the battle in Daedalus Street will take place between its southern and western sections.

*Now, what about*Loki Familia *...?*

Taking care to not let the other adventurers distract me, I scan my surroundings. I search along the grimy brick boulevard for the emblem of the Trickster...and there it is. Demi-human men and women stand against a wall whispering to one another, their armor bearing the crest. The members of *Loki Familia*glance at me, then scurry out of view.

"...?"

I don't know what to make of them. They clearly recognized me before moving away, but I can neither talk to them nor follow them. Pretending to be searching for information, I gradually make my way toward the south side of the Labyrinth District.

Those people...Did they go to tell somebody? Who? Finn? Or —?

A moment later, the answer to my question falls from above.

Stomp! Stomp!

The grating sound of boots landing on a hard surface draws my gaze upward.

"...What the—?"

I can't believe my eyes. On the roof of a tall building on this

street, beautiful golden hair shimmers against the black night sky.

Eyes to match the hair tossing in the wind gaze down directly at me.

Clad in silver and blue-green, the Sword Princess, the strongest in the city, has appeared above me.

Aiz...?!

"..."

Aiz had picked the boy out from the many adventurers coming and going on the street. She stared down at him as he looked up at her in amazement.

Finn. If that boy comes to Daedalus Street...I will watch him.

Earlier, as the adventurers were preparing to take their positions after having rested, Aiz had offered her services to Finn.

"Really?...Can you do it? Aiz, you've supported Bell Cranell too much. Honestly speaking, I'm afraid you'd purposely lose sight of him," he had responded.

Bell's surveillance was the one thing that Finn had not intended to hand over to Aiz.

"I'll be frank with you, Aiz. Objectively speaking, Bell Cranell is a destabilizing force in Orario right now. He's a risk factor. Given that, we need to do two things. First, be vigilant, and second, if the need arises, stop him from acting."

"..."

"Can you really do those things?"

Aiz had looked down for a moment from the eyes of her leader,

which would tolerate no dishonesty. Then she nodded firmly.

"If he tries anything…I will stop him. If someone has to stop him, I want it to be me."

"…"

"And if a monster shows up…I will take it down."

Aiz's words were an unadorned reflection of the mixture of duty and personal desire in her heart.

Finn had peered into her unclouded eyes, then nodded.

"All right," he had said.

"He doesn't trust me…" Aiz murmured, returning from her reverie and looking over her shoulder. "But there's nothing to do about it."

The truth was, Aiz couldn't help having a soft spot for the boy.

Chasing away these idle thoughts, Aiz focused her attention on the cityscape beneath her.

…As Olba and the other low-level members of the familia told me, he's alone for now…

The boy was still looking up at her. She had deliberately let him see her in order to keep him in check. And so her watch began.

Aiz is here alone, watching *me*…?!

This is the worst. I'm done for.

Thoughts spring to mind unbidden the moment I see her. They've let loose the strongest weapon in the faction on me, and they don't intend to let me do anything stupid. They plan to cut

down our little tricks with one swing of their sword. *Loki Familia*has left my surveillance entirely up to Aiz.

As I stand frozen in the middle of the street, the other adventurers follow my gaze upward and notice the Sword Princess. A trickle of cold sweat slides down my cheek. Pretending to wipe it away, I whisper into the oculus on the back of my left hand.

"Goddess…Miss Aiz is here."

"Ugh, really?"

The goddess's agitated voice comes back to me through the blue crystal, which is off so as to not show an image.

"Well, in one sense, it means you'll be able to keep that little Wallen-something glued to your side…But if you need to, do you think you'll be able to shake her?"

"That might be—No, that definitely won't be possible."

My role is to attract attention and, if the need arises, to find the Xenos who got separated from the group. It's a guerrilla position that capitalizes on my mobility. But that scheme has just gone up in smoke. I was supposed to be a diversion, but they've assigned only one person to watch me—Aiz. And that means no matter how much I move around, *Loki Familia*'s battle formation in Daedalus Street won't budge a celch. This must be Finn's work.

As long as Aiz is paired with me, all our tricks will be foiled.

Should I take advantage of the confusion to shake her off?

No, it can't be done. Even if I use one of Fels's magic items…

I brush my hand against the swell of the pouch hidden under my mantle, holding my breath. Just then…

"Hey!"

“Eeeek?!”

I let out a startled cry as hands tap both my shoulders. My heart pounding, I jump into the air.

The adventurers around me start in surprise. Flustered, I turn around.

“Huh? Nahza?”

Her eyes drooping sleepily, dog ears hanging beside her face, and uneven sleeves hiding her airgetlám—her fake arm—the *Miach Familia*captain addresses me in her usual flat voice and raises both hands.

“Hello…”

“Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Um…Well, I guess I’m here to help you guys.”

The words of my chienthrope acquaintance surprise me once again.

“You’re in trouble, aren’t you? You sure do hold back. It would have been fine for you to ask me a favor, considering our relationship…”

“No, but…Nahza, don’t you know…what I did?”

“I don’t know the details…But let me guess, you got yourself into trouble again by chasing after some girl’s backside. Right?”

“No, that’s not…!”

…But is she really wrong?

In the sense that I ran after Wiene, I have to admit that she’s not…

Nahza nods understandingly and pats me on the back. I can feel a sweat coming on.

“Anyway, this is what Lord Miach told me to do…”

“What?”

Nahza explained that he’d told her I had caused some problems, but she was to help me anyway without asking any questions.

“I think Lord Takemikazuchi’s familia is probably around here somewhere, too. Hermes seems to have told them that you went to Daedalus Street…Bell, I’m going to say it one more time. You’re too reserved.”

Miach and Takemikazuchi both chose to save…not the Xenos but me, who is trying to save the Xenos. They are trusting me, even though I’ve reached out to help monsters.

My vision grows blurry at the thought of their response and the kindness of Nahza, who has placed her trust in me at a time like this.

“…Bell, you’re such a crybaby.”

“S-sorry!”

I quickly wipe my eyes to keep the tears from falling. Still, Nahza—who’s older than me—strokes my hair affectionately. I blush as the other adventurers glance at me curiously.

“So, is there anything I can do? It’s just me now, with Daphne and Cassandra gone, of course…”

“Um, well…if you insist…”

Conscious of Aiz’s watching eyes, I feel under my mantle for the pouch hidden there. As I withdraw one of the items and pass

it to Nahza, I mumble some instructions into her ear.

"Okay, got it…and Bell, you'd better buy a lot of potions from me next time!" she said with a grin.

"Ha-ha…Will do!"

She walks away, waving as she goes. She's given me a jolt of energy, and courage.

A woman…a chienthrope…

From the roof of the building, Aiz watched Bell's meeting with Nahza.

…She's stroking his hair.

Unconsciously, her own hand stroked thin air comfortingly, like a little girl whose pet had been taken away from her.

An instant later, she realized what she was doing and shook her head as if to clear it.

Is he handing her something? I can't watch both of them…I'd better tell Raul, she thought, as Bell and Nahza parted.

She continued to monitor Bell.

Nahza's help may turn out to be crucial…I wonder if I should tell Lilly.

After saying good-bye to the chienthrope, I head for the southernmost section of the Labyrinth District. I glimpse Aiz out of the corner of my eye a few times—of course she's following me—and start to bring the oculus in my gauntlet to my lips, intending to get in touch with the goddess. But before I can do so, a shrewish female voice rings in my ear.

“Bell Cranell!”

“Eek?! Aisha?”

“What are you screaming about? You sound like a monster is chasing you. Did you mistake me for that big toad of a woman?”

“S-sorry! And Lyu, too—Ergh!”

I blink in surprise as Lyu reaches out a finger and presses it to my lips. She is wearing a hood and a mask that hides her face, while Aisha is dressed like a showgirl.

“Greetings, Mr. Cranell. But please, kindly avoid yelling out my name.”

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I ask, repeating the exact question I asked Nahza.

“Andromeda told us everything. We’ve come to help you,” Lyu says calmly.

“I didn’t tell you, but I’ve joined *Hermes Familia*. Apparently, there’s no such thing as veto power over there,” Aisha adds with a shrug.

I haven’t quite figured out what’s going on, but…Hermes again?

Given our topic of conversation, we’re hunched together like we’re having a secret conference. The male adventurers on the street click their tongues in disgust at the sight of my face only a hairbreadth away from the masked Lyu and the gorgeous, charming Aisha. Their eyes are cold enough to freeze me solid…

“Andromeda had some requests…”

“I’ll take care of that. Is there anything you need? Just say the word.”

“Well…” Talking to talented second-tier adventurers makes me nervous, but I make my request.

“…That’s a rather difficult order,” Lyu says. Aisha is less restrained, however.

“You’ve got some nerve!”

“S-sorry! Even if you could just buy me a little time…or is that too difficult?”

To be honest, I know full well that I’ve asked a lot. But I also know that now is not the time to hold back.

If I don’t request their help, I won’t be able to do a thing.

“No, no, we’ll do it. If that’s what you want. We’ll do everything we can.”

“Lyu…I’m sorry. Thank you so much.”

A feeling of deep gratitude wells up in my chest as I look into the sky-blue eyes in the depths of her hood.

The sensation of Aisha’s arm encircling my neck startles me from this pensive mood.

“Uh…!”

“Trouble surrounds you, boy. Or should I say, you can’t help sticking your head in it?”

Both of Aisha’s arms are around my neck now, and she is pulling me toward her.

I am surrounded by soft brown skin and the scent of musk. I flush at the feeling of her large breasts against me as she sighs into my ear.

“When this is all over, I want my proper reward.”

“Huh?!”

She licks her lips and gives me a fiercely coquettish smile. I can feel the blood draining from my cheeks when—

“I thought I told you to *keep your hands off him*!”

Lyu jabs her wooden sword toward Aisha with frightening force.

Aisha dodges the point as if she’s been waiting for it—with me still pressed into her cleavage. From the shadows of her hood, Lyu’s eyes burn with wrath.

This is no show. She’s genuinely furious!

“Let go of Mr. Cranell this instant. If you don’t, I’ll beat you to a pulp.”

“Just you try! I’m not the type to sit there staring at my prey with my mouth shut!”

Why has the situation suddenly turned violent?! Didn’t they say they were going to help me?!

I desperately try to wriggle out of my soft brown constraints, but I can’t break free of those Level 4 arms. I’m trapped between the anger of an elf and the body of an Amazon. On top of that, the eyes of the other adventurers are filled with a mixture of resentment and malice…Ahhhhhhhhh……!

Wait, I’m being watched right now!

I look up and right there—

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!

Aiz is staring right at me!

More women…? An Amazon and…who could that be?

Aiz looked down on the Amazon and the masked figure as they interacted with the boy.

Oh, she just pressed her fingers against his lips.

……And he's being…embraced!

Aiz watched in silence from the edge of the roof as the Amazon pressed Bell to her breast. Seemingly of their own accord, Aiz's legs bent into a crouch to bring her a tiny bit closer to the scene below.

She wrapped her arms around her legs and stared fixedly at Bell.

If Aiz's surveillance were rain, this would be a downpour.

This is bad, this is bad…! I want to run to her and explain everything…!!

When Lyu, Aisha, and their argument finally leave me, I start sweating like a waterfall.

The other adventurers seem on the verge of a riot, and I'm not fond of their murderous glares, but it's Aiz and her constant gaze that are bothering me the most!

And her expression hasn't changed a bit. Not one bit!

It's like she's taking me to task for something. My heart won't stop thumping.

*Is this another one of your strategies to undermine me, Finn?!*I scream inside my head, although my fear and awe for the

first-tier adventurer are almost certainly unjustified.

I'd better go somewhere with less people…

Or so I thought.

"There you are! Bell!!"

The final assassin arrives.

"E-Eina?!"

"I finally found you! I've been looking everywhere!"

Dressed in her Guild uniform, she heads straight for me. I hear malicious whispers of "Again?" around me. My sweat is reaching high tide.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I ask for the third time tonight.

"I heard you were in Daedalus Street! And when I asked the other adventurers, they very kindly pointed me in your direction!" Eina says passionately.

I have to admit that given the amount of attention I draw, asking other adventurers could be a good way of finding me.

But…is Eina mad?

I thought that when we met it would be more…awkward?

Ignoring my panic, she walks right up to the tip of my nose.

"Since you didn't come after so long, I had to come to you!"

"S-sorry?! Um, I, uh, I felt embarrassed and too ashamed to show my face, so…?!"

“I bet you did. You’re just that type of guy! No matter how serious the situation, you’re such a chicken that it surprises even me! But don’t you think it would have been a good idea to at least get in touch or see me once?”

“I-I’m sorry…!” I say, flinching.

I’ve never seen Eina look this ferocious before.

The fault rests entirely with me—I’m the one who caused trouble for her and made her worry—so all I can do is apologize profusely. She’s angry with me from the depths of her heart, and she’s laying into me like a sister berating her younger brother.

“So I’m just some woman you used when it suited you, huh?!”

“Miss Eina, Miss Eina?! Someone might misunderstand you…!” I yell back as she drops today’s biggest bomb yet.

The stares of the other adventurers have become even sharper. I had already hit rock bottom, but now a scrap of garbage would have a better reputation than me. I can hear them hurling insults and curses my way.

“He’s the worst.”

“An enemy of women everywhere!”

“Go screw yourself, Rabbit!”

Ahhhhhhhhh…!!

I’m too scared to even glance in Aiz’s direction.

“I’m not letting you go until you’ve answered every single one of my questions!”

“What? That’s—?!”

Eina takes my arm, and once again I find myself pressed against a woman's body.

I turn beet red, then white—my elbow is touching Eina's chest and all the adventurers are glaring at me. But also because of my idol's gaze burning into the back of my head.

It's like some kind of divine punishment. This must be the price of making Eina cry that day.

It's…another woman again…?

Aiz was acutely aware of Bell's meeting with Eina.

……All women, no men.

She sunk into a silence that reached the depths of her heart. As she sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, her eyes relentlessly bored into the boy's white head. She could make out phrases such as *just some woman you used*.

He turned red, then white, as rapidly as a quick-change artist. He looked restless.

Aiz cocked her head to one side, her golden hair spilling over her shoulder.

"Is Bell…a jerk?" she whispered to herself.

A moment later, Bell's cry split the night sky.



"I've been hearing Bell screaming for a while now…" Haruhime said fretfully.

"I know. I want to warn him not to make so much noise, but since we're separated, there's nothing I can do," Hestia answered,

crossing her arms over her chest.

The boy's wails were coming from the oculus. Hestia and the kimono-clad Haruhime were in the southwest section of Daedalus Street, practically on its border with the Pleasure Quarter. They had taken up a position on top of an empty tower with a good view of the city.

"And, Haruhime, please be careful about talking near the crystal because it'll pick up the sound."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" the renart girl said, pressing both hands to her mouth and jumping back from the oculus.

A number of oculi were lined up on the roof, and beside them was spread a map the size of a carpet. THELEGACY OF-DAEDALUS—its name—was inscribed in one corner. The original Sage had walked the area on bony feet to create the drawing of the Labyrinth District. *I wasn't able to get out much, but I did manage to survey the area*, the mage had said. Despite this modest claim of having missed some of the hidden alleys and doors, the map included routes that even residents of Daedalus Street didn't know about. The hundreds and thousands of figures noted on the sheet—from the widths of streets to the number of potential bottlenecks—made Hestia feel faint the first time she laid eyes on it.

There was one more important point about the map.

A number of names was written on it, and they were moving about as if they were alive.

"Let's see…it looks like Bell and Supporter are in the south section as planned…"

"But over in the west, Lady Mikoto and Master Welf haven't met up with the Xenos yet, it seems."

Hestia was on all fours on top of the map, while Haruhime bent over it with her hands on her knees. They were following the various names as they moved around, and Hestia traced after them with her finger.

The map had been sprinkled with Seeker Powder, one of Fels's magic items.

The powder was kept in a large jar. To use it, one would drip blood onto it and sprinkle the reddened substance onto the map. If the donor of the blood was in the area the map showed, their name would appear, along with their location. Hestia and all her familia members had dripped their blood into the jar before giving it to the familiar owl, along with the oculi, to deliver to the Xenos. After the monsters added their blood, the owl brought the jar back to Hestia. She sprinkled the powder onto the Legacy of Daedalus she had received from Ouranos, and the magic map was complete. It allowed her to see at a single glance where her familia members and the Xenos were located.

The only drawback was that the powder could be used only with maps Fels had created with specialty handmade paper. This magical paper had to be instructed in the proper routes. A carelessly drawn map would not do.

The huge map of the Labyrinth District displayed everyone's name in bloodred Koine, except for Fels and Gros, who had no blood to give. Perhaps Fels had been feeling playful, as the words appeared to have been written with a feather pen and moved like chess pieces.

Haruhime picked up the twin of Welf's oculus.

"Master Welf, Lady Mikoto, uh…Please turn at the third corner," she said.

"There will be a sewage drain running along the left-hand side of the road. That's where the Xenos are hiding," Hestia added.

“Got it.”

“Thank you, Lady Haruhime and Lady Hestia!”

The power of the Seeker Powder and the oculi—which together allowed Hestia and Haruhime to instantly determine everyone’s location and communicate with them—had turned the rooftop into an outdoor command and combat operations center. What happened here would determine the destiny of the Xenos, who would need to make their way through the convoluted maze of Daedalus Street and then into the underground Knossos.

Since Hestia had zero fighting ability, she was charged with directing the operation from behind the scenes. Haruhime served as her assistant and, in case of emergency, would sortie to give Bell and their other fighters a level boost.

“Now if only this told us where the enemy was, too, it would be perfect,” Hestia said.

“That is true…If that were the case, we could get through this whole thing without bumping into *Loki Familia*at all.”

Hestia moved off the map, sat down cross-legged, and gazed out at the central part of the Labyrinth District, where she suspected *Loki Familia*had located their headquarters.

Of course we can’t ask them for their blood…

The image of a certain goddess’s face floated in her mind, and her thoughts jumped back in time.

“Loki. I want to talk to you about the armed monsters.”

It was the previous day, and Hestia and Bell had just separated in Daedalus Street. Those were the first words out of her mouth after he left.

“Now, and alone.”

“…Sure, whatever. As long as it doesn’t take too long.”

Perhaps there was something in Hestia’s serious expression that made Loki agree; she followed her to an oval courtyard with a fountain in it.

“The monsters who appeared on the surface are called Xenos. They are intelligent,” Hestia said.

She went on to explain everything she knew about the Xenos and her familia’s connection to them. It was a gamble. Knowing Loki, it was quite possible that she would find the information amusing and broadcast it to the whole city. But if she knew the truth about these recent events, it would surely have some impact on *Loki Familia*. Hestia spoke with the hope that Loki would act with some semblance of a goddess’s character.

“Wow…Monsters who can communicate.”

Loki didn’t seem especially surprised by Hestia’s words. She narrowed her vermilion eyes.

“So now that you’ve spilled the beans, what do you want from me?”

“…I want you to help us live peacefully with the Xenos. Maybe that’s too much—if you would just ignore them for the time being—”

Loki interrupted her with a mocking laugh.

“What are you, an idiot?”

With those five words, she dashed Hestia’s hopes.

“…!”

“Little girl. Do you know who the leader of our faction is?”

“…Braver, Finn Deimne?”

“And what’s the name of our faction?”

“… *Loki Familia*, the strongest faction in the city?”

“ *You’re damn right it is*. Finn is the hope of the prums and the star of Orario. It’s kind of a pain, but we’re the top familia in the city. Do you have any idea what people would do if we sided with the monsters?”

Hestia could find nothing to say.

“If I tried to force my cute little children to do something like that, they’d laugh me out of town. They’d say, ‘Loki, you’ve taken your jokes too far. Time to quit your fun and games.’ They might even turn against me and leave. As for Finn, he’s been in this for his own interests from the start—he wouldn’t think twice about deserting me.”

Contrary to her comment about Finn’s coldly calculating attitude, Loki actually seemed to be enjoying herself.

“What Finn wants is fame for reviving a familia. He’s not gonna do anything to mess up his own reputation. He can’t. So making nice with monsters is out of the question…Your kids are proof enough of what would happen if people found out.”

“…”

“Finn’s ambitions are never going to match up with what you want.”

There was no way *Loki Familia*under Finn’s leadership and *Hestia Familia*seeking to protect the monsters were going to reach an understanding. Strangely enough, Loki was saying ex-

actly what Hermes had told Bell.

"Anyway, Finn already has a pretty good idea what those Xenos things are like."

"!"

"But he hasn't told Aiz and the others much. You know why?"

Since Hestia hesitated, Loki went on.

"Because it will slow them down. It might make his cute little underlings hesitate before acting. And most of all...if the truth about the Xenos came to light, it would shake the foundation of Orario."

Telling everyone about the Xenos might be their salvation, but it also posed a risk to people's lives.

Could Hestia honestly say that all the adventurers who learned about the Xenos would remain able to slay other monsters without a moment's hesitation? She could not. And a moment's falter would put their lives at risk. That could be fatal for Orario, the city that flourished thanks to the Dungeon's existence. Finn knew that.

Hestia did, too. When the fighting between *Loki Familia*and the Xenos had broken out in the Labyrinth District, neither she nor Fels had broadcast the fact that these were intelligent monsters. They feared taking the irrevocable risk of causing chaos throughout the mortal world.

Fels also probably knew that Finn would not listen to any of their pleas. If any townsfolk were watching, he would unquestionably kill the "monsters," even if he knew they were harmless. That was the kind of unwavering spirit and extreme ambition he had.

"Basically, it's impossible, right? The idea of our children liv-

ing together peacefully with monsters," Loki said.

"That depends..."

"A lot of us idiotic gods would probably see it as a mystery or a bit of entertainment. But the children are a different story. They hate monsters with their hearts and souls. That's why I'm afraid."

Loki sighed before continuing.

"What was that sickness that killed a whole bunch of the children...? Oh yeah, the Black Death. If that sickness wreaked its havoc and then came along saying, 'Hey, I want to make friends with mankind; I promise I won't kill anyone else,' do you think our children would just shake hands and make friends with it?"

"..."

"Not a chance. They'd be way too scared. They'd know that even if the sickness didn't want to, it could make them all suffer and die. On the spur of the moment, as easily as breathing."

Monsters had left a swath of destruction all over the world, killing hundreds of millions. Even now, they were killing people. They had menacing bodies, claws and fangs that were the very symbols of bloodshed, flames that invited death, and beastly voices. Everything about them embodied slaughter. Loki was implying that for the inhabitants of the mortal plane, monsters were the same as a devastating disease or natural disaster.

In this case, the "sickness that wreaked havoc" would be the Xenos. And letting in this "sickness" without a vaccine on hand could lead to nothing but self-destruction.

"So I'm deaf to your requests. Everything is up to Finn—all our decisions and all our actions," Loki said.

Hestia had been looking down and biting her lip, but at Loki's next words she raised her head.

“In exchange, I’ll keep my mouth shut about what you told me today.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying I’ll pretend I never heard a thing from you. I won’t tell Finn what your familia is planning to do. I’ll just stand by and watch.”

“…What are you after?”

“Oh, this and that…I guess I’m just one of those gods who loves a little mystery and amusement,” Loki replied teasingly before turning to walk away.

“Wait, Loki!”

“Bye, Itty Bitty. Thanks for helping me kill some time.”

With a half-hearted wave, the vermilion-haired goddess disappeared from Hestia’s view.

I don’t know what Loki is thinking…but it seems like we won’t need to watch her.

In a sense, she was the most annoying trickster of them all, and now they wouldn’t have to worry about her getting in their way. At least something useful had come from the conversation.

That was Hestia’s conclusion as she returned her focus to the present.

“The rest all depends on Bell and the others…” she murmured.

She looked up. Thinning clouds veiled the night sky.

The broken watch lying next to the map beside her ticked. The appointed time had come.



Lido looked up at the deep-blue sky.

No longer hidden by clouds, it was an endless sea of stars.

“I’m finally able to see the sky I longed for…but only by sneaking around like this. Perhaps we are creatures of the shadows after all,” he said softly through his fangs, mocking himself.

The lizardman warrior’s two misshapen, scaly feet were planted on the edge of the dark sewer. He stayed gazing up at the sky.

He was searching for one tiny hope, fainter than a star, in the infinite heavens.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Welf! Mikoto!”

“Long time no see…Well, it hasn’t actually been that long…but I’m glad you’re looking well, Wiene.”

Lido turned around at the sound of Wiene’s happy voice, just in time to see her reunited with Welf and Mikoto. They were carrying a large sack stuffed with stink bags to cover up the scent of Lido and the others.

With his brethren, he formed a circle around the overjoyed vouivre and humans. The sight of their carefree smiles was priceless. They were the hope of the Xenos.

Every time Lido saw their smiles, an impudent wish reared its head. *What more can you ask for than this?*an inner voice warned him…yet still he felt himself reaching out for something more.

I want a future where we walk side by side.

"...Lido, it's time. We're counting on you!"

"Ah, yes."

At the urging of Fels, who was looking down at the broken watch, Lido emerged from the sewer. Then, with an agility surprising for his enormous body, he scaled a building and sprang onto the roof.

He looked out over the city submerged in darkness and apologized silently to all its unknown inhabitants. Then he made his decision.

He filled his chest with air and, in a single rush, let it all out.

OWOOOooooooooooooooooo.....

The monster's howl shook the black night.

The long, low cry echoed through every corner of the Labyrinth District and out to the edges of the city.

Adventurers everywhere lifted their heads in unison. Townsfolk shuddered with fear. All of them stopped whatever they were doing. They knew the time had come.

Once again, the war cry of the resurgent monsters sounded the arrival of upheaval in the city.

OHOOooooo.....

"They've answered," Fels said, turning away quickly from the sound.

The shrill howl that rent the night sky just after Lido's resembled the cry of a young girl. The siren squinted with concentra-

tion.

“I can hear Fia and Lett but not Aruru…”

“We definitely would hear her if she was howling. Either she’s keeping quiet or something is preventing her from making any noise…”said the gargoyle.

The baying continued to echo back and forth across the sky. It was a language that only the monsters understood. Humans and deities could not discern the true meaning of those howls. They were a kind of report communicating each monster’s location, target destination, and all other important information.

“The most we can do is trust in them and go.”

At Fels’s command, the Xenos filed away from the sewer, melting into the darkness.

“Sir Royman?!”

“What’s that? What’s that? Is something going to happen?”

The pale Guild chief emerged onto the top floor of the Pantheon and leaned forward over the banister.

“Are they coming? Are they coming?”

“It’s a festival! A party!”

“I wanna go to Daedalus Street! I wanna goooooooo!”

The gods and goddesses had given themselves over to excitement. As their children cowered, they danced and skipped.

“Captain!”

“…”

The commander of the best troops in the city gazed quietly down at the Labyrinth District.

"..."

The jet-black beast looked up at the sky and began walking, its feet guided by the stars.

Hermes narrowed his orange eyes and spoke into the darkness.

"So the game has begun."

Ever so quietly, the curtain rose on the war.



CHAPTER 4
A SKIRMISH IN DAEDALUS STREET

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CHAPTER 4
A Skirmish In Daedalus Street

The strategy began with Lilly.

"What are those monsters braying about?"

"Find where those cries are coming from!"

The howling had sent the adventurers in Daedalus Street into an uproar. Amid the chaos, a young prum boy snuck down a back alley. Once he was out of view, he drew close to a dingy wall and put his hand to his forehead.

"Stroke of midnight's bell."

A film of gray light enwrapped the boy's body and then melted away to reveal Lilly, who had just deactivated the shape-shifting Cinder Ella spell.

"Ooh, I hate this. It's so scary. If the adventurers catch me, they'll kill me on the spot. Why do I have to be the one to do it…?"

Mumbling to herself dramatically, she prepared for what she had to do next.

She lowered her chestnut eyebrows and closed her eyes.

"Your scars are mine. My scars are mine."

As her petite lips uttered the chant, the magic once again transformed her appearance.

In an instant, she was wearing a bulky blue battle jacket and a broken watch around her neck. She had a fluffy round tail, long ears, and round, shifty red eyes. She had become an al-miraj, or rabbit monster.

So long as she resembled the thing she was transforming herself into, Lilly had the power to take on the appearance of a monster using Cinder Ella. Now that she was the al-miraj Aruru—whom she felt had the least unpleasant appearance of all the smaller Xenos—she bounded resolutely out of the shadows.

"Kuuuuu!" [I can't do this!] She shrieked with her no-longer-human voice.

The adventurers quickly found her.

"I—I see one!"

"A monster! In the alley!"

Shouting wildly, they poured from the main avenue into the side street.

Mad with desire for a bounty, eyes bloodshot, swords and axes hoisted, they chased their prey as it hopped this way and that. *Those greedy bastards! No wonder adventurers have a lousy reputation!*Putting her own identity aside for the moment, Lilly uttered a rabbit's curses.

Still, the adventurers were a ferocious and quick-witted bunch. Cinder Ella allowed her to change her appearance but not to take on a Status higher than her own or a monster's potential. Some of the adventurers pursuing her were upper class, and since she was merely an ordinary supporter, she feared they would quickly catch her. Fact of the matter was, they nearly did catch her more than once.

Every time that happened, she fled into a blind corner and

quickly deactivated Cinder Ella.

"Stroke of midnight's bell."

Once back in her own form, Lilly walked right past the demonic adventurers, feigning innocence.

Transform, deactivate. Transform, deactivate. Her pursuers' irritation mounted each time the al-miraj disappeared just before being caught. Every time their shoulders and bodies collided as they crisscrossed every celch of the narrow alleys, an exchange of shouting and verbal abuse would follow.

With the sound of growing chaos in her ears, Lilly used her magic over and over again, panting as she frantically hopped around the Labyrinth District.

"Oh, I hate Fels…!"

Even as she cursed the sage who had devised this plan, however, Lilly poured everything she had into her designated role.

"There's an al-miraj on the loose!"

"It's over in that direction. Go get it!"

Bell was in a different part of the Labyrinth District's south side, but the frantic shouts of the adventurers had spread to where he was.

"…!"

Eina, who had been stunned by the howling of Lido and the other Xenos, was still holding Bell close to her. Now that an opportune moment had arrived, Bell carefully extracted his arm from hers. By the time she noticed, he was already running.

"I'm sorry, Miss Eina!" he yelled, glancing back as he gained

distance.

"Huh?! Bell!"

"You can get mad at me later!"

"Oh, you…!"

Eina's indignation was only for show, however. In truth, she wanted to run after him. No—she wanted to stop him from going. She was beside herself with worry that he would run straight into danger and get himself hurt. But Bell was an adventurer and Eina was a Guild employee. She had come this far fueled by personal feelings and passion, but now she had to fulfill her duty as a worker.

"…Uh-oh, I forgot to give him that bracelet he lost, the one Hermes gave me."

She glanced down at the band on her right arm, her expression changing from anger to worry.

Meanwhile, Bell was running straight down the street away from Eina.

"Bell. It seems that two of the lost Xenos are on the east side of Daedalus Street."

Hestia's muffled voice filtered through his mantle from the gauntlet underneath. Fels must told her the location of the Xenos who responded to Lido's call, and now she was relaying it to him.

"Hmm…That's a good distance from where I am on the south side. So…" he whispered into the oculus.

"Please keep focusing on diverting attention, as we planned."

Bell nodded.

Miss Aiz is still following me…and just like we wanted, other adventurers are tracking me, too.

He glanced over his shoulder at Aiz, who was following him by running from rooftop to rooftop. As he looked back, he noticed that while some of his pursuers were closing in on him, he could also sense the eyes of others who were following at a set distance, neither approaching nor receding, like hunters. Perhaps on orders from their patron deities, they had not run off to chase the al-miraj but instead kept after Bell, the more certain bet. If he included those he couldn't see clearly, there seemed to be quite a few chasing him. It was like they thought Bell would lead them to some enormous pile of gold.

But if the eyes of Loki Familia *aren't on me, the diversion isn't working. My only choice is to shake off these people once, along with Aiz, too!*

He increased his pace and turned down one of the innumerable alleys branching off the main road.

"!"

"Hurry up, before you lose sight of him!"

Skirting the pack of adventurers on the wild goose chase after Lilly, Bell headed to the neighboring southeastern district. The adventurers followed. Bell was happy to lure them this far, but now he needed some way to pin them there so they would stay in the southeast while he continued on.

Nahza and Lyu, I'm counting on you for the rest!

He slipped into a shadow where his followers could not see him, withdrew a stink bag, and sprinkled the contents over his head to mask his scent. Then he pulled off his black mantle, turned it inside out, and threw it back on so that it covered his entire body. The next instant, he had disappeared without a trace.

"?!"

"Where'd the Little Rookie go?"

Bell listened to the hubbub all around him. He could sense Aiz's astonishment as well.

He had used the Reverse Veil, one of Fels's magic items.

Like Asfi's Hades Head, it turned whoever wore it invisible. But in contrast with the Kaos Head, which made its wearer invisible no matter what, Bell's veil was reversible, so the user could benefit from its powers as needed. An ordinary mantle swiftly became a tool for secrecy and stealth.

Leaving the surprised adventurers and Aiz behind, Bell moved away, still veiled.

"Where is that little twerp hiding…?"

The adventurers searching for Bell were growing irritated at the complicated streets and numerous obstacles. Just then, they noticed something.

"What's that sweet smell…?"

The animal people were the first to notice, but soon others, too, were sniffing suspiciously at the faint perfume.

They forgot their suspicion, however, when a human in the pack shouted out.

"I saw him! The Little Rookie! He went into that house!"

A crazed look came over the adventurers' faces, and they rushed in the direction he was pointing. Swearing at Bell for putting them through so much trouble, they burst into a barrack in a back alley.

“Not that one, this one! Over by the main road!”

“What?!”

“M-monster! It’s a monster!”

Amid all the shouts flying back and forth, the adventurers began to get confused. What should they make of all the claims of monster sightings or of the fact that Bell Cranell seemed to be popping up in multiple places? Each band of adventurers began to distrust all the others, suspecting they were trying to trick the rest and slip away.

“Hey, I don’t see anything in here at all! Not a monster *or* the Little Rookie!” said a dwarf upper-class adventurer.

“B-but it’s true! He’s over there—behind you!”

The dwarf turned his head in the direction the animal person—also an upper-class adventurer—was pointing, but not a soul was there. Flushed with fury, he punched the animal person in the face.

“Wow…these things really do make people hallucinate!” Nahza murmured.

She was standing at a distance, listening to the angry and confused voices inside the building as she pressed a damp scarf to her nose. In her other hand, she held two wilted flowers. Their petals were blue and red, and when she looked closely she could make out fine grains of golden pollen floating from them. They were another of Fels’s magic items.

To use the flowers, the person first had to impress a certain image on their memory. Whoever breathed in the pollen after that would see visions of that object or person. Certain abilities warded off the illusions, but in a large group of adventurers like this, they were rather effective. Lower-class adventurers and up-

per-class adventurers who hadn't yet gained any immunity shouted out alerts about whatever they saw. The flowers had plunged both the southern sector, where Lilly was, and the south-eastern sector into chaos.

Holding the magic flowers in one hand, Nahza wandered through the night streets as she pleased. Bell had explained how the flowers worked and asked her to simply walk around the southern part of Daedalus Street holding them.

"I wonder where he got these…I'd sure love to know."

Fascinated by the flowers, Nahza tilted her head quizzically.

"What could Bell and his familia be up to…?"

"He's disappeared?"

Aiz had been sprinting from roof to roof as she followed Bell. Now she peered down, astonishment in her golden eyes.

She'd thought he was simply hiding in the shadows for a moment, but he'd suddenly disappeared.

She stopped running and searched the surrounding area from her high perch.

*No, he's still*here .

She had sensed his presence. No matter how well he erased his scent and form, he could not evade the perceptive powers of the first-tier adventurer, who was able to discern the faintest footsteps and hints of presence. Immediately, the veteran swordswoman guessed that he had become invisible.

While the confused adventurers below her chased after mistaken sightings of the boy, Aiz sped through the Labyrinth District in pursuit of the real Bell.

"Sword Princess."

"!"

A figure was blocking Aiz's way forward. The masked adventurer who stood before her wore a long hooded cape and long boots resembling Aiz's own. She drew a wooden sword from her hip.

"I ask you for a contest."

Aiz looked at her in surprise.

"Now?...Here?"

As a leader of the city's largest faction, Aiz had dealt with surprise attacks many times. An assault from an unknown foe was nothing surprising. Neither was it unusual for a fighter confident in her swordsmanship to ask for a contest with the Sword Princess.

She was only surprised that it was happening in this situation.

"I am a creature of the shadows. It is only in a situation like this that I can match my sword against yours," the mysterious figure said.

Her quiet voice did not sound as if it was lying. And interestingly enough, this fighter had an aura not entirely unlike the Sword Princess's. Aiz felt a twinge of something akin to empathy.

But could the timing really be a coincidence?

Her hand on the hilt of her favorite sword, she thought of the boy speeding away from her.

"Pardon me, but I insist."

Aiz was still trying to decide whether or not to ignore the re-

quest when the masked adventurer flew at her on sure feet, her sword slicing the air.

She was incredibly fast!

The speed of the stranger's wooden sword suggested she was a *first-tier adventurer*. Left with no choice, Aiz drew her own weapon. As the sound of blade hitting blade echoed into the night, the momentum of the fight carried the two combatants from the roof down to the alley below.

Aiz knew that even if she had prioritized the pursuit of Bell, the masked adventurer would likely have followed her. Since that would prevent her from watching the boy properly, she had decided to return the attack of the opponent at hand.

Those sparks of light…

Watching as brilliant specks drifted from beneath the masked adventurer's cape, Aiz remained locked in swordplay.



"Um, is that elf going to be okay…?"

A worried look on her face, Haruhime gazed in the direction of the masked adventurer. Hestia, who was looking down at the magical map, also followed her movements.

"All we can do is trust in the elf. She is a very capable fighter, but judging by what I saw in Daedalus Street, that little Wallen-something-or-other is unbelievably strong herself…"

Shortly before, Lyu, the masked elf, had visited Hestia and Haruhime at their post on the southern edge of the Labyrinth District. Bell had asked her to prevent Aiz from following him, and as per his instructions, she had come for a level boost.

Haruhime's powerful sorcery was indispensable if Lyu was going to take up much of the Sword Princess's time.

And so, in the southeastern section of the Labyrinth District, a battle far too fierce for an ordinary skirmish was playing out between Level 5 and Level 6 adventurers.

"Goddess!"

"Bell?"

"Thanks to Lyu, I was able to get away from Aiz…but I haven't been able to attract any of the other *Loki Familia*members. Maybe it would be better if I went to Wiene and the others…?"

He was worried that if he couldn't draw attention toward himself, the Xenos would be risking capture.

"Wait a second, Bell," Hestia said. "Not knowing your location must be scary for *Loki Familia*. At the very least, worry will be lurking at the back of their minds. You know yourself how difficult an invisible enemy can be, right?"

"Well, yes…"

"Do you still have any magic items? If you do, I want you to stay invisible and cause some disturbance among the adventurers. And don't let *Loki Familia*find you. Our supporters should be making their move soon, too."

"…Got it!"

Having convinced Bell to hold firm, Hestia let out a sigh of relief. But a moment later, she was frowning.

"I know I just said that to Bell…but damn. *Loki Familia*'s formation hasn't budged."

"Lady Lilly and Master Bell are doing their best…" Haruhime

said.

Despite the frenetic movements of Bell's and Lilly's symbols on the map, however, *Loki Familia*still encircled the central zone of the Labyrinth District. At least the magic-stone lanterns they could see from the roof hadn't moved.

Lifting their gazes from the magic map, the goddess and the girl looked out impatiently at the central zone.

"So they've made their move," Finn murmured.

Information had begun to come in after the monsters signaled the start of the battle with their howls.

"Word is an al-miraj showed up to the south! And there have been multiple monster sightings in the southeast, too!"

"Bell Cranell was in the southeast as well! And, uh, Aiz has lost track of him…"

"As I said before, Bell Cranell is a diversion. Leave him to Aiz and forget about it. We don't need to do anything in the south or the southeast yet. The west is where I smell something suspicious. Elfie, tell Tione and the others in the northwest to move to the ninety-eighth block and take up positions there."

In fact, the news that Bell had managed to shake off Aiz surprised Finn, but he didn't let it show as he rapidly fired off commands. Seeing the calm demeanor of the captain, the other familia members remained composed themselves, responding with a "Yes, General!" before briskly setting to work.

They were in Daedalus Street's central zone. Like Hestia, Finn had installed himself on top of a tall building with a good view of the whole district. The wide-open, windswept rooftop brought to mind an old castle.

*Loki Familia*communicated by signaling with magic-stone lamps. Familia members were on standby on various rooftops, continually updating central command about what was happening on the ground by flashing the lamps.

Something must have prevented Aiz from moving. An ambush? I hadn't expected the enemy to be so strong…but it's fine. Aiz will probably be back on track soon.

Finn had rested the shaft of his long spear against his right shoulder and was thinking about the situation.

The enemy group is probably fairly large. The fact that our lookouts and scouts haven't spotted any of them and they haven't gotten caught in any of the nets most likely means either that one of them is very familiar with the terrain in Daedalus Street or they have some kind of magic item. Maybe both.

Finn had deduced that the enemy was clustered in one main group due to the likely number of keys to Knossos. Based on the information from Ikelos, he guessed there were no more than two. And there would be no point in the monsters reaching Knossos, which was below the zone that *Loki Familia*was currently guarding, if they weren't able to open the door. Counting adventurers from other factions, Finn's side was patently superior to the monsters in both number and might. And if the two sides encountered each other, it was very unlikely that the enemy would spread out and attack from all directions. That would not be an option for creatures so unwilling to leave behind any of their brethren. Finn had witnessed their strong camaraderie when he crossed swords with them before.

The fact that they had risked revealing their location by letting out those howls must mean they were signaling the jet-black minotaur and the other monsters who had been separated during the battle several days before.

The enemy's movements are what worries me…despite what I

said about the west being the most suspicious.

Finn looked down at his right hand. His thumb was not throbbing.

He looked back out at the Labyrinth District, then turned to a faction member he had held back with him.

“Any news about the black minotaur?”

“Nothing so far.”

“I see…We’ll hold the formation. For now, I’m going to wait and see what happens,” the prum faction leader said.

He resumed his quiet watch.



“Wow…the captain is incredible. Just like he said, the battle has begun.”

Raul Nord was a lackluster *second-tier adventurer*in *Loki Familia*. Despite his Level 4 Status, he didn’t make much of an impression on members of other factions. This was due mostly to his personality. He was the polar opposite of Finn and the other leaders. By his own account, he had accumulated excelia by stealthily picking up opportunities others left behind. This was one reason for his poor self-esteem, the end result of which was his reputation as a bore. His exceedingly average appearance—black hair and black eyes, medium height and weight, and facial features that were neither overly handsome nor especially ugly—probably didn’t help. The deities had given him the alias “High Novice.”

In short, the distinguished leaders of the faction, in whose presence he simply withered, constantly overwhelmed him.

Even now, the human boy was in awe of Finn's ability to accurately assess the state of the battle, and he whispered in amazement as he looked out over the southern and southwestern areas, which were roiling with activity.

"Raul!"

He turned around, surprised by the voice calling his name.

"Um, uh…Captain?!"

It was the very same prum commander he had just been marveling at.

Raul was in the western sector of the Labyrinth District, on a line of defense some distance from the central zone. The sight of Finn walking along the front, not back at headquarters where everyone expected him to be, threw other familia members present into similar confusion.

"Wh-why are you here, General? Don't you need to be directing the action…?"

"The main monster force has arrived in the southeast! And so has the black minotaur! Meet Aiz there and crush them! Tell your unit—we're changing formation! I'll join you there!"

"Yes, sir!" Raul said, standing at attention and responding reflexively to Finn's strong tone as he mentioned the black minotaur.

"Also, Raul, do you remember our positions in Knossos?"

"Uh, do you mean the underground Knossos? I remember, but _"

"Tell me what they are. Something has been bothering me."

Raul was flustered but obeyed Finn's command.

“Uh, Gareth and his group should be guarding the four doors we discovered—northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast…”

“I see…Well then, I’ll head out first. Gather everyone in this area and come to the southeast.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

As Finn set off in that direction, Raul shifted into frantic action, passing on his leader’s command to those posted near him. He was a bit concerned that no similar order had come through the signaling device, but he told himself it was all right because he’d heard it directly from Finn himself. He ceded his own judgment to the order from his eminently accomplished superior.

But what happened to the captain’s spear…?

The memory of Finn standing there empty-handed struck him as strange.

“Huff, puff…!”

Finn was running at full speed.

He flew down the steps at the end of the alley, looked around to make sure that no one was nearby, and then, still running, pressed a hand to his forehead.

“Stroke of midnight’s bell.”

Finn’s form instantly dissolved into thin air. In his place stood Lilly.

“I did it!”

Once again, she’d used Cinder Ella.

“My apologies to you, Finn, but that fuss over the marriage

proposal really came in handy!”

Cinder Ella allowed Lilly to transform her external appearance, but she couldn’t fool anyone unless she imitated the personality of whomever she was impersonating. When Finn proposed to her, she had come to understand his character, and in that sense the experience was now proving extremely useful. Her sharp insight, honed through her former career as a thief, had efficiently analyzed Finn’s speech patterns, mannerisms, and character.

It wasn’t that the memory of his earnest feelings left her completely cold, but her own life and that of the Xenos were on the line. She had no other option. And so, to deceive *Loki Familia*, she had transformed herself into a spot-on copy of Finn.

Lilly’s role in the storming of Daedalus Street was both to create a distraction, like Bell, and to use his actions as a cover for spying.

Most of *Loki Familia*’s members were upper-class adventurers, and the Guild made their basic profiles public. In order to successfully fulfill her role as spy, Lilly had memorized them all. Her old thief’s sense had told her that the High Novice would be the easiest to control, and therefore she had targeted him.

“He’s as simple as Bell!”

Quite pleased with herself, she insulted both adventurers at once as she took an oculus out of her pocket.

Her cheeks flushed, she shouted into the crystal the information she’d extracted.

“As we suspected, the guards are posted at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast doors of Knossos.”

“Well done, Supporter!”

“Lady Lilly, you’re amazing!”

Having listened to Lilly’s report through the oculus, Hestia and Haruhime applauded her.

“With this, we’ll be able to breach their defenses…!”

Hestia Familia’s ace in the hole was Daedalus’s Notebook.

As Fels had pointed out, there was a high likelihood that *Loki Familia*had not discovered all the entry points shown in the book’s maps. The aim of Lilly’s spying had been to find an unobstructed route into Knossos.

Hestia flipped through the pages of the book, which she had with her in addition to the map spread out on the rooftop. She was trying to figure out which of the unguarded entrances to the upper floor of Knossos—in other words, the one directly below Daedalus Street—was closest to the Xenos’s current location.

“The west one! Fels, the western door is unguarded!”

“Thank you, Goddess Hestia!”

The blue crystal at the far end of the row of oculi—the one connected to Fels—sparkled brightly.



The sign hanging at the entrance of the backstreet in western Daedalus Street read 98TH BLOCK.

“Hey, everyone is up in arms about some monsters on the south side. Don’t you think we should head over there, too?”

“Yeah…damn it, we’re off the mark again.”

The pair of adventurers was walking down the abandoned tunnel-like street. One was a human, the other a dwarf. All the other adventurers guarding the area had rushed off to the south side as soon as they heard about the monsters.

On the ceiling above the two stragglers, something was listening to their conversation.

"?!"

Without a sound, the scarlet tail dangling behind the two men wrapped itself around the dwarf's neck.

Unable to cry out, he was whisked upward off the street.

"Huh? Where'd ya—Ack?!"

The dwarf's ax was knocked from his hand by the impact of the attack and fell onto the back of his companion's head.

Looking up, he saw a lizardman clad in armor, his four feet stuck to the ceiling. Easily hoisting up the hefty dwarf, the monster was now looking down on the man with glittering yellow eyes.

The terrified human opened his mouth to scream, but before he could—

"Pardon me."

A mellifluent female voice that one wouldn't expect to hear in such a location echoed from directly behind him. In the next instant, a strange sound wave emanated from directly next to his ear and overwhelmed him.

"Ah-ah-aahh...!"

"Ouch!"

Robbed of both his balance and his consciousness, he fell flat on his face, blood streaming from his ears. The dwarf fainted as well and fell from the rooftop, bubbles frothing from his mouth. The two adventurers lay sprawled on the stone pavement.

"Thanks to Bellucchi and the others, the adventurers have really thinned out…But of course there are still some around," Lido said, dropping from the ceiling with a *thump*.

"It's unlikely things will go easily,"the siren Rei responded.

A lamia and a troll, who had been waiting nearby, poked their faces into the tunnel and then ran over to hide the unconscious adventurers in the shadows. Wiene, still an apprentice, rushed to help.

"They sure are good at this…" Welf said.

"Yes, they really are. They're as stealthy as the ninjas in my hometown…" Mikoto replied. She and Welf had already seen the Xenos take down quite a few adventurers, but they couldn't help commenting on their skill once again.

"We had to do it all the time in the Dungeon," explained the gargoyle Gros, standing next to them. Shortly before, he had been hiding among the stone statues in the Labyrinth District and attacking one unsuspecting adventurer after the next.

"Lady Haruhime, are you sure it's near here?" Mikoto said into the oculus she had just taken out.

"Yes, Lady Mikoto. The closest one to it is…Lady Wiene."

"Me?" the dragon girl asked, cocking her head. She tapped her bluish-white hand along the wall of the tunnel until one of the stones slipped in with a grinding noise.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise as the wall slid aside to reveal

the entrance to a hidden passage.

"Hurry up, before *Loki Familia*gets here. According to Hestia, Braver is a cut above us."

Fels and the Xenos were advancing through Daedalus Street by way of secret passageways and hidden doors in order to avoid adventurers and *Loki Familia*scouts. One reason Fels had asked Hestia to get the Legacy of Daedalus map from Ouranos was that some of the secret passages in the area were unknown even to the mage.

This one, like many of the others they had used, was thick with dust.

Lido breathed flames to serve as an impromptu torch in the stone passageway, which was completely devoid of magic-stone lamps, and the group headed down it. The unicorn neighed as if seized by a fit of coughing, tossing its silvery mane.

"It's Lido, right? There's a branch in the passageway up there. Please take the route that slopes down to the right. The next exit will take you out right near *Loki Familia*."

"Got it, Goddess."

Having Hestia guiding them was a huge help. Not only could they proceed smoothly through the tangled streets of the Labyrinth District while the adventurers were busy getting lost, her support also enabled them to use secret passageways like this one. It was thanks largely to the communication support from her and Haruhime that the circus-like procession of Xenos had remained undiscovered.

"You're the one who surveyed the Labyrinth District, right? Don't you remember where the hidden passageways are?" Welf asked Fels.

“Well, it’s been six hundred years since I made that map. Certain points are less than clear,” the mage replied, black robe shifting as if with a sigh. “I made the map at Ouranos’s request. It took me five years just to survey the ordinary streets, you know…”

“And you didn’t find any streets that led to Knossos?” Mikoto asked.

“No, probably because I was only able to map the surface. Or maybe it was that six hundred years ago the expansion had not yet begun.”

“You’re just a sore loser,” Welf said. But Mikoto sensed some truth in Fels’s words. Daedalus’s family was connected to evil in the city, and she guessed that at the time they may not have had adequate capital or manpower to do the work.

“I…wonder if Bell is doing all right,” Wiene murmured, her words echoing among the long shadows of the monsters in the passageway.

“Wiene, have faith in him for now. Remember what you said about repaying this favor?” said Gros from next to her.

“…Yes,” she answered, nodding firmly.

“Halt!” Fels said.

The end of the passageway was in view. Before they emerged onto the streets, he wanted to have one final meeting.

“When we go out this door, we will be immediately in front of *Loki Familia*’s camp. And there are no more hidden passageways we can use.”

“So that means we’ll have to race to our destination without stopping?”Rei asked.

“Yes. The underground passages leading to Knossos are all

under the central zone, which is in the heart of enemy territory. We'll aim for this one that leads to the western door," Fels said while spreading out the copied plan of Knossos and pointing to the route.

"Thanks to Bell Cranell and Lilliluka Erde, the activities of *Loki Familia*and other adventurers have fallen into disarray. Now is our only chance to break through. Welf Crozzo and Mikoto Yamato…I'm counting on you to intercept any attacks."

Welf and Mikoto nodded.

"Leave it to us. We're on top of it."

"We will protect your lives with our own."

Both were wrapped in the same black Reverse Veil mantles as Bell. In the shadows of the mantles, Mikoto carried a knife and an aqua dagger at her waist, while Welf had a similar dagger and a sword. The hilts of the aqua daggers glinted in the dim passageway.

"…I'm going to count down. Please prepare yourselves."

The line of Xenos and humans moved into a wedge formation well suited to charging. The atmosphere was tense.

"Five, four…"

Lido, armed with a longsword and scimitar, was in the vanguard, together with the unicorn. The middle guard was made up of the lamia, a winged monster, Fels, and Rei, her face smeared with blood for battle paint. Those who were the size of a troll or smaller, along with the slowest of the group and those like Wiene, who had poor combat skills, brought up the rear. Gros, his stone wings creaking, played the role of key rear defenseman.

"Three, two…"

At the front of the formation, Welf and Mikoto threw the Reverse Veils over their bodies and put their hands on the door. Watching on the other side of the oculus, Hestia and Haruhime gulped anxiously, their nerves frayed from the tension in the dark alley. The dragon girl wrapped her arms around her robed form and hugged her slender chest tightly.

"One—Go!"

The instant Fels gave the command, they flung open the door.

"...!!"

Like an arrow released from a taut bowstring, the Xenos shot into the dark night.

They found themselves on a street so narrow it resembled a ravine. Beneath the watchful gaze of the dark brick buildings on either side, the group sprinted forward.

The powerful legs of the lizardman pounded the stone pavement, while above him, the siren's golden wings and the gargoyle's gray ones beat the air.

"E-ENEMY ATTAAAAAACK!!"

Almost as soon as they had set off, the scream of an adventurer rent the air. It was a *Loki Familia*member standing on a rooftop. The first-tier adventurer had noticed the group of monsters materializing from the darkness. He abandoned the signaling device and moved to ring a bell.

Before he could do so, the now-invisible Mikoto scaled the wall as skillfully as a ninja, grabbed the man's ankles, and pulled him off the roof. He didn't even have time to yell out when the unicorn raised its horn and sent the adventurer spinning through the air. His body slammed onto the ground. But that was only the first opponent to spot them.

Another lookout was already ringing bells that echoed through the Labyrinth District.

“They’ve seen us!”

“It doesn’t matter. Keep moving forward!”

*Clang! Clang! Clang!*As the high-pitched ringing of bells and the angry bellows of adventurers engulfed the Labyrinth District, the Xenos ran even faster.

The parade of the monsters had begun.



Shortly before…

“—Raul?”

Finn had quickly noticed the movement in the west.

Troops were leaving their posts and advancing southward. From his position on the high ground, Finn could see the signaling devices flashing, as if they were swaying.

“Th-the western troops are on their way south! He said they were going to encircle the pack of monsters that showed up there!” the messenger said, staring at Finn.

“I’ve heard nothing of the sort! And I never gave a command, so why are they moving on their own?”

“B-but, uh…Mr. Raul said you came directly to him and gave him the command…”

“What?!”

As the messenger explained the situation to the captain, a buzz

passed through the central encampment. Finn alone was seized with a sense of déjà vu.

*Yes! This is just like the war game between*Hestia Familia *and*Apollo Familia *!*

The prum who had invited Bell and his team into the castle—assuming it hadn't been a trick—and then the prum girl who had appeared only at the end of the battle—

Finn whispered unconsciously to himself as the pieces came together.

"So that's what happened…"

"Captain?"

Finn ignored the faction member who was giving him a strange look and instead focused on the face before his mind's eye.

It must be that girl.

He had witnessed the bravery of his fellow prum and guessed that she was the sharpest member of *Hestia Familia*. She must have some magic item—no, some form of magic. He realized she had duped him.

At the same moment, he realized that he had allowed Bell Cranell to monopolize too much of his attention.

"Pull back the troops. And tell Narfi to fill the gap in the formation…No, scratch that. It's too late," he said, shaking his head.

As if to confirm his conclusion that it was too late, the high clanging of bells echoed through the air. Since the sound was coming from the west, it could only be a warning that the monsters had been sighted.

In the next instant, a cacophony of shouts surrounded Finn.

"C-Captain! A large group of monsters has suddenly appeared from the west. They have breached the gap where Raul's troops were and they're heading for the central area!"

"I know. Calm down. Tione's unit probably noticed what's happening, but I want you to call them back. We'll pincer the enemy using the remaining garrison forces."

The commander appeared as calm as ever. Seeing his reaction, the young female faction members also regained their composure, took up their arms, and ran off to their assigned tasks.

"So it was the west after all," Finn murmured to himself. Despite the calm with which he had issued his orders, he asked for additional information with a new urgency.

"What route is the enemy taking? What part of Knossos are they headed for?"

"Uh…straight ahead! They are moving straight east from the point in the west where they appeared!"

" *Straight ahead?*So their route takes them toward the west of Knossos?"

For the first time, Finn's composure crumbled.

He looked at the faction member, who was nodding confusedly, and then shifted his gaze to the dark Labyrinth District.

I thought that if they appeared in the west, they would head either to the north or the south…

*Loki Familia*had discovered four entrances to Knossos: the northeast entrance, where the charging vouivre girl had appeared, plus the northwest, southwest, and southeast entrances.

Even now, Finn's troops were closely guarding the orichalcum doors to these entrances inside the underground passages.

They can't know of a route into Knossos that we haven't found, can they?

Over the past several days, the faction had made an extremely thorough search for underground passageways leading to Knossos. But what if they had missed one, and the enemy knew where it was?

Suddenly Finn remembered something.

The god Ikelos mentioned the existence of a book called Daedalus's Notebook. He said it contained a plan of Knossos… Could the enemy have that book?

When they took in Ikelos, he'd said he didn't have it. And Finn had believed him.

But if he'd been deceived—

"This is bad," Finn muttered, looking down at his right thumb.

The captain's razor-sharp instincts were directly linked to this digit. Whenever it ached, he knew danger was near.

Yet that thumb, which throbbed at the approach of an insect, was quiet now.

Did I depend too heavily on my instincts?

Even as he reflected with shame on his error, Finn quickly shifted gears.

He had originally anticipated luring the monsters into the underground passageways. Now he tossed aside that more extreme plan and looked out at the streets of the Labyrinth District where

the monsters likely were at this very moment. His thoughts were moving so fast that the outside world faded away.

"Hey, Finn!"

His patron deity's drawl broke his concentration.

"Loki, where were you?" he asked, without turning to look at the goddess who had arrived at the hectic headquarters.

"Oh, here and there..."

The vermilion-haired goddess walked up to him from behind.

"Thinking about something, are you, Finn?"

"Yes. It seems I overestimated my own abilities a bit. I'd appreciate if you could give me some time to myself right now."

Loki stared at the side of his face, which he had kept averted as he spoke. Then she smiled ever so slightly and placed her hands on his narrow shoulders.

"Finn—get to the bottom of this," she whispered into his ear.

He abandoned his previous train of thought.

Did she mean the monsters or Bell?

Without turning his head, he looked at Loki. Her eyes were narrowed, and she was smiling.

"With your own two eyes. Don't rely on anyone else."

"..."

"As for the decisions after that, I leave those to you. I won't say a word."

Loki stepped quickly away from Finn, back to her usual self. She laughed foolishly. As the blue-eyed prum gazed at her, she waved, then disappeared like a capricious twilight.

"..."

Still standing at his high, incessantly noisy post, Finn sighed.

The next moment, however, he assumed an expression befitting a commander and trained his gaze once again on the darkness of Daedalus Street.

He knew what he needed to do. He called a faction member over to him.

"Bring Raul to me. Now."



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INTERLUDE

Three Orphans, A Cry In The Night, And A Bloody Maze

Chigusa Hitachi and Ouka Kashima were at a loss.

"Please! Please help us! Ruu's gone back to the church!"

They were near the northwestern outskirts of Daedalus Street. A large number of the Labyrinth District's residents were gathered in this spot not far from East Main Street, one of the city's central arteries. The evacuation order the Guild issued several days prior had instructed them to gather there. *Takemikazuchi Familia*was among this crowd, surrounded by children.

"He said he had a pet cat he hadn't told anyone about, and he had to go get it, and then he left, and, and…"

"And the monsters are out now…"

"Everything will be fine. Just calm down…okay?"

Chigusa and the other members of *Takemikazuchi Familia*had originally set out for Daedalus Street because their patron deity asked them to help Bell, but then Guild staff requested their help with the overwhelming number of evacuees, and they hadn't been able to say no.

*Ganesha Familia*and other adventurers were guarding the surrounding area as the Guild staff desperately tried to lead the crowd to East Main Street. With the howling of the monsters,

everything south of their location had become a battle zone, which meant the only evacuation route left was north toward East Main Street. All the exits in that direction were packed with people, and the situation had devolved into a massive human traffic jam. The townsfolk were terrified of the monsters.

The children standing in front of Chigusa—Lai, the human boy, and Fina, the chienthrope—were no exception.

"I, too, am begging you. Please, somehow, find that boy…!" the elderly nun Mother Maria pleaded, adding her voice to the chorus.

"Try to keep your chin up. I don't know what I'll do if even adults like you start crying," Ouka said. He was too exhausted to muster more than this awkward response to the entreaty of the thin, black-haired woman. With most of *Ganesha Familia*'s members and other adventurers busy guarding convoys of evacuees, Maria seemed to be grasping at straws. All the more so considering it was just one little boy.

"All right, we'll look for him. Tell us how to get there…No, never mind, it's no use. I have no sense of direction around here," he said.

"Please let me go with you! I'll show you the way to the church!" Maria said.

"I want to go, too!"

"Me too!"

Lai's and Fina's requests surprised Chigusa and Ouka.

"Lai!" Maria shouted, trying to stop the boy. Ignoring her, he and Fina clung to Ouka before she could tell them it was too dangerous.

“We may not be connected by blood…but we’re a family!”

At those words, Ouka understood everything. He furrowed his brow as he tried to decide what to do.

“Orphans…Damn it. I’m a pushover.”

Both Ouka and Chigusa were orphans themselves. So was Mikoto, who had transferred to *Hestia Familia*. Each had lost their family under different circumstances, but all had grown up at a home run by Takemikazuchi and other benevolent deities.

Lai and the other kids probably went through the same things we did, Ouka thought, bringing his hand to his muscular neck.

“Chigusa…I’m sorry. Can they come?” he said.

Chigusa smiled and shook her head, revealing her right eye, which was ordinarily covered by her bangs.

She liked the awkward, kind Ouka.

He smiled back at her wryly.

“Okay, take us there!”

“This way!”

Leaving the other adventurers behind, Chigusa and Ouka headed off with Maria and the children.

Cassandra Illion was carrying something.

“Whew! This is heavy…!”

Her arms were wrapped as far as they could reach around the huge wooden box as she tottered through the hushed Labyrinth District.

She was in the northeastern section, and fortunately for her, not a monster or an adventurer was to be seen. There was only an eerie, faint light. The *Miach Familia*emblem, an abstracted human form, shone above the rod she had attached hastily at her hip. Her long hair swaying and her timid, droopy eyes darting about more than usual, she was making her way through the mazelike back alleys—when, suddenly, the box in her arms began to shake and rustle.

"D-don't move," she whispered nervously to her cargo.

After a quick scan of her surroundings, she was relieved to see that no one was nearby—or so she thought.

"There you are, Cassandra! What are you sneaking around all by yourself for?"

"Eeek!"

Her friend Daphne Laulos appeared from behind. As the startled Cassandra looked up at her, the box slipped from her hands onto the stone pavement. An instant later, a high whimpering sound came from inside.

"…"

"…"

Daphne froze.

Cassandra turned white.

"Cassandra…really?" Daphne said with quivering lips as she stared at the shaking box.

"D-Daph, you're wrong! Wait—please wait!"

Cassandra stretched her arms out to block her way, but Daphne pushed her aside and opened the wooden crate.

“Kyuu…”

“Woof…”

Inside sat a hellhound and a teary-eyed al-miraj pressing one paw to its head where it had bumped it in the fall.

“Whaaaaaaaat? What in the world?”

“D-Daph, keep your voice down!”

The two monsters jumped up at the sound of Daphne’s screech, sending Cassandra into a panic. Daphne’s almond-shaped eyes revealed a mixture of anger and confusion beneath her short hair, and she drew close to her friend.

“Cassandra. You idiot! What are you doing? Don’t tell me you’re hiding one of those monsters with a bounty on its head?!”

“No, that’s not it at all! I’m, well…It’s because I had a vision!”

A little less than a week earlier, Cassandra had dreamed of being swallowed up in a jet-black wave. Just as she was on the verge of death, she had taken out a rabbit charm she’d gotten and managed to escape. It was an extraordinarily frightening dream and, as usual, totally unexpected.

From the experience she’d gained during her eighteen years of life, the girl knew that this type of precognitive dream was extremely bad. Trusting in the dream’s frightful message, she had made her way to a desolate alleyway five days earlier—on *that*day, the day *that*happened, when it really would have been better not to go. There she had found where the charm had been dropped…and there was the white fluff ball. And the black fur ball.

They were wet with blood and completely exhausted. Both were lying prone and unconscious, their limbs splayed. The rabbit

charm of her dream, it turned out, was an al-miraj and a hell-hound.

Cassandra had nearly fainted with shock—but her obsession with her vision of utter destruction kept her focused. Her face white and her hands and feet shaking, she hid the two monsters in a box she found lying around and brought them back to her own room that same day. It was a miracle that neither Miach nor Nahza nor Daphne nor any of the other adventurers had found her out.

Cassandra was not protecting Xenos—monsters. To the contrary, she was terrified of them even now. But she had to keep the "rabbit charms" with her until the fateful day. She had no choice but to feed them pieces of Jyaga Maru Kun so they didn't starve to death. It definitely wasn't because the white monster made a sniffling mewing cry or because the black one made a grunting barking cry. Incidentally, they liked the potato snacks. After that, Cassandra always fed the girls (were they girls?) potatoes. *I wonder if I'm meant to be a tamer*, she wondered nervously.

In the end, Miach (who still couldn't bring himself to tell his familia about the Xenos) and Cassandra (too afraid to tell Miach the truth) had rather impressively managed to avoid each other. But Daphne couldn't care less about Cassandra's explanations.

"Your stupid dreams again!! Give it a break, will you? And get out of my way!!"

If word got out about this, *Miach Familia*would be making Bell's mistake all over again. For the sake of her familia, and more than anything for the sake of her friend, Daphne drew her baton-like dagger from her hip.

"Kyuu?!"

"N-no, Daphne, don't!"

“Let them go, Cassandra!”

Daphne tried to pull the shrieking al-miraj free from Cassandra, who was gripping it from behind. Her glittering dagger seemed to be shouting that monsters must be killed on the spot, when—

Thump!

“—”

Just as Daphne and Cassandra heard *something* ferociously pounding the cobblestones, an enormous shadow engulfed them.

When the petrified girls turned their heads, they saw a huge black form looming against the dark night sky.

Its skin was covered in rivers of crimson blood, which for all they knew came from vanquished enemies. Its upraised foreleg held the double-headed ax known as a Labrys. The beast pierced the girls with its terrifying stare and raised the huge weapon like a guillotine.

Daphne’s face lost all trace of color, and Cassandra’s crumpled with fear. Although both were upper-class adventurers, the overwhelming strength of their opponent was obvious. They were certain that in the next instant they would be reduced to lumps of meat.

Just as they had accepted that death was imminent, however, they heard a sound.

“Kyuu!”

The al-miraj and hellhound had jumped out of their box and were standing between them and the beast. As the al-miraj hopped and screeched again and again, the silent jet-black monster gave no answer…then slowly lowered its ax. It passed before

the girls, who still stood as unmoving as statues, and disappeared into the night.

The al-miraj looked up at Cassandra, gave a final *kyuu*, and straddled the hellhound. The two monsters followed the black beast into the darkness.

"…"

"…"

A silence like the quiet after a storm descended on the two girls.

Cassandra collapsed to the ground and wrapped her arms around Daphne's waist.

Daphne was just barely holding herself together, but her knees were about to give way. She awkwardly made eye contact with Cassandra, who smiled tensely back at her.

"S-s-see? They s-s-s-s-saved us…!"

"Ha-ha—and of course it's all because you brought those things home, right?!" Daphne said, knocking Cassandra on the head with her fist.

"Ouch!" Cassandra yelped, pressing her hand to her head.

The animal girl turned pale.

"Quick, call a healer! Or get a potion—anything you can find!" someone screamed.

"It's awful…" groaned another.

"How many of us were taken out?!"

Properly speaking, it was Lilly, transformed into an animal

person, who was pale—pale from the pandemonium of the adventurers and the sight of the mazelike alleyway dyed red from end to end. Her animal ears quivered as she stared at the bodies of adventurers piled in heaps.

Which of the separated Xenos did this? Or was it all of them? Even if it was all of them, this is…

Lilly and Bell were supposed to join up with the scattered Xenos and, if possible, bring them together with Fels and the other Xenos. If that proved impossible, the last-ditch plan was for them to use the second key—which one of the Xenos had—and find another route to Knossos on their own.

Right now, Lilly was in the eastern section of the Labyrinth District, where a sign on the wall written in Koine read 277TH BLOCK.

The call that Lido sent out at the start of the battle had instructed the separated Xenos to meet up in this district. Thanks to her former career as a spy, Lilly had been able to sneak here, but…

A group of adventurers must have found them…and I guess the Xenos took them all out in self-defense. From the looks of it, the party was quite large, and they probably had no other choice…

Stairways led up and down from the mazelike alley, and a great number of side streets branched off to the left and right. The street and walls were smeared with fresh blood, turning the entire alleyway into a red world. A bloodied Amazon lay slumped against a crumbling wall, her neck broken. A dwarf lay staring blankly up at the sky, his prized hammer and armor pulverized. The bloody calamity had rained down equally on upper- and lower-class adventurers.

“Ugh…?!”

Even for Lilly, with her long experience as a supporter, the brutal picture of deep lacerations, twisted arms and legs, and bones jutting from flesh was a sight terrible enough to drain the blood from her face. Could they really be alive? Lilly pressed her hand to her mouth. She lacked the courage to enter that circle of still-groaning adventurers and find out.

*Some of them are members of*Loki Familia *...I wonder if Sir Finn guessed at the monsters' hiding place and sent out scouts? After all this uproar, the Xenos probably won't be coming back here...*

Among the unconscious adventurers, Lilly found a few of the fool emblems and gulped. The crushed walls and stone pavers that littered the aftermath of the battle brought to mind the monster that had managed to inflict this much damage. The image was...that jet-black minotaur whose fierce howls she had heard before.

Did a monster capable of this much damage really need help?

Lilly began to search the alleyway for signs that might lead her to the Xenos. Each time she found an adventurer who was still breathing, she felt both tremendous relief and tremendous unease.



Whether with fists or kicks, he struck them.

That was all it took.

"Aaaaaaaahhhhhhh?!"

One of the hunters tossed aside his weapons and tried to run, but he was overtaken right away and received a kick for his efforts. Just like his fellow hunters, he collapsed, vomiting blood.

It wasn't fair to call this a struggle. He couldn't even call it hunting.

Tormented by the hunger that grew and grew out of control, he returned to his brethren—the ones who had been separated. Hunters had been attacking them, and he saved them.

His rabbit kin had hopped with joy, saying he was truly someone to count on.

His winged kin had mumbled pitifully, saying perhaps he'd gone too far.

The brethren who witnessed his hunger fell into two categories. Those who praised it and those who feared it.

He realized that even among his own he was a maverick. His dream was fundamentally different from theirs. They had feelings for these places on the surface and for the people who inhabited them. But he had none. He could find meaning only in struggle.

We must part ways here, he thought.

He saw that his dream might destroy the dream of his kin. He would give them the key. The key with the eyeball buried in it. The object he'd been keeping for them until now. When he told them that he didn't need it, the brother in the red hat asked him a question.

"What will you do now?"

He told them what his intentions were.

To fight. To open a path.

And.

That he sensed the dream he was searching for was here on the surface.

"...I understand. I wish you good fortune in war."

He turned his back on the brethren, who were mourning their parting.

Perhaps it would be an eternal separation.

He had a premonition that would be the case, but it didn't matter. Not if he was able to find his dream here on the surface.

Concealing his oversized form and presence in the blackness, he continued his journey of seeking.

To meet again—and to fight again.



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CHAPTER 5
Ultra Soul!

"..."

Tiona discovered the body of an adventurer hidden among the ruins.

The adventurer was not dead—only unconscious.

As she looked at the human with blood running from both ears, she groped around her waist.

"Damn, I don't have any potions with me," she said, realizing she'd forgotten to bring her items.

"Tiona, hurry up!" her sister called. Reluctantly, she left the adventurer behind.

Without using her hands, she scaled the structure that surrounded the tunnel-like passage where she'd been. At the top, she found her sister, Tione, who like Tiona had been ordered to serve as both scout and guerrilla fighter. The Amazon was stamping her bare feet and looking irritated.

"Ugh, this is so frustrating! We're doing what the captain said, but we're not finding any monsters. Daedalus Street is so annoying. It's nothing but twists and turns and dead ends."

Not to mention ups and downs.

The western section of the Labyrinth District, where the two sisters were, was so complex they felt like they were walking

through a trompe l'oeil painting. It was no wonder Tione was irritated.

"Our opponent may be moving faster than Finn's commands," Tiona said.

"Are you suggesting the captain is falling behind? I'll kick your ass for saying that!" her sister growled in defense of her beloved leader.

"You're pretty annoying yourself!" Tiona snapped back with a fed-up look on her face, before mumbling that Tione was right. "But yeah, I think Finn's instructions are spot-on. I bet the monsters passed near here."

"...Did you find something?"

Tiona remained silent for a moment, gazing into the distance before answering.

"I've been thinking, Tione. Those monsters that we're after—"

She did not complete the thought. The clanging of a bell broke the silence.

"The signal for a monster sighting...! Let's go, Tiona!"

"...Yeah!"

Watching her sister race off, Tiona seemed to change her attitude of a moment before. She shouldered her double-edged sword and followed Tione.



Like a ferocious wave, the Xenos were barreling straight down the road in a single line.

They were in the western section of the Labyrinth District, near the center. After emerging from the shortcut immediately in front of *Loki Familia*'s formation, the monsters were now running as fast as they could toward the underground passage to Knossos.

"Thanks to Lillicchi, there aren't any adventurers around!" said Lido at the head of the group.

"Don't let down your guard! They're coming!" Fels yelled up from the center of the line. The mage was right: *Loki Familia*members were at that very moment rushing from the center, northwest, and southwest to fill the gap in the formation.

"Archers, take your positions!" *Loki Familia*platoon leaders shouted.

The archers drew back their bows and aimed at the advancing group of monsters. Positioned on buildings in front and to the left and right, they were about to unleash a tri-directional rain of arrows on the Xenos.

But.

"?!"

"It's coooooold?!"

The elves and animal people who had been fitting their arrows to their bows were suddenly half-*frozen*. A blizzard that materialized from thin air had blindsided the girls. The bow, arm, shoulder, and half the face of each demi-human were covered in an armor of ice. They cried out at the bitter cold.

"Sorry...!"

"Apologies for the surprise attack!"

Under their veils, Welf and Mikoto whispered their regrets. Their invisible hands gripped the aqua-colored magic daggers they had drawn from their sheaths.

By running alongside the Xenos at a set distance and letting the noisy band of advancing monsters draw the attention of their opponents, Welf and Mikoto had managed to pull off the perfect sneak attack. Even the upper-class *Loki Familia*adventurers were helpless against this bombardment from their blind side by an invisible enemy. There was no escaping the blizzard from such close range as it swept over a wide area the instant it was released; even those who attempted to defend themselves from the aqua-blue wave of cold were imprisoned in ice.

The magic ice daggers were called Hiens.

Welf had worked without sleep or rest to forge the two blades for this day. Their beauty, which recalled crystals carved from ice, belied their cruel icy waves that froze anything in their way. Welf and Mikoto each carried one.

Flames or lightning would wound an adventurer, but ice—while painful—could be reversed without seriously harming the enemy.

"With these, we can get by without damaging the city!"

Welf smiled half-heartedly, unable to fully give himself over to pride in his creation.

The Crozzo magic daggers and the original Sage's magic items made for a wicked combination. Without revealing that *Hestia Familia*had sided with the monsters, they were able to completely immobilize the targets of their surprise attacks.

Not only were the adventurers on the rooftops unable to pull back their bows, they were also unable to move, because their feet and even the ground was frozen. As the adventurers below looked

up, dumbfounded at the frozen blocks of ice that their companions had become, Welf and Mikoto leaped to the ground and unleashed another attack.

"Aaaaaaahhh!"

The adventurers on the ground screamed as they were enveloped in the blizzard, and the Xenos charged forward.

"Yaaaaaaaarrrr!"

Led by the lizardman and unicorn, the parade of monsters hurled themselves against the frozen adventurers. Animal people flew through the air. Humans were thrown against walls. Weapons and fragments of armor scattered. As they broke through the enemy line, the Xenos let loose a chorus of monster bellows.

"Lady Haruhime! Tell me the way forward!" Mikoto screamed into her oculus.

"There's a road off to the right a little farther ahead!" Haruhime responded.

Leaving Welf to watch for enemy pursuers, Mikoto went to intercept adventurers approaching from other streets. With the help of Hestia and Haruhime, she was able to forestall them without getting lost herself, sending waves of cold over them as they rushed toward the Xenos. The adventurers became her magic dagger's quarry as she plastered herself to a wall above their heads and waited to ambush them. They cried out as the ice forced them to halt.

The invisible Welf and Mikoto were able to hold the sporadic groups of *Loki Familia*fighters entirely in check.

"Go, Welf and Mikoto! You get 'em…!"

Hestia pumped her fist into the air as she looked down at the magic map. She could see the symbols for Welf and Mikoto moving frenetically around the Xenos, who were advancing east straight through the central zone of the Labyrinth District. She cheered on her familia members as they did their utmost to hold back the enemy's approach.

"Found ya!"

Unfortunately, the goddess's prayers were dashed.

"—!! Shit?!!"

"Gros!"

The gargoyle rearguard spun around as he sensed a flash of light flying toward him. A knife had been hurled toward the group at high speed. It crashed into his stone right wing—which he had spread to protect his brethren in the rear—and shattered it like a hammer.

Rei, who had been singing as she flew along, looked back—and saw two Amazonian women, their black hair flying behind them.

"I knew they were around here!" one shouted.

"We've caught up with them!" the other responded.

Rei and Gros widened their eyes simultaneously.

There was no way they could have forgotten those two Amazons.

They were the same extremely strong first-tier adventurers who had trampled the Xenos in this very city several days before.

"OHOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Gros let out a tremendous yell. His warning alerted Lido at the

front and Fels in the center to the threat, and Welf and Mikoto, too, instantly turned around.

“The Hyrute sisters!”

“So they’re here…! Let’s give ’em hell!”

“Yeah!”

Welf and Mikoto immediately dropped what they were doing and ran to intercept Tiona and Tione, who were approaching with incredible speed. Dropping from the front of the formation to the back, they lifted the Hiens. Welf was on one side of the Xenos and Mikoto on the other, running on top of the buildings lining the street. They aimed their daggers at their opponents and, at nearly the same moment, swung them forward.

They were sure they had targeted the sisters’ blind spots, as they had managed to do with the other adventurers up till now—but the sisters dodged.

“?!”

Welf and Mikoto were too surprised to utter a word. The sisters had reacted with incredible speed to the blizzard that materialized from thin air, evading it quite easily.

“What was that? Is there an ice bird around here or something?” Tione called out, brushing a strand of long black hair from her face.

“Seems a little too powerful for that!” Tiona replied, glancing backward at the enormous icy form that had risen up in the street. Returning her gaze to the front, the Amazonian girl called out to her sister again as she ran.

“Hey, Tione. Someone’s here, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if they’re shape-shifting or they’ve made

themselves invisible…but there are two of them for sure."

The sisters looked up and directed their piercing gazes at two points ahead and above them.

Welf and Mikoto shuddered. The sisters had accurately pinpointed their locations. For all their invisibility and freezing blizzards, they both realized that one blow from the sisters would crush them.

The twin warriors were she-devils incarnate.

The sight of the Level 6 first-tier adventurers bearing down on them was truly petrifying. Yet even though the glint in the sisters' eyes filled them with a horror unlike any they'd experienced before, they summoned their courage.

"Lady Hestia, is there any terrain coming up that we can use?!"

"Uh, um…Sorry, Welf, there's nothing! No turnoffs and no obstacles! The road just gets wider and wider. Looks like the only thing is a downward slope…"

The wind was so strong that it nearly blew Welf's veil off and drowned out his questions as he spoke into the oculus. The answer sounded like a screech. He could sense that the invisible Mikoto was growing anxious as well. He looked up, startled.

"A slope…!"

Far in the distance down the arrow-straight road, he could see a hill that appeared to lead into a basin.

The young smith spoke once more into the blue crystal in his hand.

"Lady Hestia, please connect me with those two."

Hestia understood immediately who he meant by "those two." Working with the flustered Haruhime, she pushed Mikoto's and Fels's crystals together with Welf's so they could hear him.

Mikoto and Fels paused for a moment after hearing the gamble Welf proposed, then agreed. Fels spoke first.

"We have no other choice. We're betting on your magic daggers, Welf Crozzo. Lido, run as fast as you can!"

"I'll try, too, Sir Welf!" Mikoto said.

"I'm counting on you!"

The Xenos mustered their strength and ran even faster.

Having given up on aiming directly at the approaching sisters, Welf and Mikoto now attempted to stop them by freezing the road, throwing up dozens of ice walls and knife-sharp ice mountains to block their progress. But Tiona and Tione crushed each one in the space of a single breath, slashing them down with the double-edged sword, kukri knives, and even their bare feet. Mikoto grimaced at the sight of the extraordinary woman warriors in savage pursuit of the Xenos amid a blizzard of shattered ice chunks.

"Run! Run!" the lizardman shouted to his brethren again and again in the howling language only the other monsters could understand. They had to take full advantage of every second Welf and Mikoto gained for them.

Wiene gasped for breath as she ran, and the flat-footed troll flapped its arms even more clumsily than usual as they tried to keep up. Lido and Fels took on the other *Loki Familia*members who Welf and Mikoto—now fully focused on the Amazons—were no longer able to hold back. Lido's longsword and scimitar mowed down all who tried to block their progress forward, while Fels's jet-black gloves sent out invisible shock waves that kept

others from approaching.

Rei, who was flying above the party, dropped back to Gros's position to protect Wiene and the other Xenos at the rear, as well as Welf and Mikoto. With feather projectiles from her wings, she somehow managed to intercept the knives that Tione threw and send them to the ground before they reached their intended targets. But again and again, the white blades made their way through her defense and ripped into the siren's body.

As the parade of monsters grew increasingly ferocious and the fighting verged on spinning out of control, the narrow road began to widen as Hestia had said it would. Soon they were running down an avenue more than eight meders wide.

"This is annoying! Tiona, you throw something, too!" Tione shouted, clicking her tongue in irritation at her inability to draw closer to the Xenos.

"Okay, but Urga is all I've got!" Tiona called back before hurling the double-edged sword.

The massive hunk of metal was impossible to fend off. Welf, Mikoto, and Gros gaped at it, and Rei shrieked shrilly for her kin to get out of the way.

With no time even to glance backward, Wiene and the others in the rear rushed away. In the next instant, the huge double-edged sword hit the ground.

"?!"

The stone pavement buckled at the tremendous impact, sending the Xenos flying. Avoiding a direct hit by a mere hairbreadth, they tumbled down a slope paved in black bricks.

It was the hill Hestia had told them about.

"Tiona, let's kill them he—"

Tione stopped mid-sentence. She had just begun to descend the slope with her sister, who had retrieved her sword from the ground before running on. She sensed that the invisible sources of the bombardment had stopped in the middle of the road at the bottom of the hill.

"They've stopped!"

"So they think they can cut us off?!"

Tiona and Tione knew their opponents were facing them, poised for battle.

Instantly, they realized they were facing the fiercest attack yet. In the distance, they could see the monsters falling back into formation as they escaped, but they nevertheless made their decision without an instant's hesitation.

"I'll shield you. Kill them, Tiona!"

"Okay!"

Rather than retreat from the wide avenue, the sisters had chosen to charge the enemy.

Tiona stood directly behind Tione, hiding in her shadow; her older sister would take the fire while she brought down the enemy. Their target was clear.

As Mikoto braced herself for a direct attack from the warrior sisters who were ready to risk their lives in the fight, sweat trickled beneath her veil.

But her heart was as clear and quiet as a perfectly still pool of water.

If they lost the upper hand here, everything was over.

If the enemy caught up with the Xenos, they would be de-

stroyed—and she could not let that happen.

The girl from the Far East met the gazes of the approaching first-class adventurers with her invisible eyes and brought her hand to the hilt of her magic dagger.

"!"

Welf swung his dagger from his position diagonally below them in a final attempt to stop the advance. Unfazed, Tiona and Tione positioned themselves firmly in the middle of the slope. Whether their opponents tried to freeze them or burn them, the sisters were confident they could withstand the attacks. No matter how terribly they were wounded, they would not back down from their enemy. They flew through the air toward the invisible presences.

The instant before they made contact, the sisters heard a metallic *shing*.

"—"

The sound was neither ice crystals forming nor raging flames.

It was the sound of a glittering metal blade sliding along its sheath—and a sword being loosened from its scabbard.

Mikoto, crouched low to the ground, had two weapons at her hip. One was her third-tier adventurer's weapon, Kotetsu. The other was a sword with a magic blade.

As the first-class adventurers gaped, Mikoto's eyes flashed with determination. She waited for just the right moment, then drew the weapon.

Welf smiled as he watched.

"Go get 'em, Fubu."

“—!!”

The jade-colored blade sparkled as it was freed from its confines with a single swift, silent movement.

As it flashed before the eyes of Tione and Tiona, the blade released a hurricane-force gale.

“Wha—?”

“You’re kidding me!”

The sisters literally flew backward in the gust.

There was no fighting against the bombardment. The twins were blown high into the air and far away into the distance, completely unable to “withstand” anything.

Their hair whipping around them, Tiona and Tione disappeared from the battlefield.

“We did it…Oops!” Mikoto said, struggling to hold down her Reverse Veil as the powerful back draft pushed it up.

The Xenos cheered.

“Hurry up, they’re not knocked out of the fight! They’ll be back before you know it!” Welf shouted to them.

Like the Hien, the Fubu could not kill or wound. It simply created a strong wind. It lacked even the power to lacerate its victims, and so long as it was used correctly, it would inflict no wounds. The instant Tione and Tiona hit the ground, they would most likely rush back toward their opponents in a fit of fury.

But Fels couldn’t help letting out a shout, even as Welf urged the Xenos along.

“Down with the first-class adventurers!”

Mikoto may have made ample use of the magic blade and veil, but she had nevertheless driven off the sisters, and Fels was praising her for it.

And now...!

As the Xenos continued moving forward, the mage felt confident of their position.

The fact that Amazon the Slasher and Jormungand had intercepted them was likely the result of a miscalculation on *Loki Familia*'s part. With guards posted throughout the Labyrinth District as well as at the doors to Knossos, few troops were free to move unhindered—let alone the Sword Princess, who was glued to Bell, and Finn, who was tied up commanding the operation.

The underground path to Knossos was close now. If things continued like this, Fels believed they would be victorious. But just at that moment—

"_"

The black-clad mage saw a lone shadow cross the sky.



"I am sorry, Captain!"

It was earlier in the night, and at *Loki Familia*headquarters, Raul Nord was bowing obsequiously. Finn kept his back to Raul as he gazed out at the western section of Daedalus Street, which was now a battlefield.

"B-because of me, th' battle formation was destroyed...! But th' phony captain looked just like you! I mean he coulda been your twin. Two peas in a pod! That's why I didn't see through him...! Oh geez, I am so, so sorry!"

“There’s nothing to be done about it now, and I don’t have the time to hold you to account. Just answer my questions, Raul.”

With that, Finn began to calmly question his pale, quivering underling.

“Did my imposter ask you anything?”

“Huh?”

The question confused Raul. He searched his memory.

“Uh…he said monsters had been sighted in th’ south and told me to move the unit…and then, I’m fairly sure that after that he asked me where th’ guards were positioned in Knossos.”

“I see…Good work, Raul. You’ve confirmed my suspicions.”

Ignoring the bewildered Raul, Finn continued as if reciting a monologue.

“Our opponents went so far as to impersonate me in order to find out where the guards were positioned in Knossos…I don’t want to believe it, but there’s no other explanation. They must have Daedalus’s Notebook.”

If that was the case, then all they had to do once they knew the locations guarded by *Loki Familia*was follow the plan of Knossos to one of the unguarded entrances, avoiding all contact with *Loki Familia*.

“It’s meaningless for us to guard the underground doors. Raul, I’ve already called back half the guard units and told them to wait aboveground. Take this message to them.”

“Yes, sir!”

Finn stared straight down onto the battlefield as he spoke.

“Send Gareth on a sortie.”



Back in the present, the shadow that Fels had seen approaching lifted the weapon in its hand skyward.

“—”

It was a huge battle-ax.

The figure holding it was a mighty dwarf warrior, his mantle flapping in the chill night air that had descended after the rain.

As Fels watched the aged warrior plunge downward, eyes bulging ferociously, the mage tossed appearances to the wind and let out a piercing scream.

“Run!!”

An instant later, the warrior landed.

“Yaaaah!”

He swung his battle-ax downward, shattering the black brick pavement.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrhhhhh!”

Gareth’s blow bounced high and fell like a meteorite, exploding in the center of the line of Xenos.

Immediately Fels released a shock wave. The Xenos were not injured, but the combined force of the blow and the shock wave was strong enough to crumble the earth and throw them back. Not one was left standing—not Welf, not Mikoto, not Wiene. The sound of the rumbling earth mixed with the cries of the monsters, most of whom had been hurled against the walls.

Cracks split the stone pavement and fissures ran up the sides of the buildings, sending walls thundering down.

“Guess I got carried away. I’ll have to pay for those,” Gareth said, readjusting his helmet. Swinging his battle-ax up onto his shoulder, he broke into a run.

He was closing in on Fels, who was plastered to a wall.

“?!”

Gareth had guessed that the figure in black was a commander of sorts for the monsters and prudently set his sights on the head of the group. The dwarf’s merciless ax cut through the air toward Fels. The instant before it struck, a longsword and scimitar knocked it away.

“Yaarrhh!”

“Huh?”

The side of the sword slashed into the ax, driving it off course and sending it crashing into the wall directly next to Fels.

Even as he pressed his own wounds, Lido had swooped down on Gareth, and now he immediately raised his weapon to mow him down with a second blow. But Gareth pulled his ax back first and, eyes narrowed, drove the pommel into the lizardman’s breastplate.

“Ooof!”

The monster’s massive body flew back as easily as if it were a feather, rolling onto the cracked stone pavement. Fels thrust out both hands and released a shock wave from point-blank range, but the dwarf warrior swiftly leaped to the side, successfully avoiding it.

“OHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

The gargoyle's command echoed through the air, and the next instant the Xenos were flying at Gareth in unison. They had realized they had to deal with this demi-human if they were going to escape. Coughing violently from all the dust, Welf and Mikoto checked that they were still invisible and watched the battle in terror.

More than ten Xenos surrounded the dwarf, but still he managed to keep them at bay, overwhelming his opponents with his sheer strength. Using his ax, he sliced off the jabbing horn of the unicorn and the flailing tail of the lamia, before sending the troll flying with a fierce punch from his gauntlet-clad fist. Even the lizardman and the gargoyle, who were the strongest of the bunch, were dispensed within a matter of seconds.

The scene was an exact replay of the one that had unfolded five days earlier in the Labyrinth District. The overwhelmingly powerful Level 6 adventurer was trouncing the monsters. The most terrifying thing of all was the intense presence of the dwarf who stood in front of them, more frightening even than that of the Amazonian sisters or the werewolf.

"—Aaah!"

With all her might, Rei released a wave of sound.

The strange shriek caught Gareth off guard. For the first time, his notably un-dwarflike mental agility dulled for an instant. Welf and Mikoto, who had been standing stock-still until that moment, realized this could be their only chance to act.

"!"

Gareth sidestepped the blizzard that Welf's Hien drew from thin air, but the wave of frigid air that Mikoto released a moment later froze one of his legs. Standing their ground, Welf and Mikoto unleashed a second attack on the trapped dwarf.

The first-class adventurer was imprisoned in a world of freezing winds, ice, and frost. But in the next moment, he rendered Mikoto speechless.

What?!

Welf couldn't believe his eyes.

Is this some kind of joke?!

"Uwaaaaaaaaaa—!!"

The mighty dwarf warrior was determined to fight, whatever the consequences.

His body still frozen, he burst through the armor of ice with sheer will, raised his ax in his fist, and swung it wildly around him. The Xenos flew at him, mouths agape, but were hurled back.

Welf and Mikoto edged around to his blind side and released wave after wave of cold. He did not stop. No matter that half his body was frozen solid and covered with frostbite. He was one lone adventurer, but they could not stop him.

A moment later, a cracking sound split the air.

"...?!"

As if defeated in their battle of wills with the dwarf, the magic blades crumbled to pieces. Overuse had destroyed them. Welf and Mikoto were speechless as they watched the shards of the aquamarine blades crumble through their fingers.

"Mr. Gareth!"

"Get 'em! Bring 'em down!"

As if to drive home their misfortune, *Loki Familia*'s reinforcements had arrived. Upper-class male and female adventurers

flooded in from the alleyways feeding into the main street, from the rooftops of the buildings, and from all four directions.

"Time to use these!"

From the sleeve of Fels's black cloak appeared a number of black spheres, which the mage scattered across the road.

As the spheres cracked, black smoke billowed into the broad avenue. It was the same smoky veil Fels had used five days ago to help the Xenos escape: the black mist, a magic item. It was a last-ditch strategy to prevent the adventurers from communicating with one another. The black mist instantly turned the street into a tangle of adventurers and monsters blindly fighting any moving body, the air filled with their confused screams.

Shit, this is bad. What do I do?!

Spears and claws materialized from the depths of the mist and besieged Welf, his invisibility no protection from the chaos. He was at the mercy of his own wildly pounding heart.

The word *annihilation*swam through his mind, stirring his thoughts into chaos. It would be nearly impossible for the Xenos to pull themselves together and escape from this insane melee. At the very least, he had to do something about Gareth.

Welf had lost the Hien. Mikoto still had the Fubu, but if she were to use it to blow away this black mist, both enemies and allies alike would be blown away with it, and when the air cleared, Gareth would be waiting once again to trample them. If the other *Loki Familia*members were to join in, the fate of the Xenos would be to end then and there. And Lilly probably couldn't come to their rescue, either.

What if I use this…?! But if I use it now…!

Welf looked at his waist.

In place of his usual longsword, his belt held a magic one. As he gazed at the naked blade, which was a deeper aquamarine than the Hien, a ferocious inner struggle tormented him.

He had already wasted a few precious seconds on this mental conflict when he heard a familiar voice.

"Ha-ha! This is a real party!"

Chunks of ice rained down from the sky onto the street.

"Huh?!"

Welf could hear the crackle of the street freezing and the screams of the dwarf and the other adventurers, and through the mist, he was sure he could see a powerful gust of snow.

As he stood there bewildered, a figure landed with a *thud*directly in front of him.

"Uh…Tsubaki?"

"Huh? Is that Welfy I hear?"

The girl had brown skin, black hair knotted behind her head, and a patch over her left eye like the one her patron deity wore. Dressed in a bright-red *hakama*and combat clothing, she brought to mind a fencer from the Far East. Her attractive but somehow peculiar features indicated a mix of dwarf and human blood.

Tsubaki Collbrande, captain of *Hephaistos Familia*. At the sight of this unexpected intruder, Welf pulled off his veil and revealed himself.

"What are you doing here?!"

"My patron deity begged me to help you guys out. I heard about the Zenoes or whatever you call them, too. Looks like

you've got yourself wrapped up in something pretty interesting, Welf!" the half-dwarf explained simply with a smug smile. Like Nahza of the Miach familia, she had come to help Welf and his familia members in their attempt to save the Xenos.

Welf wasn't entirely thrilled that Hephaistos had told Tsubaki about the Xenos, even though he could imagine why. From the perspective of Hephaistos, whom Tsubaki venerated, telling the girl must have seemed unproblematic. But Welf hated the idea that this pleasure-seeking adventurer knew about their situation.

Totally unaware of Welf's thoughts, Tsubaki held up her magic blade.

"Looks like we both had the same idea, eh, Welf? Anyway, leave it to me. I'll stay out of view and let them have it with this magic blade. Ha-ha, I've got weapons coming out of my ears!"

Welf found the sight of Tsubaki with her bundle of weapons slung carelessly over her shoulder revolting.

"You just want to try out your magic blades!" he shouted, forgetting where he was in his anger at the master smith's ulterior motives.

Tsubaki was such a pure and eccentric craftswoman that she sometimes descended to the Deep Zone of the Dungeon just to see how well her creations worked. This insane passion also explained her skill as a smith and her genuine battle prowess, which had earned her the nickname "Cyclops."

"Don't be stupid. Didn't I rush to your aid knowing full well *Loki Familia*would hate me for it? Ha-ha! I'm off! Here I go!"

"Just like I thought; you're enjoying this! By the way, if you go crazy with your attacks, *Loki Familia*'s gonna—"

"Ha-ha-ha!! You think that dwarf is gonna roll over because of

this? *Loki Familia*leaders are all monsters!”

Accurately speaking, she seemed to be after Gareth alone. Taking advantage of the veil of smoke, Tsubaki slashed her magic blade randomly through the air. The chaotic battlefield made Welf uneasy, and he had an excruciating headache. After a few minutes, Tsubaki came across his crumbled magic blade.

“Eh, looks like this one reached its limit. Still room for improvement, I’d say,” she said, tossing away the empty hilt.

The next moment, her mood shifted, and she glanced sidelong at Welf through her narrowed right eye.

“And? What are you standing there dreaming about? Is that longsword at your waist a decoration?”

“…!”

“Why did you even bring it, silly boy? Put that thing to use!”

The senior smith seemed to be ridiculing Welf, or perhaps scolding him.

“Didn’t you come here to save those Zenoes guys? While you stand there dithering, the monsters are gonna turn into a pile of smoking ash!”

“…If I use this, even a first-tier adventurer would—”

“Idiot!”

Tsubaki brushed away Welf’s needless worries with a smile.

“I told you before, those guys are monsters. A little baby magic blade like that isn’t gonna knock them down so easily.”

Tsubaki directed her single eye at Welf as if to say he didn’t have time to waste worrying about his opponents’ well-being. He

couldn't find anything to say in response.

Instead, he frowned and gripped the hilt of his longsword, bracing himself for the fight.

"...It's hard to find the enemy in all this mist."

"I'll be your eyes. Get ready."

Tsubaki was not only a master smith but also a Level 5 adventurer. She could hold her own against any first-tier. Welf frowned at this superwoman who could sense her opponent's presence especially well in the current chaos, drew his sword, and took a fighting stance.

"Two o'clock. Yeah, right there. They're on guard, but nothing to worry about—not with your silly old magic blade."

"Any Xenos in the line of fire?"

"Nope, nothing to worry about. Now is the time—do it," Tsubaki said, sidling behind him and pushing her finger into his spine.

"Asshole," Welf mumbled.

Then he swung the deep-aqua blade down from above his head.

"Hiyo!"

With a high-pitched, birdlike screech, a wave of ice and wind materialized.

The aqua-blue ice floe swept through the black mist like the outstretched wings of some giant bird of prey. Instantaneously freezing the pavement below, its sharp beak searched for victims. The raging blizzard unleashed by the Hiyo far surpassed anything the Hien had produced. Even Gareth stared wide-eyed at the bliz-

zard and pulled his shield from beneath his mantle, forced for the first time to take a defensive stance.

Standing protectively in front of the adventurers near him, the dwarf bore the full brunt of the raging snow and crackling ice.

"M-Mr. Gareth?!"

"...Feels about the same strength as Riveria's magic. That did a bit of damage."

Gareth's entire left side, including the shield he thrust before him, was frozen solid. His beard was encrusted in ice and his face was frostbitten, but still the mighty dwarf warrior laughed fearlessly.

"You guys step back!" he told the other adventurers, hiding them behind his back as he made his body into a wall against the second bombardment of ice and snow.

"Hey, look, he's alive!" Tsubaki laughed.

"Shut up. Lady Hestia, can you hear me?" Welf retorted, taking out his oculus.

"Yes, I'm here. What is it, Welf?"

"We'll hold them here somehow! Tell the Xenos to move forward!"

The black mist lingered stubbornly despite the repeated blizzards. Welf had decided that he could turn it to his advantage by using it to hide his presence as he fought, and that was why he asked Hestia to send his message to Fels. Mikoto must have heard him, because her voice came back through the oculus.

"Got it!"

Presently, he heard the lizardman's roar. Welf could sense the

monsters scattered around him responding to the command to move forward. And then, the adventurers pursuing them. Cursing his inability to hold them back, Welf continued to swing his magic blade in the direction Tsubaki told him to.

We've just gotta keep that dwarf pinned here!

The road where Gareth stood had turned into a river of ice. They had stopped the first-tier adventurer.

On the outskirts of southwestern Daedalus Street, Hestia dripped with nervous sweat. Next to her, Haruhime had turned white.

"Oh, this is bad. This is really bad…!"

"Yes! It's awful!"

In the aftermath of the fierce attack from *Loki Familia*, the names of the Xenos were scattered across the magic map. The enemy had ruined their prospects of reaching the central zone of the Labyrinth District.

As if to drive home the dismal message, Hestia saw a lone symbol moving away from the group.

"No, Wiene! You can't go that way!"

The dragon girl was striking out on her own.



Wiene was running.

Some of her scales had been torn off, and crimson blood was seeping from the gaps.

She gripped her wounded left arm and plunged into the black mist.

Fels's smoke had overflowed the main avenue and filled the alleys that surrounded it like a spiderweb. The thick fog that blotted out the stars was probably visible from anywhere in Daedalus Street.

If Wiene stopped in the mist, the adventurers would surround her. She knew that. And she knew that even now she was running farther and farther from the other Xenos. But she could not stop her feet.

They're…coming…!

Arrows flew at her ceaselessly, grazing the hood of her robe and her pointy ears. *Loki Familia* archers. Terrified of the bolts flying to kill her, she turned a corner. The dragon girl's diabolical pursuers were drawing closer.

"Huff, puff…"

Wiene struggled to find her way through the Labyrinth District. She didn't have an oculus with her, so she could not turn to the goddess for help. The black brick buildings stretched up as far as she could see, turning the streets into canyons. Countless side alleys branched off like fissures, beckoning the girl into the abyss of mist.

At last, Wiene broke out of the dense, still fog that blocked her vision.

"!"

She emerged into a scene of ruin. The black bricks had given way to ancient cobblestones surrounded by clusters of the strangely shaped, crumbling buildings Daedalus had designed ages ago. Every few minutes, the tremors and rumbling from the

battlefield shook loose a rain of sand and stone fragments.

The scene suggested that in her confusion, Wiene had crossed the border of the Labyrinth District's western region and entered the northwestern section. She paused for a moment and looked around at the wider and slightly less complicated roads.

"There it is! I found it!"

"!"

At the sound of the adventurers' shouts, Wiene took off running again. Evading the rain of arrows, she turned a corner. Her bluish-white skin and scales covered in sweat and her silver-blue hair tangled beneath her robe, Wiene plunged desperately forward, clinging to an invisible hope.

But.

"—"

As if to crush the monster's wish, the starlight illuminated a figure far in the distance.

Wiene stopped breathing.

I've made it this far somehow, but…

The brown-skinned woman's bare feet were planted firmly on the roof of a building, and she had an unbelievably huge double-edged sword over her shoulder—an Amazon.

It was Tiona Hyrute.

Why—?

Wiene recognized her as a threat. She could not understand how one of the pair Mikoto had blown away earlier could be standing before her now.

“Well, I guess since I’ve happened across one, I better do something about it,” the Amazon muttered to herself.

Tiona didn’t really know why she’d ended up in this place. If she had to say, it was probably because she’d seen the black mist creeping to the northwest.

Once she had finally landed on the ground after Mikoto’s tornado, she’d headed back toward the battlefield with Tione, who was insane with rage. But when she saw the jet-black mist spreading northwest, Tiona had changed directions.

The south side was still okay. The only ones down there were adventurers. But she’d heard that there were still some townsfolk on the northern side of the Labyrinth District who hadn’t managed to evacuate. Her instincts told her that things could get nasty if they tried to head to the outskirts through the mist, and that had led her to follow the cloud to the northwest.

“I’ll take this one down,” she said to herself.

When Wiene saw Tiona toss her double-edged sword to one hand, she sped off in the opposite direction.

For all her youth and inexperience, the dragon girl could sense that she was in a desperate situation. As she collided with *Loki Familia*pursuers, all hope drained from her face. She leaped into an intersection as the adventurers and Tiona closed in on her from both sides.

Huh?

A little boy was standing near her.

A human…child…?

It was a pale, young half-elf, hugging a kitten to his chest.

Wiene saw her own reflection in the child's pupils. Her two amber eyes peering out from the dark hood and, above them, like a drop of blood on her forehead, her sparkling third eye. The sight of her monster's face wreathed in darkness would surely be enough to petrify any small child.

Wiene hesitated for a moment as she faced the terrified boy. Just then, she heard a loud explosion from the direction of the battlefield that shook the ground.

An instant later, it gave way to a powerful roar.

Suddenly, one of the buildings looming above the child's head pitched forward and began to crumble.

"Ruu?!"

Screams exploded from the mouths of Lai, Fina, and Maria as if their chests were bursting open.

"Ouka?!"

"It's coming—!"

As they saw the building tipping forward on the west side of the intersection, Chigusa and Ouka dashed into the street, their weapons in hand.

They had arrived at the corner just a minute earlier, still searching for the little boy who had run back to the orphanage all alone. They had felt a flood of relief when they caught sight of the half-elf on the east side of the intersection. That was immediately before the explosion.

"Miss Tiona?!"

"Oh no!"

Ouka saw the monster in the torn robe racing with frightening

speed into the intersection, the little boy frozen in place, and the astounded *Loki Familia*members. Then he noticed the dilapidated building falling toward the intersection.

I won't make it!!

Within his heart, Ouka screamed silently at the horrifying disaster about to occur.

Ah…

It was a familiar scene for Wiene.

The mountain of bricks falling above the boy's head. Back then, it had been packages falling from a horse-drawn cart.

You should just leave him there, Wiene's fearful heart whispered to her.

The people will scream and throw rocks at you. They will all hate you, and sadness will overwhelm you, and your heart will wear thin, and your days will pass in miserable tears.

But—

Wiene asked her heart a question.

But even so, Bell saved me, didn't he?

She had heard from her brethren about the boy's plight. It was her fault that even now he faced hostility and malice on all sides. When Wiene learned that, she had burst into tears and felt a tightness in her heart.

Bell had saved Wiene even though he knew people would throw rocks at him.

Wiene's fearful heart had nothing to say in response. Instead,

it gently urged her onward.

The next moment, the heat in the finger pushing her forward burst through her skin and her robe and grew into a new wing.

"—!!"

The potential of a dragon turned Wiene's body into a bluish-silver arrow speeding toward the child.

She spread her wing out to block the mountain of falling brick, using her body to press the half-elf boy to the ground.

"Ruu!!"

The collapsing rubble drowned out the screams of the other children.

The sound of avalanching debris enveloped the intersection as a waterfall of stone descended.

By the time the rush had subsided, an enormous cloud of dust had ballooned from the wreckage, and the entire area was littered with jagged hunks of stone.

"…Ah."

Wiene and the boy were in the center of this collapsed building.

The boy was lying faceup on the ground, and the vouivre was pressing her hands against his face as she peered down into his eyes.

Her outstretched wing had not been able to block all the rubble. Blood dripped from her head onto the boy's cheek.

"—Shoot it!"

"?!"

An arrow bounced off Wiene's wing.

How had this scene appeared to those who watched it unfold? At least to Maria, the children, and *Loki Familia*'s members, it looked as if the monster had attacked the child with its dreadful wing, and by chance the rubble had fallen onto its head.

Wiene looked down as a band of angry adventurers approached from beyond the settling dust. She rose from the boy's side and began running. A moment later, Maria and the children and other *Loki Familia*members rushed to take her place next to the boy.

"I'll go after her! You guys protect the children!" Tiona shouted to the adventurers, raising her sword as she ran after the monster.

"Got it!"

Maria, Lai, and Fina hugged the dazed Ruu, who was gripping the kitten tightly.

"Oh, Ruu! Ruu!"

"You dummy! What were you doing?!"

"Ruu, are you okay?"

Maria, Lai, and Fina were all crying.

"No, you're all wrong…Mother, Lai, Fina," he whispered faintly as they held him close. A drop of the monster's blood trickled down his cheek like a tear.

"Big brother…was right all along."

The half-elf child stared up at the deep-blue night sky as his

foster mother held him. His lips trembled as he made out the faintly shining moon beyond the settling dust. The child's sobs echoed through the ruins.

A few steps away, Ouka and Chigusa were standing stock-still.

"Ouka…what just happened?"

"The monster protected him? Protected a child…?"

The two had been standing immediately beside Wiene as the scene unfolded, and they had seen all the details that Maria, the children, and *Loki Familia*members had missed from their position behind the vouivre. Now they exchanged puzzled whispers about what they had witnessed.

Their words trailed off, and they gazed toward the street where Wiene had disappeared.

A short distance from the intersection, two pairs of footsteps echoed down a narrow alleyway illuminated by timeworn magic-stone lanterns.

It had taken only a few moments for Tiona to catch up with the fleeing Wiene.

"Here we go!"

"?!"

The Amazon handily swung her double-edged sword down, blocking Wiene's path of retreat.

Although the sword did not hit the dragon girl, her thin legs collapsed from the force of the impact and the gust of wind from the rapidly swing of her weapon. Tiona did not waste this chance to lift her sword in preparation for another thrust.

Ah…

Wiene didn't even have time to shield her body with her single wing. Even if she had, the sword would have skewered her, wing and all. In the last instant, as the Amazon closed in on her, she squeezed her eyes shut.

"…?"

She waited and waited, but the piercing thrust of the sword did not come.

Very timidly, she opened her eyes. The huge double-edged sword was suspended in front of her chest. When she looked up, Tiona was standing there silently with a deeply conflicted expression on her face.

"Uhhh, errrrr, mmmm…yeah!"

After groaning and grumbling for a minute, Tiona nodded and pulled back her weapon.

"I just couldn't do it after all!!"

She tossed the sword over her shoulder. The massive weapon rolled across the ground with a grating crash.

"Huh…?" the vouivre whispered hoarsely from her bluish-white lips.

The best word to describe her expression would be "stunned."

"You…you saved him, didn't you? That little boy."

Wiene reacted with surprise.

"I don't know if you can understand what I'm saying…but you'd better get out of here fast."

“Ah…”

“Not everyone is a softhearted idiot like me, you know.”

Tiona stared down at the monster. Wiene didn’t know what to do, but very timidly, she stood up. She opened her mouth slightly as if to speak, but at that moment the booms of the battle echoed down the alleyway, and she hurried away.

Just once, she turned to look back at Tiona, then disappeared.

The magic-stone lamps flickered in the alleyway. Left alone, Tiona picked up the sword she’d tossed away and slowly raised her eyes to the heavens.

“…This is how the Argonaut must have felt…”

Her words faded into the cloudy night sky.

“Tiona!”

“Oh, hey, Tione.”

When she left the alleyway, Tiona bumped into her twin. Tione frowned angrily and pressed in close to Tiona.

“Why’d you run off without telling me? I was looking for you!”

“You came after me? I figured you’d be busy fighting over on the main street.”

“The captain told us to stick together! I’m not going to disobey him, am I? And…what about the monster? I heard you chased one over here.”

Tiona considered lying to her sister but decided against it.

“Yeah, I let it go.”

“What?! It didn’t escape; you purposely let it go?! Are you crazy?”

“But—!”

“‘But’ my ass! These are unique circumstances. Didn’t you hear what the captain said?”

“But, Tione, even you know those monsters are more than just smart…”

“Hmph.”

“I think they’re different from regular monsters. I don’t get a negative feeling from them,” she told her sister frankly, thinking back to the adventurer she’d found who was unconscious but not dead.

For a moment, Tione was silent, as if she knew Tiona had hit on the truth. But her anger quickly resurfaced.

“Shut up! I’m going to get that black minotaur no matter what! I’m out of here!”

“You just want revenge!”

The sisters ran off side by side, bickering as they went.



“Goddess Hestia, where is Wiene?!”

Fels’s voice was coming through the oculus.

“She’s in the northwest, heading farther and farther away!” Hestia screamed back.

She was at her post in the southwestern outskirts of Daedalus Street. As she looked down at the dragon girl’s name moving

steadily northward across the magic map, Hestia could feel her heart thumping faster and faster.

"Can't anyone go rescue her?" she asked.

"It's impossible. The adventurers are fighting hard…! If Lido or anyone else left, we'd be done for!"

Through the blue crystal, Hestia could hear the monsters howling in a furious battle. Frowning, she frantically thought about what else they could do.

If Fels can't help, then the closest ones to Wiene are Welf and Mikoto…No, that's impossible, too; they're holding off the adventurers! And Lilly and Bell are too far!

Fels and the Xenos were fighting in the western sector, just on the edge of the central zone, and Mikoto and Welf were very close by. Lilly was due east, and Bell was heading southeast, stirring up trouble with adventurers. It would be hard for them to reach Wiene as she fled to the northwest.

It was clear the adventurers were pursuing Wiene as she headed north through the Labyrinth District. Hestia felt like every tick of the hands on her broken watch shaved off more minutes of the girl's life. She was at a loss for what to do, when—

"Aaah!"

"Haruhime?!"

The girl, who had been on the tower rooftop with Hestia, had leaped off the edge.

Just as her golden hair and crimson kimono disappeared into the darkness of the Labyrinth District, the loud crack of something breaking rang through the air. Panicked, Hestia peered over the edge of the roof. Far below, she could make out a hole in the

roof of a barrack and, below it, the renart's form stumbling forward as if she had rolled onto the ground.

"—!!"

Haruhime had abandoned all trace of logic or reason at the thought of Wiene in peril, and she literally jumped into the night to find her. Hestia, too, threw aside her indecision, grabbed one of the oculi, and shouted into it at the top of her lungs.

"Bell! Help!"



"Wiene has run off from the Xenos! And now Haruhime has gone after her!"

Hidden under my veil, I panic at first when the goddess's voice unexpectedly comes through the oculus. But as I listen to her desperate plea, the blood drains from my face.

"Wiene's by herself?!"

Burning with anxiety, I slip into a back alley to get away from the shouts of the adventurers.

Wiene is all alone? And no one can get there to rescue her? The vision of the girl crying by herself is deeply upsetting. As I pull up a map of Orario in my mind's eye, I know that we are in an awful situation.

I am in the southeast. Wiene is in the northwest. We're as far as we can be from each other. If I take the most direct route to her, I'll run straight into *Loki Familia*'s encampment in the center of the Labyrinth District. It's impossible for me to get through without a hitch, invisible or not. But a detour around their encampment would take forever. No matter how I think about it, I know I can't make it in time on my own two feet!

Well, maybe not with the feet I have right now…

The second that thought crosses my mind, I yell into the oculus.

“To Haruhime!”

“Huh?”

“Please tell me where Haruhime is!!”

I start running even before the goddess has answered me.

Realizing what I plan to do, she gasps, and then—as if she’s made a decision—relays the information on the magic map.

I forget all about clandestine actions and rush headlong down the street. My body heat is building up inside my veil, but I don’t even have time to wipe away the sweat. Forsaking my role as a decoy, I leap and run across the uneven rooftops.

Faster, faster! Hurry!!

The goddess’s voice guides me as I cross the southern section of the Labyrinth District from east to west.

“Haruhime!”

“Eeek!! Oh—Master Bell?!”

Haruhime has been running as fast as she can through the back alleys as the goddess guides her. I catch up with her and grab her hand, forgetting to take off my veil. As I pull her into an abandoned old house, she guesses my identity, and her surprise gives way to tears.

“Master Bell! Lady Wiene, Lady Wiene has…!”

Her trembling hand grips my clothes. I try to support her as

she collapses, and we both sink to our knees. As the tears spill from her green eyes onto her kimono, I take her hand again and squeeze it.

"Haruhime—"

She looks up at me, and I ask her to do what would be impossible on my own.

"—please help me."

We will save Wiene together.

Surprised by the urgency in my eyes, Haruhime dries her tears and nods. My right hand grasps her left, and her right hand takes my left.

The beautiful renart begins to chant a song of illusion.

—Grow.

Her voice is clear and pure as crystal.

She closes her eyes and continues to sing in her sonorous voice.

That power and that vessel. Breadth of wealth and breadth of wishes. Until the bell tolls, bring forth glory and illusion.

As the spell builds, a golden light begins to glow in the dim room, illuminating my tense face.

"—Grow."

From this point on, I—no, we—will be in great danger.

Perhaps because Haruhime, too, realizes this, her hands shake despite her smooth, flowing singing voice.

“Confine divine offerings within this body. This golden light bestowed from above. Into the hammer and into the ground, may it bestow good fortune upon you.”

Her hands cling to mine as they rest on my knees, revealing her fear for Wiene.

I answer with a squeeze. Trembling under her kimono, she forcefully utters the final line.

“—Grow.”

Haruhime opens her eyes and looks into mine. She says the name of the spell.

“Uchide no Kozuchi.”

The room is filled with a brilliant light. At the same time, a swirl of sparkles surrounds my body.

She has given me a level boost, raising me one level with the strongest of sorcery. The thrill of reaching Level 4 buzzes through my whole body, and I let out a cry of joy.

I pull the veil around me again, stand up—and lift Haruhime off her feet.

“Huh?!”

There’s no way one level boost will be enough. I still need Haruhime’s help, and I have no intention of leaving her behind. I’m sure she knew that, but her cheeks flush pink all the same—maybe because she wasn’t expecting me to sling her under my arm like this.

I feel bad, but there’s no other choice. She’ll just have to endure it. I check to make sure both Haruhime and my sparkling body are completely covered by the veil, then bring my mouth to

the fox ears at my chest.

"Please hold the veil down."

She nods. Since both my hands are holding on to her, she reaches her arms around my neck and grabs on to the Reverse Veil for me. Through the fabric, the objects of the outside world appear transparent. I peer around and steel myself for what is to come.

"—We're off."

A single bead of sweat trickles down my cheek, and I take off running.

"Ack?!"

Haruhime gulps back a shocked yelp at my extreme Level 4 speed.

I fly through the wide-open door of the old house, leap down the street with stone-crushing strides, and soar into the night sky.

Below me sprawls the Labyrinth District. There are the blinking magic-stone lamps of *Loki Familia*'s encampment. There's the western sector cloaked in black mist. And there's the northwestern part, where Wiene has been left all alone.

I take one last glance, then let gravity pull me down to the rooftop of a building—and start running again at full speed.

"?!"

"What's that?!"

Despite our invisibility, people are bound to notice us passing by. We're unbelievably fast, and we're stirring up a wind that makes a ferocious roar, and my feet are pounding across rooftops and walls. The adventurers in the area look up as they sense me

speeding past above their heads.

But it doesn't matter. All I can do is ignore it. I don't have time for anything else.

I have to get to Wiene as fast as I possibly can!

"—!!"

Haruhime grips my neck tight as I run even faster, desperately trying to hold down the veil as the wind pulls it up.

Leaping like an actual rabbit across the uneven roofs, I rush through the streets, sometimes even scaling lofty towers in a single breath.

"Yes, keep going straight ahead just like that!"

The sound of the wind rushing past me almost drowns out the goddess's voice, but I manage to follow her instructions and blast through town via the shortest route.

The risk of *Loki Familia*detecting us is extremely high. First-tier members of their familia will definitely be able to sense my movements.

But my only option is to continue.

As I run with a speed unthinkable without Haruhime's level boost, I feel like an all-powerful god. But there's no time to get drunk on the glorious sensation of her beautiful sparks of light. I just run as fast as I can.

"—Pardon me, Master Bell! Despite my current strange position, I am deeply happy!!" the shivering renart says, as if she can't help herself.

"I feel like I've heard those words before!" I shout in response, without thinking.

“What? Those are my lines, Haruhime! I’m going to come take your place!!” the goddess says for some reason, and things get a bit chaotic for a moment.

Even as the three of us shout at one another, I continue to tear through the night air.

With all my energy focused on becoming the wind itself, I blow across the Labyrinth District from southwest to northwest.



Wiene was advancing through the alleyways.

“Huff, puff…”

Her ragged breath was a sign of just how worn out she had become. She had no sense of where she was. She walked forlornly through the backstreets, her new wing hidden and her hand against the walls, confused by the darkness.

Her pursuers seemed to have disappeared, but she could not calm her terror of the phantom adventurers who her fear drew from thin air. More than anything, an overwhelming loneliness tormented her.

“……”

She desperately tried to keep her lips from uttering that one name.

She didn’t want to worry him. If she cried, he would start worrying about her again. She wanted to reassure him. That was why she was trying so hard to control her feelings.

But the dim Labyrinth District eroded her determination. At last, the pitiful fear that shook her reedy body got the better of

her, and she sought the shadow of the past, that irreplaceable warmth.

"Bell..."

She whispered his name so faintly it seemed to melt into the darkness.

And something happened.

"—Wiene!!"

He answered her prayer.

"!"

"Lady Wiene!!"

As the vouivre looked up in shock, Bell and Haruhime threw off their veil and materialized from nowhere, floating down from the dark-blue sky.

Tears overflowed from Wiene's amber eyes, and in the next instant she was running toward them. She flew into the arms of the boy and girl who had landed in front of her.

"Bell! Haruhime!"

Their outstretched arms encircled her.

"Oh, Lady Wiene, Lady Wiene!"

"Wiene, it's so good to see you...!"

"I'm sorry, so sorry, Bell and Haruhime...! Thank you, I love you...!"

All three could hardly form a sentence for all their tears. They simply held one another in a warm embrace. Wiene buried her

face in Haruhime's chest, and Bell wrapped himself around both of them—Wiene's new wing and all.

"You came looking for me...?"

"The goddess told us where you were!"

"So you're okay, Wiene? I'm so glad you haven't been hurt!"

Bell smiled at Wiene's upturned, tear-covered face.

"...Thank you, Goddess!" she said.

They heard sniffling from the sparkling blue oculus on Bell's gauntlet, and Wiene's expression blossomed into a smile.

After they had hugged for a few minutes, Bell stepped back from Wiene and Haruhime.

"Come on, there's no time to waste. We have to meet up with Lido and the others somehow."

"Right!"

Wiene and Haruhime nodded, and they set out.

By now, more than five minutes had passed since Bell met up with Haruhime. He wanted to find a place to renew the level boost. They were currently in the north-northwest of the Labyrinth District. He knew full well that heading south to meet up with the Xenos while dodging *Loki Familia*along the way would be next to impossible. In the worst-case scenario, he would have to serve as a decoy. Still, he brought the oculus to his lips.

"Goddess, please tell us the w—"

Bell's sixth sense suddenly set internal alarm bells clanging.

"Uh-oh!!"

"Huh?"

It was practically a miracle that he was able to pull Wiene and Haruhime close and throw the Reverse Veil over all three of them. The instant he had retreated into the darkness of an alleyway— *thwack!*A pair of silver metal boots crashed onto the ground.

The figure wearing them had a coat of wind-ruffled gray fur and an intimidating blue tattoo on one side of his face.

Bell, Haruhime, and Wiene all gasped at the young werewolf who had descended from the sky.

It's Bete...!

As Bell had feared, they'd been detected.

Bete Loga had sensed Bell and Haruhime's reckless trip through town. Defying Finn's orders, the first-tier adventurer had left *Loki Familia*'s encampment to pursue them. Bell was horrified by the werewolf's incredible speed, which nullified all chance of his getting another level boost from Haruhime.

"..."

Bete stood in the open area at the end of the alleyway where Bell, Haruhime, and Wiene were hiding. As he slowly scanned his surroundings, all three held their breath and followed his eyes. The thunderous pounding of their hearts blended together so loudly that they feared he might hear them. On the other side of the oculus, Hestia blanched and tried to keep completely silent.

A drop of Bell's sweat dripped onto Wiene's hair.

"—Come out!"

Accurately and mercilessly, Bete had scanned the many alleys

branching off the plaza and determined the one where Bell and the others were hiding.

They froze beneath his gaze, which pierced them despite their invisibility. The minute it had taken him to find them had felt like an eternity, and now their hopes crumbled like sand.

Wiene's shoulders shook as Bete pointed his feet in their direction. Bell squeezed them and prepared to do the only thing he could: walk out to Bete. He would act as a decoy while Haruhime and Wiene escaped.

But Haruhime's next move prevented him from doing that.

Haruhime…?

Wiene looked up when she felt someone stroking a lock of her hair, and she saw the renart smiling down at her. Haruhime gently extracted herself from the dragon girl's embrace and sent a fleeting smile at the dumbfounded Bell.

His outstretched arm met air as Haruhime pushed aside the veil and stepped into the darkness.

"Huh?"

"…"

As the astonished Bell and Wiene watched, she stood facing Bete directly, illuminated by the starry sky.

Her fox's tail quivered as the werewolf eyed her dubiously. But she hid it behind her back and returned his stare resolutely.

"You can't be here alone. Come out, all of you!"

"I am alone."

"Let's stop the jo—"

"—I am alone!!" she shouted.

Wiene jumped—she'd never heard Haruhime speak so loudly.

Her gracefully arched eyebrows and determined green eyes showed no sign of yielding to the boy's dangerous glare. She pressed her hands to her voluptuous chest and shouted at the young werewolf again.

"Please move!"

Bell understood that she was speaking not to Bete but to him. The weak young girl he had rescued from such depraved surroundings was nowhere to be seen. Standing guard with her back to them, she was like a Shinto maiden bravely confronting calamity, a sister protecting her dragon-girl sibling, a mother.

She howled. The girl who had always needed rescuing cried out now to save the ones she loved. Bell was amazed.

"Now!!"

Haruhime's yell, along with the sight of her resolute back, urged Bell forward.

He couldn't let her determination go to waste.

He shook off his distress and pulled his hand back from Wiene's shoulder. Gritting his teeth with determination, Bell tugged the dragon girl along as she glanced tearfully back, then took off running in the opposite direction from Bete and Haruhime.

"...You won't even fight, so stop lording it over me!" the werewolf growled.

Bete could sense the two invisible forms beyond Haruhime disappearing into the distance. He pawed the ground, his foot scraping over the cobblestones. As he did, fragments of broken

stone shot like bullets toward Haruhime, tearing into her cheeks and kimono. She threw her arm in front of her face and stumbled but caught herself before she fell. Still, she did not move aside.

"Tch. Get out of my way," Bete said.

"I will not."

"I'll crush you."

"I will not move!"

As Bete strode toward her, she threw both arms out. He narrowed his eyes at the renart, who still refused to budge, and kicked the ground. He moved with such incredible speed that she could not even track him with her eyes. In an instant, the werewolf's shadow was at her feet. As she stood frozen, Bete raised his left hand as if to brush away a trivial speck of dust. He was about to bring it down on her when—

"—!!"

His hand stopped in midair. He was looking at Haruhime's steadfast green eyes below her golden bangs.

"…"

His gaze was fixed on Haruhime, silently taking in this girl who refused to look away even on the verge of a direct blow.

Quiet fell over the pair. In the distance, the two animal people could hear the faint sound of battle cries. The odd scene continued until Bete broke the silence.

"—You small-fry!"

A brutal smile played over the werewolf's lips.

"You're totally helpless—but you've still made up your mind,

eh?”

“?!”

The werewolf’s thirst for blood was out of control. Haruhime’s animal-person instincts trembled before the overwhelming presence of this starving wolf. He was about to devour her on the principal that the strong must consume the weak.

Still, she did not retreat.

She looked back at him as a humiliating trembling finally overtook her, her arms still thrown out.

“Got a little carried away, didn’t you?”

Instead of his lowered fist, his left metal boot came crashing down on the ground.

His foot struck the stone with a splintering sound and a shockwave that launched Haruhime backward. She doubled over in pain and groaned as her back was slammed against the wall at the entrance to the alley.

Bete’s smile contrasted with his harsh words. It was half mocking condescension toward the “small-fry” and half enjoyment.

He had accepted Haruhime as an enemy. He recognized that she was not just another nonentity hardly worth sneering at but an opponent he was meeting on the battlefield.

He smiled because he recognized the renart’s determination.

“Don’t stand there all pleased with yourself like a little minx! You’re all show!”

“!!”

Haruhime, who had been suffering under Bete's stream of abuse, raised her face. She glared as hard as she could at the werewolf smiling wickedly down at her and thrust both hands out in front of her chest as if she was presenting an offering.

"—Grow."

She began to chant.

"That power and that vessel. Breadth of wealth and breadth of wishes. Until the bell tolls, bring forth glory and illusion."

It was the only magic Haruhime knew, and it had no use as a weapon. She was well aware that it could not harm the mighty adventurer standing before her, but still, she chanted.

"—Grow."

She needed an interval of around ten minutes between level boosts. By the time her strange exchange with Bete was over, almost ten minutes had elapsed, and as she began to chant, the magic drew forth her powers even more.

"Confine divine offerings within this body. This golden light bestowed from above. Into the hammer and into the ground, may it bestow good fortune upon you."

Bete remained facing her at a slight distance, waiting silently until she finished chanting. Did he wait out of pride? No. He waited because he respected the girl's determination—this weak girl's roar toward the strong.

The instant she finished, the werewolf would set upon her without hesitation or mercy. Just before he did so, he clapped his hands.

"—Grow."

Uchide no Kozuchi. Even though Haruhime hadn't formed a magic circle, golden light beamed out before the spell took effect, signaling its peculiar nature. As the chanting continued, the faint mist of magical power gathered into a cloud of light, announcing the presence of a magic so potent even the goddess Ishtar had groaned under its force.

A cloud of light and a swirl of golden sparkles rose up above the heads of Haruhime and Bete. Like the black mist spreading through the Labyrinth District's western region, a faint glittering enveloped the north-northwest area where they were. Anyone who saw it likely recognized it as a sign that the hammerhead made of light was being summoned.

Just as Haruhime finished chanting and Bete leaned toward her, the one who had heard the girl's prayers rushed toward them.

"!!"

Bete turned to look behind him and saw a beautiful woman with coal-black hair land firmly on the ground.

It was an Amazon armed with a huge broadsword: Aisha Belka had arrived as backup.

"Uchide no Kozuchi," Haruhime pronounced.

Instantly, the sparks of light flowed over Bete and gathered around Aisha, and the shaftless hammer of light fell onto her.

"You..."

Before Bete's narrowed gaze, the level boost was completed.

Wrapped in a torrent of light, the Amazon brandished her sword and pointed it at Bete, sparks of light rising from its tip.

"Hey, asshole. You were about to lay your dirty paws on my lit-

tle sister, weren't you? I think you were. In fact, in my eyes, you already did."

"Hey now."

"—I don't let anyone mess with my sweet little sister. I just won't feel right unless I kick your ass right here and now."

Aisha was picking a fight with a smile on her face.

This had nothing to do with the Xenos. Aisha had turned it into a personal grudge. As Haruhime watched her confront Bete and his glare, she shivered with emotion.

"Lady Aisha…!"

"Useless little fox, don't be so reckless. I told you not to use your magic so freely…but I like the look in your eyes today, so I'll forgive you," Aisha replied with a shrug. She seemed secretly pleased that Haruhime had called on her for help.

Bete snorted at the two women.

"Worthless girl, leaving all your hard work to someone else," he said, despite smiling in recognition of Haruhime's tactics.

He was raring for a fight.

"Get over here and take me on, crazy woman. I'll stomp you into the ground, idiotic head and all."

"I'm ready for you!!"

As Haruhime looked on, the two began their battle.



"Bell, Haruhime will be…!"

"...!"

Bell was pulling Wiene through the alleyways, a deeply troubled look on his face.

Would Bete hurt Haruhime? He didn't know. But he was willing to bet he wouldn't kill her. For now, he had to focus on getting as far away as he could before Bete came after them.

Bell's mind was a tangle of worries and doubts and things he had to do. Even as he silently apologized to Haruhime for his incompetence, he kept moving forward so her determination wouldn't go to waste—and for Wiene's sake.

"Bell, you don't have much time...! If you don't hurry, you won't be able to meet up with Fels!"

Spurred on by Hestia's anxious voice, Bell and Wiene hurried ahead even faster.

The sparks of light from the level boost were already gone. Bell was wearing the veil and taking care not to draw the attention of adventurers or *Loki Familia*members, but the streets were so empty there was hardly need for those precautions. Instead of seeing this as good fortune, however, Bell sensed a threat in the air. Glancing from side to side, he headed south toward their destination.

South, south, ever farther south...eventually, Bell's feet could move no more.

"...Bell?" Wiene asked, confused that their progress had stopped.

"..."

Gripping her thin hand, Bell was drenched in what seemed like every last drop of sweat in his body. His breath came in

ragged gasps, and the deafening sound of his own heartbeat thundered in his ears. He stood in the middle of a backstreet, surrounded by narrow side streets and steps leading up and down. His red eyes stared into the blackness ahead.

Southeast Orario.

In a corner of an alleyway where the ongoing chaos and shouts of the adventurers did not reach, a form lay twitching.

An arm moved slightly in the dim light as the figure peeled its back from the cracked brick wall and coughed weakly.

“Five years, is it? She’s left me in the dust…”

Three minutes.

That’s how long the fight had lasted.

As consciousness returned, the figure sluggishly lifted its head and looked up at the sky.

Forgetting to wipe the blood from her lip, she pressed her hands against her stomach, where she’d been hit with the back of her opponent’s sword.

“I’m sorry, Bell Cranell…” Lyu Leon whispered.

“—”

The ruffled clouds covering the sky had dissipated, and the moonlight chased away the darkness below.

Its beams illuminated long hair that shone like gold dust, glinting faintly off silver-and-blue clothing and the hilt of a sheathed sword. Bell and Wiene blinked at the brilliance.

To Wiene, time seemed to stand still as the girl stared down on

them.

"Miss…Aiz…"

Golden hair and golden eyes.

At the sight of the swordswoman standing in the middle of the backstreet, Bell gasped out a single cough.

"…So the vouivre is alive."

The word *vouivre*—there was no doubt Aiz had said that word—shot through Bell like a shock wave. In the same moment, he realized belatedly that Aiz had probably gotten past Lyu with ease and started following him again quite a while ago.

He hadn't noticed her because she hadn't actually been looking at him. She knew he was unusually sensitive to gazes directed his way, so she had avoided looking straight at him; instead, she had followed not so much his physical form as his presence, so skillfully he hadn't detected her.

After losing track of him once because of Lyu's interference, she had picked up the trail again when he crossed from the southeast to the southwest. She'd watched as he met up with Haruhime and again when he was reunited with Wiene. She'd been watching the whole time.

In other words, Bell hadn't succeeded in shaking off Aiz. Bete had shown up first only because she'd been unable to make up her mind.

"Come out…"

With a trace of sadness, Aiz ordered Bell to take off the Reverse Veil.

Silently, he pushed aside the veil.

"..."

"..."

Aiz lowered her eyes as Bell and Wiene, with her single new wing, appeared.

"I've been thinking about...why you asked me that," Aiz said.

Five days earlier, immediately before the mission had been issued to the entire city, Bell had asked Aiz a question.

If the monsters had a reason for living...had feelings just like you or me, what would you do? If you met monsters who could smile just like people, worry about things, shed tears just like people—could you still draw your sword against them?

"So this is what you meant..." she said, slowly raising her gaze from the ground to look at Wiene.

Bell saw something dangerous in that gaze.

Her expression was as emotionless as always, yet something in her eyes was distinctly different from the Aiz he knew. His heart trembled at those eyes.

Why here? How could she? Stop looking at us like that!

Desperately pushing down the grief that was rising up from his chest, Bell shielded Wiene from that gaze and pleaded with Aiz.

"Miss Aiz!! This girl—"

"My answer," Aiz said, interrupting him emphatically, "has not changed."

With that, she brought her hand to the hilt of her sword.

"If anyone is crying because of a monster—then I will kill that

monster."

Bell froze at the words of the Sword Princess—and the sight of her silver blade.

Aiz's boot came down with a resounding *thud*as she took one step forward.

"Wait…please wait, Miss Aiz! This girl hasn't done any harm! She would never hurt anyone!! This girl—Wiene—is different!!" Bell shouted.

His voice was ragged and tinged with tears as he hid the terrified Wiene behind his back.

"Will you be able to say the same thing if she goes on another rampage?" Aiz asked.

"—"

The ruby embedded in Wiene's forehead glittered as if it were shaking.

"I would not be able to, myself," Aiz said.

She was fundamentally different from the naive Amazonian girl who poked fun at herself and others in equal measure. Her expression was cold, her daggerlike words final. Bell did not know what made her so cold-blooded. He did not want to know.

All he knew was that negotiations had broken down.

He understood at that moment that the girl he admired and yearned for was now his opponent.

"Uh, ah…"

Finally, the despair and resignation raging within him led his hand to the hilt of his knife.

Like the swordswoman he faced, Bell had already arrived at an answer he could never reverse.

He'd do it for the monster girl he'd promised to protect.

As Aiz narrowed her eyes at him sadly, he pulled two knives—one black and one crimson—from their hilts.

"Bell…" Wiene whispered, sounding like she was about to cry.

"…"

Hestia, on her side of the crystal, was at a loss for words.

"…Why?" Bell whispered, his lips trembling uncontrollably. "*Why…?*"

Aiz leaned forward and lunged toward him.

"—Crap!!"

Bell, too, lunged forward, swinging his black knife at the silver sword that bore down on him.



The first clash of blades threw off a shower of countless sparks.

Aiz was of course overwhelmingly stronger than Bell. But he knew that from the start and compensated by turning the brunt of her blow into centrifugal force that sent him spinning.

"Wiene, run!!" he screamed as he slashed the Hestia Knife in a reverse grip in his right hand toward Aiz once again.

The dragon girl hugged the veil to her chest and swayed before Bell's ghastly expression and voice. Then, still on the verge of tears, she obeyed his order.

Bell had no time to look back as Wiene ran down the road they'd come by. Since Aiz had blocked the Divine Knife, he thrust the crimson knife in his left hand toward her.

But the golden-haired, golden-eyed swordswoman unceremoniously flicked it away with a single blow of her sword.

"Oof!!"

Bell gritted his teeth as Aiz facilely parried his blow. Somehow, he had to keep her pinned here. He raised both blades in preparation for a twin strike, but—

"—"

The instant after he felt something deflect his black knife, a golden curtain descended in front of his eyes.

His mind went blank. It was only a moment later that he understood what had happened.

After her defensive move, Aiz had leaped into the air and flown like a butterfly over his head. Bell's red blade found only air as she landed behind his back, their positions reversed.

"Huh?!"

Every nerve strung taut, Bell spun around. Aiz was already racing after Wiene. He followed the direction of her gaze.

She's not looking at me!

The sorrow that had filled his chest transformed into something else—something that set the pit of his stomach on fire.

Was it anger? No, not that. It was frustration that the adventurer he admired so much would not even deign to fight him.

His whole body radiating heat, Bell ran after Wiene and Aiz.

“B-Bell?”

Hestia’s sob crackled through the oculus. She must have figured out what had happened by watching their movements on the magic map. As she feared, Bell was not drawing closer to Aiz. It seemed that Aiz’s sword would reach Wiene’s back before he caught up with them.

It’s hopeless! I’ll never make it in time. Wiene will—!

As Aiz’s gaze pierced the dragon girl’s back, Bell squeezed his hands into tight fists, as if he were wringing out his anguish.

Wiene glanced backward as Aiz closed in on her. But the instant before the Sword Princess made contact with her quarry, Bell let out a heartrending roar.

“Firebolt!!”

A scarlet streak of fire plunged through the air.

The Swift-Strike Magic shot like a flash of lightning toward Aiz, crossing the hopeless distance between her and Bell in an instant and blocking her progress. As it collided with a wall and sent stone fragments in every direction, the surprised Wiene disappeared behind a cloud of dust.

He’d taken a shot. Once again, he’d gone and taken a shot.

Last time it was at an adventurer.

This time it was at his idol.

What was he doing? He had no idea, and that confusion practically drove him to tears. All he knew was that he could no longer reverse course.

Bell kept running, his face twisted into a frown. As the stunned Aiz jumped back to avoid the bolt, he flew at her with knife

raised.

"Miss Aiz, please listen to me!" he shouted across his knife, which she had blocked with her sword.

An absurd emptiness filled him as he recognized the contrast between his words and the urgent need to swing his knife at her. Their blades clanged together as they parried each other's blows.

"...I don't have anything to talk about with you," Aiz said, refusing to meet his eyes. Her cheeks flamed red.

"Well, I do!!" Bell retorted, like a petulant little boy spurned by his playmate.

He stepped toward her and jabbed his knife forward, but the scowling Aiz repelled his blow. After she easily sent Bell tottering back, she once again took off after Wiene.

"...Goddess!"

"Yes!"

The oculus on his gauntlet sparkled as Hestia guided him through the streets.

He'd never be able to catch up simply by following Aiz, so she searched for a shortcut to reach Wiene's location on the magic map.

The vouivre had turned down a backstreet into a network of alleyways as tangled as a spider's web. Bell climbed above the cloud of dust from the Firebolt and sped across the rooftops, hoping to reach the dragon girl—and Aiz—by the shortest route possible. From high above, the buildings of Daedalus Street looked like rafts floating in a calm ocean. His footsteps firm amid the waves of this imaginary ocean, Bell sped through the neighborhoods. After a few moments, he caught sight of Aiz's long golden hair flying down a narrow street.

Leaping down from the rooftops, he landed directly in front of her.

"!"

"Miss Aiz!"

Aiz stood frozen, staring at him in astonishment.

They were in a cramped alley with no side streets nearby. Her golden eyes swiftly scanned their surroundings. As she tilted her slender neck back to look upward, Bell closed in.

Oh no you don't!

He was one step ahead of Aiz, who was searching for an escape route via the rooftops. He lunged toward her.

"...!"

Left with no other choice, she returned his attack.

For the second time, his two knives clashed against her single sword.

"I don't want to fight you..." Aiz whispered, as if she were struggling to get the words out.

"Neither do I!" Bell shouted back.

Just a few months earlier, they'd trained together on the city walls until the sun rose, but this fight bore little resemblance to those. This was no drill.

Pushing down the pain and burning with anguish over his horrible situation, Bell pleaded with Aiz for a third time.

"Miss Aiz, I'm begging you, please listen to me! That girl and the other Xenos are—!"

“My answer…is the same.”

“Ergh!”

Why?!

Bell glared at Aiz, silently screaming at her refusal to even listen.

He gripped his knives.

Channeling all the thoughts and feelings he couldn’t communicate through words into the blades, he slashed at her with all his might.

“Yahh!”

“?!”

The black and crimson blades flashed in front of her eyes.

It was the Rabbit Rush, a series of extremely quick attacks. The fight was on again.

The black and red knives cut tracks through the air, and Aiz’s sword flashed in all directions to defend. As if to mirror her astonishment, an extraordinary fountain of sparks danced to the tune of clashing metal. Bell’s physical instincts kicked into high gear, leaving conscious thought behind.

He was moving faster than he ever had before.

Bell threw everything he had at his idol, moving even faster than he had in his past fights against first-tier adventurers like Phryne and Dix.

“…!”

The shape of the alleyway put the silver sword at a further dis-

advantage. It was difficult to move the long blade in the narrow street, and Aiz was unable to take advantage of its full reach. Bell's knife, on the other hand, was especially effective.

Pressed hard from start to end, Aiz gulped and looked into Bell's face. She blocked his final slash and jumped back.

"Huff, puff...!"

The sound of Bell's breath echoed through the dim alley.

"..."

Aiz looked down at her tingling hand.

"...You've improved, I see," she said.

"!"

Bell looked back at her, surprised that she had acknowledged his skill. But the praise had a downside.

"I can no longer make any allowances for you."

She was giving him notice of the fierce onslaught that was about to begin.

"—"

Aiz's figure became a blur. All Bell could make out was the trace of her long golden hair.

He was able to respond to her attack only through pure intuition and instinct; during the course of training, his entire body had learned the path of her sword through the air better than he would have liked.

The instant the Hestia Knife made contact with her blade, an absurdly powerful impact overwhelmed him.

"?!"

His right arm was knocked upward with enough force to tear it off, or so it felt. It was a miracle he didn't lose his grip on the knife.

The blur of gold and silver did not slow. Aiz spun like a whirlwind, her blade flashing as if it were possessed by a supernatural force as it sliced through the walls of the narrow street like butter.

Her next inhumanly fast spinning strike left Bell time neither to respond nor to defend himself.

It's over. Two blows. That's all it took.

Bell's instinct as an adventurer told him that death was near.

"..."

His body did not split in two.

The instant before her blade made contact, Aiz drew her eyebrows together and flicked her wrist aside.

"Oof!!"

The side of Aiz's sword struck Bell's ribs and hurled him against the wall directly next to him. As his shoulder crashed into stone, the world swam before his eyes. He felt dizzy and nauseous.

He sunk helplessly to his knees, watching as Aiz's boots passed calmly before him.

"No...!"

Determined to stop her, he commanded his trembling knees to rise.

He summoned energy to every crevice of his body and stood.

Aiz stopped and looked back at him. Hiding her emotion at the sight of the undefeated will to fight in the boy's red eyes, she flourished her sword with a cold expression.

"Here I go," she said.

In the next instant, a whirling sword attack materialized before Bell's eyes.

"—Huh?!"

The Sword Princess had unleashed a true continuous slashing attack.

As if to return Bell's similar attack of a few moments earlier, Aiz began to perform her sword dance. He reflexively raised his knife, but he did not have time to intercept her blade. If he managed to block one blow, five more rained down on him. The dual adamantite armor that Welf had forged for him rang out again and again with earsplitting clangs. If she had been hitting him with the edge of her sword rather than the flat, he would have been long dead from the overwhelming onslaught. His field of vision was entirely filled with the silver slant of her sword. As Bell teetered on the edge of consciousness from the pain and force of her blows, something dawned on him.

She was stronger than Phryne and faster than Dix. She was beyond comparison. Those first-tier adventurers who had caused him so much suffering paled in his memory.

I knew it.

I knew it, but—

This girl is stronger than anyone!!

The flashing sword cut under his breastplate with a swoosh of wind, lifting Bell into the air.

A moment later he crashed onto the cobblestones and lay there faceup.

“Ah…oh…”

As the world grew dim around him, Bell saw Aiz lower her eyes and turn her back. The burning pain that gripped his entire body prevented him from even stretching out his hand as it seemed to spin away from him. Again and again he tried to rise, but his body only trembled.

In his blurred gaze, the night sky looked far, far away.

…I feel like I’ve seen this place before…

As his body sunk into the earth after the baptism from his idol, his empty consciousness recalled an irrelevant scene.

Doubt began creeping into his mind about the backstreet, which all along had looked familiar.

When was it? Where was it?

He couldn’t think straight.

“Bell, Bell?!”

Hestia’s voice reverberated into his consciousness just as he was about to sink into the blackness.

He thought of Aiz’s sad expression and Wiene’s tears.

He closed his eyes once, then raised his eyebrows and scratched his fingers across the cobblestones.

Far from Bell, in the north-northwest of the Labyrinth District, a woman lay prone beside a huge broadsword thrust into the ground.

"Damn werewolf…you have no mercy," Aisha said, hurling her spiteful words at Bete. He was already long gone, leaving her there covered in wounds. Blood was running from a laceration on her lip.

"Owww…" she said, glancing at the chipped broadsword beside her. Despite her frown, she sounded secretly pleased with herself.

"Lady Aisha, Lady Aisha…!"

The tears dampening Aisha's brown skin were Haruhime's.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she sobbed, gripping the hand of the woman Bete had defeated. Haruhime herself was uninjured aside from some scratches from the stone shards Bete had kicked at her. As the girl's sobs echoed through the alleyway, Aisha scowled in annoyance.

"Stop crying. A few little bruises aren't going to kill me."

"But—but…!"

"If you have time to cry, you have time to do something else, don't you?"

Aisha stroked Haruhime's long golden hair as the renart wiped the tears from her face.

"You have some place you're trying to get to, right?"

"…Yes."

She pulled the blue crystal from the sleeve of her kimono.

Holding the oculus she'd been given in her role of supporter, Haruhime looked down at Aisha.

"Okay, get going, then. I'll just rest a little and then figure out something to do."

"Thank you so much…Lady Aisha," the red-eyed Haruhime said before standing.

As she watched the girl run off, fox tail swaying, Aisha felt the energy drain from her body.

"All I ever do these days is lose…Maybe I should get the Little Rookie to take me on a trip instead of training."

Aisha's glossy lips curved into a smile as she closed her eyes and drifted into a long sleep.



"…Bell?"

Wiene stopped and looked over her shoulder.

The sounds of fierce fighting no longer reached her ears, and the worry she'd been feeling all along ballooned now into a raging anxiety. After hesitating for a moment, still gripping the veil, she turned and slowly began walking back down the road she'd come by.

"Bell…Goddess?"

Wiene advanced fearfully through the maze of tangled streets. Pressing her single dragon wing to her body and hugging her thin chest as she edged along the walls, she looked less like a monster than a lost child.

Would those golden eyes be staring at her coldly around the

next corner? Would the silver glint of that terrifying sword sever her neck the instant she stepped into a crossroads? She quivered at the imaginary scenes the dusky half-light seemed to whisper into her ear.

Just then, a shadow fell across her from behind.

"—?!"

Startled, she looked over her shoulder. A hand reached out and clamped over her mouth, and another wrapped around her thin waist and pulled her close. Suddenly she was enveloped in warmth, wing and all.

"Wiene, don't say a word."

"Ah…Bell!"

As the white-haired boy whispered into her ear, the tension drained from her body and relief took its place.

The next moment, though, she noticed Bell's appearance. His clothes and armor were torn to pieces and covered in bloodstains. His face could not hide his pain and exhaustion. She was speechless.

"Let's go," Bell whispered, pulling her along by the hand.

"B-Bell…" she said, her voice dissolving into tears.

"I'm sorry, Wiene, just try to hold out a little longer."

As Bell moved forward, he kept a careful watch for any sign of Aiz. He squeezed Wiene's hand. Then, as he brought the oculus on his gauntlet to his lips, he happened to look up.

On one of the walls surrounding the wide intersection paved in sooty black cobblestones was an ariadne drawn in brilliant red lines.

His sense of déjà vu crystalized and tapped on the door of his memories.

Oh, so that's what it is…

He'd finally figured it out. Of course he felt like he'd seen this place before.

He'd been down this road once. He'd been with Hestia on the day of the Monsterphilia, and the silverback had been chasing them.

A self-mocking smile spread over Bell's face as he thought of what he was about to do.

"Goddess…are there any hidden passages near here?" he said into the oculus.

"Huh? Uh, um…there are, but none of them lead to where Fels and the Xenos are. They'll actually take you out of your way," Hestia said, sounding confused.

"Please tell me how to get there."

Following her instructions, he eventually arrived at a wide dead-end street. He pushed one of the stone panels on the walls, and the wall opened to reveal the passage. Bell told Wiene to go in first, then passed something to her.

"Bell…? Is this…?"

"Yes. You'll be able to communicate with the goddess. She'll take good care of you…"

He squeezed her hand around his only oculus, which he'd detached from his gauntlet.

"Bell, you're…"

Coming through the oculus, Hestia's words trailed off into silence.

"Go down this passage. I'm going to stay here for a few minutes," he told Wiene.

"What…?"

Wiene's eyes, too, were wide with surprise and worry.

"Wh-what will you do?"

"I want to talk to Aiz about something…She's definitely going to end up here."

"…"

"As long as you listen to the goddess, you'll be completely fine. Don't worry, I'll be following right after you…"

There was no way he could follow her.

Without the oculus, Hestia would not be able to direct him. He wouldn't know where Wiene was. Bell stroked Wiene's hair, covering his lie with a kind smile.

Hestia listened in silence to their conversation. He was grateful; she'd understood what he wanted to do.

As Wiene looked up at him, dumbfounded, he gently pushed her forward.

"Go ahead."

She slipped into the passage and disappeared as Bell shut the secret door behind her.

She'd stared back at him with her amber eyes until the very last minute. As the door shut with a heavy *thud*, Bell leaned his

head against it.

This is the second time…

He felt he was a coward. The instant he realized he would be unable to protect Wiene if he couldn't beat Aiz, he sent her away from him, just like he had done with Hestia.

He was still a pitiful, powerless, weak adventurer.

But that time…

When the silverback had been closing in on them, he'd thought to himself with a tinge of wistful longing that he'd like to see Aiz's face one more time. How ironic that was in light of his current situation.

Bell laughed. It was funny. No, maybe it was his head that was funny.

A moment later, he heard a scraping sound behind him and slowly turned around.

"Bell…"

Aiz was staring straight at him. She must have seen him help Wiene escape. Her eyes glinted with reproach. Bell tried to form his mouth into a wry smile but failed.

He was guarding the only door to the passage where Wiene had escaped. Aiz didn't know where it led, so forcing Bell to move aside was her only option. This would buy time for her to get away. And it would also force Aiz to interact with him.

He would not let her ignore him.

"Move."

"No."

“What can I do to get you to move?”

“I’m staying here until you listen to me.”

“…”

Aiz looked down and closed her eyes.

After a moment, she flourished her sword resolutely.

Bell’s smile stretched into a tight line. As Aiz walked toward him, he drew his weapons.



It was a dark, dark passage.

“…”

“…Turn right there, Wiene.”

“…”

“…Now go straight ahead.”

“…”

“…”

“…Goddess.”

“…What is it?”

“I don’t like this…”

“…”

“I don’t want to leave him…! Bell is lying to me…!”

"…"

"Bell is trying to save me. I'm happy, but it's wrong. I don't want Bell to be hurt; I don't want him to cry."

"…"

"I've never repaid him for anything!"

"…I won't stop you."

"Huh?"

"I understand. I was like you."

"A goddess… Like me…?"

"Yes. You know how sly Bell is, right? He knows he's weak, but he's always trying to show off and do the impossible. He probably wants to escape more than anything else, and I'm sure he knows he can't beat her, and still…"

"…"

"Even though he doesn't want to fight his hero and he's suffering…"

"Why did Bell…?"

"Because he can't abandon a girl—no, a family member—who's in trouble."

"Family…?"

"Yes. It doesn't matter if you're human or monster. He loves you like you're part of his family."

"…Goddess, I really don't like this."

“I know.”

“I want to go to Bell.”

“I know.”

“I want to repay him for his help.”

“Are you prepared to face the consequences? You may be separated from him forever…What I mean is, are you ready to die?”

“Yes. This time—it’s my turn to save Bell.”

“…I understand. Go, then.”

“Thank you, Goddess.”

“Wiene.”

“What?”

“You’ve grown strong.”



A hard blow struck his body.

Several empty glass vials were rolling at his feet. The potions were already gone. He didn’t know how many times he’d been on the verge of being unable to recover. He’d been hit with far too many blows to count. He gagged, but still, he stood his ground and brandished his knife.

“…!”

Even on the verge of yielding to his enemy, even on the verge of collapsing, Bell rose again. He would not move from in front of the door. To the contrary—he dauntlessly attacked her. Aiz gasped softly, but she, too, refused to let up. Her sword swished

through the air and landed mercilessly on Bell.

High-speed slantwise strike from his shoulder. He was unable to block it.

Uppercut. He knocked her sword off course from the side.

Mowing strike. He was unable to dodge.

Jab to his knife sheath. He recognized that one.

Spinning kick. Direct impact.

Their blades missed. They met. They missed. They slid over each other. The skills she had taught him, and the tactics he had stolen, were proving more useful than ever before.

As the glint of the dancing blade flashed before his eyes again and again, a thought passed through Bell's delirious mind.

What am I doing?

Why am I fighting the person I admire the most?

She's beating me to a pulp.

—Of course, she always beat me to a pulp in training, too.

Smiling at this completely unamusing situation, Bell watched Aiz's unforgiving sword technique. His attacks couldn't reach her, and his counterattacks didn't even leave a scratch. She was deaf to his screams and his thoughts alike.

Did he hate this cold girl? No.

Was he angry with her for refusing to listen to him? Not at all.

Her sword presented him with a towering paragon. It forced him to see the wall between reality and ideal. That was how he

felt. That was how unforgiving his decision to save Wiene was.

He had to catch up with Aiz.

He had to reach her level.

He had to overtake her.

If he recognized his own weakness, he must push harder. He must rush forward. Faster. Harder.

"—!!"

His back was hot. His back was burning. His back was screaming a mad hope at him.

She was fast. So fast. He'd known that. But her skill was limitless.

That was why he had to catch up with her.

He had to save Wiene.

"—Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!" he roared.

Aiz's arms shook from the vehemence of his furious cry. There was no question that the force of his incorrigible will shaved some of the strength from the Sword Princess's blade. He poured what little energy he had into his two knives, and for the first time, they scared her.

"?!"

She shook off her astonishment and swung her sword through the air, deflecting the red knife. Instantly she aimed a second blow directly at Bell. He flung out his left gauntlet to block it. The Sword Princess's strike slid across his dual-adamantite armor.

The space between them was filled with showers of sparks and the sounds of blade scraping against blade. He pressed in with all his might, recklessly trying to get close enough for a solid blow.

Their faces were so close they were practically touching—separated by the width of his knife.

Bell swung the Divine Knife upward.

"Aaaaaaaa!!"

The flashing blade traced a purple-blue arc across the sky.

Aiz's long golden hair flipped upward as she leaped back to evade the blow. She pressed her hand to her chest in shock.

"...!"

Her silver breastplate was scratched. Something sharp had made a scar. A mark that proved Bell's roar had hit its target.

For a moment, Aiz was speechless.

She stared at the breathless Bell, her eyebrows drawn together in consternation, then once again lunged toward him.

"Huh?!"

Bell instantly pulled his knife back and blocked the blade that slashed down diagonally across his chest. The blades screeched as he gripped his knife with both hands against the incredible weight of her sword. She was once again in a close battle with him.

"Why are you going this far?"

It was the first question she had asked him.

The Sword Princess who had refused to listen to him now

stared into his eyes across their locked blades.

Bell returned her gaze with a surprised look and shouted his reply.

“I want to help that girl!”

“Really? Are you telling me the truth? She’s not a person; she’s a monster!”

“She’s different from ordinary monsters! She can talk! We can smile at each other! We can hold hands—she has the same emotions that you and I do!” he retorted, determined not to give in to the weight of Aiz’s sword.

“You’re wrong. Not everyone can do those things.”

By “those things,” she meant, at the very least, hold hands with a monster.

With each word, the sword she held with one hand pushed against Bell’s knife.

“Eh?”

“Monsters kill people. They can take so, so many lives…They make people shed so many tears.”

“But…don’t we adventurers do exactly the same thing?” Bell spat back at her. Each word felt as if it were slicing through his own body.

“…?”

“Your sword and my knife do those things!”

If they wanted to, they could massacre thousands of people. Rationality was all that stopped them. Rationality and the sense of fraternity that the Xenos, too, possessed.

Some monsters were kinder than humans.

Some hunters were more hideous than monsters.

Where was the line that divided them?

Bell pushed away Aiz's sword as he pled with her.

"I…"

Aiz hesitated, standing a few steps back from Bell.

It would be a lie to say that Bell had never thought about the things she'd said. She was right. Essentially, he knew which side he should choose. But then the smiling faces of Wiene and Lido and the others rose before his mind's eye. He thought of their tears. He recalled Dix's howling laughter and the words of Fels.

A bat—a hypocrite.

Bell took all this in and made his decision.

He would tell Aiz the true feelings that had been smoldering within him, the final statement he hadn't been able to say out loud.

"…I want a place where we can live together with them."

There—he had finally said it to his idol, the girl who stopped time.

"I want a world where they can smile!"

His foolish wishes echoed in Aiz's ears.

"What are you talking about…?" she whispered in astonishment.

Her eyes said that she could not—and did not want to—under-

stand.

They stood on separate sides of the line, she bathed in moonlight, he in dark shadows.

Aiz turned her face away from Bell.

“I’ve had enough…get out of my way.”

As if his ragged body were telling him it had reached its limit, Bell’s knees sank to the ground. He looked up from below her, his eyes filled with suffering.

But he did not retreat.

“I don’t want to…”

“Stop it.”

“I don’t want to…”

“I’m asking you, please.”

“—I can’t!”

“—Move!”

Both of them were shouting at each other more loudly than they ever had before.

Her hair swaying, Aiz closed the gap between them and thrust her sword before his eyes.

“I’ll cut you.”

“…!”

“It’s gonna hurt a lot, so…”

Those clumsy words were her last warning.

Bell's throat trembled at the cold air around the tip of her sword, but still he did not move.

Her gaze was filled with sadness. Bell's chest overflowed with an inescapable pain.

The next instant, eyes flashing with determination, the Sword Princess directed all her energy into the tip of her blade.

Bell squinted as the blinding moonlight glinted off her sword.

"—No!"

The door behind Bell burst open, and a figure rushed into his field of vision.

Her robe fluttered as her hood fell back from her face.

She leaped forward, both arms outstretched, directly in front of him and Aiz.

"Leave Bell alone!!"

Her high voice rang out, exactly like a human's.

Time stood still as Bell stared at her back with its single new wing, and Aiz gaped at her bluish-silver hair and strange bluish-white face. A fragmented word fell from Bell's lips.

"Wie…ne…?"

Pulling himself back into the present, Bell screamed into the oculus that the dragon girl held in one hand.

"Goddess, why?!"

"…"

The oculus was silent.

Ignoring Bell, who had not yet recovered from his frustration and confusion at this sudden change, Wiene stood protectively in front of him and stared into Aiz's eyes.

"Please…don't hurt Bell."

"…!"

At the sight of Wiene's amber eyes, Aiz felt her expression crumble.

The entreaty of the monster shielding Bell seemed to shake her heart. The dragon girl's actions and words confirmed what Bell had said to her just moments before.

"Stop…Please don't talk," she said. Unable to regain her composure, Aiz looked down and hid her eyes behind her bangs. "… Why do creatures like you exist?"

Bell shivered at her quiet, dispirited words. He sensed something unknown in the blank expression on Aiz's—no, the Sword Princess's—face as she slowly raised it.

Wiene, too, froze at the extremely overbearing energy from the girl's thin body.

"What do you and your kind want?"

"I…I want to stay with Bell."

"—I won't let you do that."

Aiz's eyes narrowed to slits as sharp as her sword.

"I'll never let you have your way on the surface like those other monsters," she declared, aiming both her words and her sword at the dragon girl. "Your claws can hurt people. Your wing can

frighten them. That stone in your forehead can kill so many of them."

Her words were filled with condemnation and hatred and rejection.

This was not the usual Aiz. Her unhesitating enumeration of reasons spoke to the strength of her will. This wasn't the Aiz Bell knew.

What was driving her?

Anger? Hatred? Sorrow? Hope?

He was on the verge of touching the darkness within her—no, her very core.

"I can't turn a blind eye to you," she said.

As Bell listened to Aiz declare anew her fundamental rejection of Wiene and her intention to kill her, he forgot to even breathe. She seemed about to slice him to pieces with a conviction and resolution as sharp as her sword.

Wiene, Aiz's sword pinning her in place, looked down at her hands as Bell sat unable to speak.

"…"

She stared at her bluish-white palms and at the sharp claws that had hurt Bell just like Aiz had said. Quietly, she wrapped her right hand around the claws of her left.

"Huh?"

Bell had noticed too late.

Breathing raggedly as Aiz looked on in amazement, the dragon girl broke them all off in a single movement.

“Wiene?!”

Next, she did the same to her left hand.

After she snapped them off, the cracked claws pattered onto the cobblestones. Wiene ignored Bell’s cries for her to stop and brought her bloodied hands to her wing.

“Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…!!”

As if offering up a payment for her sins, the girl ripped her dragon wing from her body.

“—”

The wing, with its ashen skin stretched across a bluish-silver framework of bones, fell at the feet of the dumbfounded Aiz.

The girl’s slim arms, filled just a moment before with a dragon’s power, now dropped limply to her sides. As she collapsed toward the ground, Bell caught her in his arms. The lifeblood that poured from her bluish-white skin and stained Bell’s armor a brilliant red was exactly the same as Aiz’s.

Bell put pressure on her back, frantically trying to stem the bleeding from where wing and skin had been moments before, as Wiene slumped against his chest and looked up at Aiz.

“If I…What if I disappeared?”

Struggling to breathe, she brought one hand to the stone in her forehead.

“This time, I’ll really disappear…”

She moved her hand from her forehead to her chest—to the place where her magic stone, the core of every monster, resided.

Bell’s face distorted with grief, and Aiz’s crumbled.

Slowly and quietly, Wiene spoke again.

"...I was always alone. It was cold and dark...and I...before I became myself...I was always alone. Nobody came to save me. Nobody held me..."

She spoke hoarsely, from the depths of her darkest memories.

"I was cut; I was hurt...It was scary and lonely," she whispered. Even breathing seemed a struggle. She looked up into Aiz's golden eyes, almost the same color as her amber ones.

"But Bell saved me when I was all alone."

"!"

"When I was in the darkness...and nobody would save me, Bell came to my rescue!" she shouted.

The transformation was dramatic. As she listened, Aiz's mask dissolved. She stood silently, as if she had discovered something within a bleak winter landscape. She must have been imagining it. From the monster girl's fragmented story, she must have been piecing together what she had seen, what she had felt. Or perhaps she could see it through her own golden eyes.

She had forgotten everything beyond the girl's tears.

"I want to stay with Bell...!"

The innocent monster was not explaining herself or trying to prove anything but rather expressing her wish. Before the sword that would take her life, she had revealed the depths of her heart.

Aiz's gaze wavered at the dragon girl's tearful voice. The tip of her sword quivered for a moment, too, as if in hesitation.

The sword that she could neither drive home nor withdraw glinted with her agony. The blade that she was ostensibly holding

against Wiene seemed to be cutting into her own flesh.

Reason and emotion battled within her heart as she fought her own internal contradictions. Then a light shone in her eyes—not a glint of pain and confusion but, instead, something resembling a drop of the moon.

Sorrow?

Envy?

What did Aiz see in Wiene?

As Bell, who had protected the vouivre from the start, stood there unable to speak…Aiz hung her golden head.

She looked precisely like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

She lowered the sword that had been pressed to Wiene's chest.

"…I can't kill the vouivre," she mumbled in a voice drained of all energy.

"Miss…Aiz…"

"I…I can't help feeling you two were right…that's why I can't do it."

"…"

"I can't fight you anymore…"

As she stood there with her eyes to the ground, bathed in moonlight, she looked tremendously small to Bell. Not an adventurer, not the Sword Princess—simply a girl.

In an attempt to hide the tightness in his chest, Bell wrapped his arm around Wiene's shoulder.

After a moment, Aiz withdrew an elixir from the pouch at her waist, set it on the cobblestones almost as if she was dropping it, and turned away from them.

"I can't save you…I'll be here."

"Miss Aiz…"

"Go."

"…Thank you."

Bell picked up the elixir and, with Wiene leaning on his shoulder, walked away.

After a few moments, he looked back one last time at Aiz's distant figure. She was standing with her back to them, her golden hair blowing in the wind. To Bell, she looked so ephemeral she might disappear at any moment.

"…"

Aiz stood rooted to the ground. She had even forgotten to return her sword to its scabbard.

The drifting clouds and silvery moonlight looked down on her.

"Aiz."

"…"

It was Bete.

The young werewolf had descended from above. He stared at the girl's face, half-hidden by her bangs.

"Everythin' okay?"

"…Yes."

She nodded listlessly at his question, although perhaps she had taken it in a different way than he intended. She did not say anything else.

"I'll head back first," Bete said.

"...Thank you...very much."

"Why the hell are you thanking me?" he said, spitting on the ground before walking off.

Stillness descended once again.

Left alone, the girl whispered something to herself, then gazed up at the deep-blue night sky.



"Bell, does this hurt?"

"Are *you* hurt, Wiene?"

I've taken off my armor, and Wiene is prodding me gently all over.

We're in a large abandoned building some distance from where we left Aiz. In the weedy ruins of this stone structure with half its roof missing, we patch up each other's wounds the best we can. Or more accurately, we apply the elixir Aiz gave us.

Wiene has taken off her robe and is as naked as the day she was born—although I've gotten her to at least cover her chest. Her wounds have all closed up, but even the elixir can't bring back her claws and wing. If that kind of miracle were possible, of course, Nahza wouldn't be walking around with a prosthetic arm...

As for me, despite my many wounds, not one was life-threatening.

I wonder if Aiz was going easy on me all the way to the end, despite what she said.

I've still got a long way to go…

"I'm no match for her," I mutter as I put my armor back on and help Wiene pull on her robe, which now has a gaping hole in the back.

We have no time to rest. We need to get to Fels and the other Xenos as fast as we can.

"Master Bell! Lady Wiene!"

"Haruhime!"

Just as we are about to leave, she appears in the abandoned building, oculus in hand.

The instant Wiene sees her, she flies to Haruhime and wraps her in a tearful embrace. Haruhime is crying, too, as she pulls Wiene's delicate bluish-white body close.

"Haruhime, did everything go all right?"

"Yes. Lady Aisha came to my rescue…What about you two?" she asks timidly.

"…We're fine."

Haruhime must have heard about our exchange with Aiz from the goddess. I smile awkwardly back at her.

"Well, we'd better get going," I say, steering the conversation in a different direction.

"Uh, Master Bell…I, um…"

"What is it—Ack!"

“Kyuu!!”

Something soft and fuzzy has jumped onto my face, which is partially turned toward Haruhime. I pull it off in a panic before I realize it’s a little monster—a Xenos rabbit wearing clothes.

Wiene, who still has her arms around Haruhime, jerks her head up.

“Uh, the al-miraj…Miss Aruru?”

“Kyuu!”

“On my way here, I was able to meet up with several of the Xenos who had been separated from the others…”

The instant Haruhime says the word *several*, a number of Xenos rush into the building.

“Bell!”

“So we meet again, creatures of the surface!”

“Lett! Fia!”

There they stand, Lett the red-cap next to Fia the harpy. And there’s the hellhound…Helga, was it? Including Aruru, who is still glued to me, four of the separated Xenos are here. It seems that just like Aisha, they saw Haruhime’s magical light as she fled north from the east of the Labyrinth District to escape the adventurers gathered there, and they took a chance on approaching her.

It wasn’t our original plan, but we’re all happy to be together again.

“There’re so many of us all of a sudden…We’d really better hurry now!”

"...Bell. I need to talk to you about that..."

The goddess has been quiet, but now she speaks to me through the oculus.

Meanwhile, the al-miraj is quarreling with Wiene, who's peeled her off my head.

"No, Aruru!"

"Kyuu!"

"I think you'd better give up on meeting with Fels and the others," the goddess says.

"Huh?"

Everyone looks at the oculus, which Wiene has returned to me.

"D-did something happen to Fels and the other Xenos?!"

"No, they're all right. They got away from *Loki Familia*and they're in one of the passages leading to Knossos."

"In that case..."

"There's no way for you to get to them. When everyone heard the fighting in the west, they all gathered in the center of Daedalus Street—not only *Loki Familia*but other adventurers, too..."

In a depressed voice, the goddess tells us that meeting up with Fels is hopeless.

She's right that it will be a huge challenge to avoid being spotted. There's no way all of us can fit under the veil, of course. It will take too long for me to make multiple trips bringing everyone there, and Finn and his troops would surely sense our presence passing by anyway.

We're out of time…The fight with Aiz took too long.

Wiene looks up at me, but I don't know what to say. Haruhime and the other Xenos are all silent, too.

It's game over for us. The words of the deities loop through my mind.

"…! Bell, take this!"

"Huh? This…It's the key to Knossos?!"

I can't help starting in surprise at the magic item that Lett offers me. As I look back at him, perplexed, he explains.

"The last of our brethren gave it to us. He said it made no difference if he had it or not…"

"No difference…? The Xenos said that?"

"He said he's going to stay here. He said he felt his dream was close by."

"…Is that a good thing?"

"We couldn't stop him…He seemed to be ceaselessly searching for something."

Lett lowers his eyes, and I clamp my mouth shut.

So now we have a key…but it's meaningless if we can't get to a door. *Loki Familia*is sure to notice us if we try to take a path leading underground—

"—Ah!"

A light blinks on in my mind, and I look up.

"Master Bell?"

Ignoring Haruhime, who's looking at me curiously, I desperately try to reel in the threads of memory.

A path leading underground…A route leading to Knossos.

I've never seen it myself. There's no proof. Still—

"There is! There is one! There's another entrance!"

I look from one surprised face to another, raising my voice in hope.

The residents of Daedalus Street have followed the orders from the Guild to evacuate. Thanks to that, the northwestern sector where we are located now seems nearly abandoned. Keeping an eye out for the adventurers who pass by occasionally, we follow the goddess's directions down one shortcut after another, finally arriving at our destination in the north of the Labyrinth District.

Maria's Orphanage, where the children live.

We make it to the back garden without anyone noticing us.

"Did you know about this place, Master Bell…?" Haruhime asks in surprise.

"Bell, you're amazing!" Wiene chimes in excitedly.

"No, I've just happened to come here before…" I reply with a hollow laugh. As we descend a set of stairs, I activate a magicstone lamp embedded in a wall.

The garden behind the church housing the orphanage leads to a sea of ruins. Hidden among them is a stone slab door. We use it to enter the underground passage that I explored with Syr and the children a month or so earlier.

…The underground room where the barbarian was.

“It’s so big…”

“To think a place like this would be down here…”

Fia and Lett murmur in awe as they look around. I, too, survey the place using a torch I lit with the hellhound’s flame. Our stone surroundings are just as I remember them.

After the incident down here, I filed a report with the Guild through Eina…but considering how poorly the investigation was done, I guess they hushed it up before it ever reached Ouranos. I hear they’ve gotten very uptight about things ever since the Monsterphilia incident when the monsters escaped…

“…”

In one corner of the room, there’s an enormous pile of ash and the burned remains of the barbarian’s body hair. I look at it in silence, then lead everyone to the far end of the room.

There before our eyes is the door to a passage, sealed tight.

“Bell, I can’t believe it…”

It was the hunter with the goggles who mentioned the passage to me.

Yeah, we caught that big oaf.

Before we had a chance to ship it off, it gave those idiot workers of mine the slip and actually escaped.

We tried to chase it, but it disappeared down the end of that crumbling underground passage.

The “big oaf” was the barbarian I’d encountered down here, and the crumbling underground passage is the door we’re standing in front of right now.

Lett looks down at my right hand, where a white light is pulsing again and again as a bell chimes.

The hunters who were capturing Xenos used to go in and out of Knossos as part of their smuggling activities, so it's only logical to assume there's a door down here that the barbarian escaped through.

I've been charging for two minutes.

I tell Wiene and the others to step back and thrust out my right arm to use my skill.

"Firebolt."

The massive bombardment that I've charged up blows away the brick door to the passage in one blast.

" ____ !"

Haruhime and the others press their hands to their ears at the tremors and roar.

When they look up, they see a half-destroyed doorway where the bricks were and, beyond that, an underground passage leading into the distance.

"Yessss!" I whisper as I catch sight—far in the distance, among the crumbling stone walls—of the glint of adamantite.

There's no mistaking it. This passage leads to Knossos.

"If you head down here, you should reach a door to Knossos. I don't know the way, though…" I say.

"We'll be fine. The scent of our brethren is still lingering in the farther reaches of the passage. Probably…"

"Woof!"

Helga the hellhound, who's been sniffing the air noisily, finishes Fia's sentence with a bark, as if to affirm her suspicion. Probably it's the scent of the smuggling victims…

The Xenos in our group cheer at the path that's opened before them. After a moment, they turn to Haruhime and me.

"Bell, thank you, thank you so much! We will not forget your help. Next time, if you are in trouble, it is we who will rush to *your*aid," the gentlemanly red-cap says.

"Creatures of the surface, I hope you are able to visit us in our home again. Let us sing and dance together once more," the ever-curious harpy adds.

"We will…and next time, we'll bring Mikoto."

The red-cap and the harpy shake my hand and Haruhime's in turn.

As the peculiar al-miraj and hellhound snuffle at our legs as if to say how sad they are to part, I overflow with happiness that Haruhime has held the hands of the Xenos.

"Bell."

The last to say good-bye is Wiene.

The dragon girl stands in front of us and looks up into our faces.

"I'm going back with everyone. If I stay here on the surface, I'll only hurt you both."

"Lady Wiene…"

Wiene smiles, so that Haruhime, who already sounds heart-broken, doesn't feel even sadder.

“You know, when we parted the last time, I cried and cried because I was so lonely,” she says.

“…”

“But if I do that again, you’re going to worry about me, aren’t you? So I’m not going to cry anymore. You don’t have to be upset.”

“Wiene…”

She sounds like she’s trying to free herself from her position as the protected.

What caused her to change so much in such a short span of time?

Was it all the people she met? The malice humans showed her? Her brush with death? Whatever it is, I know in the depths of my heart that I wouldn’t trade the sight of her smile right now for all the gold in the world.

I know that it doesn’t matter if she’s a monster or a human—this girl who protected me is a noble creature.

“You know what Lido told me? It might not be possible right now…but he said that if people like you exist, then our dream might come true one day!” she says, a smile blooming on her face.

I smile back at her.

“We’ll meet again, won’t we?” she asks me.

“Yes, we will.”

“And we can live together one day?”

“…Yes, for sure!” I nod.

I'm not merely consoling her. I am determined to make it happen.

"I promise you. I don't know how long it will take…but one day, I'll create a place where we can live together."

Wiene blushes and beams at me.

Haruhime, who's been watching us with kind eyes, claps her hands together.

"Let's pinkie swear!" she says.

"Pinkie swear?"

Wiene and I both look at her questioningly. She explains how in the Far East, people link pinkies to make a promise. Then she hooks my pinkie together with Wiene's and recites the promise.

"Th-this is embarrassing!" I mutter shyly.

"No it's not!" Haruhime insists.

Wiene giggles, and Haruhime links pinkies with her. Then she hands Wiene the oculus as if she's giving her a present, and the two of us wrap our arms around her.

She hugs her pinkie to her chest like it's her most precious possession, then follows the other Xenos down the passage.

"Good-bye, Bell, good-bye, Haruhime! We'll see you soon!"

Their strange forms grow smaller and smaller.

Wiene's glittering amber eyes as she turns back give away the tears she was hiding. I've been hiding mine, too.

Haruhime and I shout our good-byes and watch as the Xenos, still waving, fade into the darkness.

We stay there until they disappear completely.

"A promise…"

I look at my still-warm pinkie.

I have to make it happen. I can't let it be a lie I told because I didn't know what else to say.

Even if it's as preposterous as a child's fantasy, even if it's a pipe dream, even if it's an out-of-reach ideal. We have to smile at each other on the surface once again.

To make that happen, I have to do more from now on—

"…"

I look down at my palm and squeeze it tightly into a fist.

A minute later, Haruhime smiles, wiping away her tears, and I smile back.

Today, right now, I've engraved a new promise into my finger.



"Really, Fels? Wiene and the others have really entered Knossos?!" Lido shouted.

He was covered in wounds that told the story of his fierce battle with *Loki Familia*. But in contrast to his battered appearance, his voice overflowed with joy and excitement.

"Yes. It seems that Bell Cranell led them there," Fels answered, holding the oculus in one hand. The stone passageway where they stood echoed with the cheers of the monsters. They were advancing down one of the underground routes leading to Knossos.

Thanks to Welf, Mikoto, and the black mist, a short while earlier they had made it to a hidden staircase in the central zone of the Labyrinth District that led underground. The persistent attacks of *Loki Familia*had taken a heavy toll, and the scattered group had been on the verge of collapse, but with strong defense by Lido, Gros, and Rei, they had somehow made it this far. Now, knowing that Wiene and the separated Xenos were in the clear, their last worry was gone.

The line of monsters picked up its pace toward the door to Knossos.

“It seems that Lett and the others passed through the door without incident, but the enemy’s underground forces appear to be moving with dizzying speed. Most likely, Braver realized we have Daedalus’s Notebook,” Fels said.

“And thanks to that, we made it here just in the nick of time,” the lizardman responded.

“But there’s not a single enemy in this passage. Must be one of the enemy’s blind spots,”the gargoyle pointed out.

“Gros is right. *Loki Familia*doesn’t know that this underground passage exists. Looks like the plan was our trump card after all,” Fels said, looking down at the blueprint of Knossos copied from Daedalus’s Notebook to determine their route forward.

The western orichalcum door was just around the corner.

“Well then, Fels…”the siren Rei said.

Fels nodded.

“Yes. I don’t know if we can call it a victory, but we’ve almost reached our destination.”

They hurried down the dim passage.

"Whew…I wasn't sure there for a while…but I'm glad they've made it," Hestia said, sinking to the ground and letting out a long sigh as the tension drained from her body.

She was still in the desolate tower on the southwestern outskirts of the Labyrinth District. It was no surprise that her shoulders had finally relaxed now that she had safely delivered the Xenos to Knossos. She deserved a prize for her meritorious service directing Bell and the others from place to place via the oculi.

Beneath the night sky over her open command center, Hestia returned her gaze to the magic map spread out on the floor.

"Bell and Haruhime are in the north, Lilly is still wandering around in the east, Welf and Mikoto are heading south…I guess we're done. Looks like everyone will be okay from here on out."

The names of the Xenos had already disappeared from the magic map. That was because the Legacy of Daedalus that Fels had drawn up did not include the underground passages leading to Knossos. Since the Seeker Powder couldn't turn the plan of Knossos into a magic map, Hestia no longer had any way of tracking the Xenos.

"It sure is lonely here. I think I'll go meet up with someone," Hestia—who had been alone on the tower since Haruhime left—muttered, pulling the Notebook lying next to the map closer to her.

"Boy, did Bell surprise me. I didn't realize that passage existed…I mean, it's not even in the plan," she continued, puzzling over the underground passage he'd brought Wiene and the others to.

Some of the passages seem to be dead ends…I wonder if the descendants of Daedalus constructed them, she mused to herself.

It wasn't impossible. In fact, there was a decent possibility that was the case.

Hestia nodded to herself and flipped through Daedalus's Notebook.

"To think this book is a thousand years old…and it really saved us this time."

The book's ragged condition spoke to its age. Drawings of the multilayered maze covered pages that had clearly been turned countless times, and here and there amid the text she came upon characters she couldn't read. The words laid down in obsessive pursuit of that masterpiece of creation—the maze—together with the bloodstained binding were truly a testament to tenacity.

As Hestia reread the pages of the ancient book that had helped them outwit *Loki Familia*, it suddenly slipped out of her hands.

"Oh!"

The book tumbled across the rooftop and, of all the worst luck, landed in a depression in one corner that was full of water from the previous day's rain.

"Oh no!! Not this th-th-th-th-th-thousand-year-old book!!"

Of course, she should have been handling the precious tome with the utmost care. Fearing the worst, the suddenly pale Hestia rushed to pull it out of the puddle.

"Captain, I'm extremely sorry…but we've lost track of the monsters."

As Finn stood at *Loki Familia*headquarters in the central zone of Daedalus Street listening to the report from his faction member, he was deep in thought.

Should I have sent Riveria out when Gareth was held up? That black mist really threw a wrench in our communications… No, it's a waste to think about it now.

Finn's instinct when he dispatched Gareth was to kill the group of monsters. They'd outmaneuvered him due to his fatal underestimation of the enemy's strength—no, the strength of *Hestia Familia*standing behind the monsters—and having been stingy with his troops.

And we still haven't found the black minotaur. Did someone kill it…? No, I don't think so. Something is going on with that minotaur.

He had failed to achieve his main goal. Now his options were limited due to a number of factors, including the Knossos situation. He looked out at the Labyrinth District, which was still buzzing with the chaotic shouts of adventurers.

More than anything, it's because I can't get a read on the enemy's movements…

If everything had gone according to the enemy's plan, then their leader must be formidable. Finn acknowledged that. But there was still something he couldn't understand.

"You're sure you lost sight of the monsters near the twenty-first district?"

"Yes, sir."

Finn frowned.

The twenty-first district…No way, we surveyed that area, and…

Finn's guess had been completely off. He'd been totally outwitted.

No, something was going on.

"..."

Finn looked down at his right hand.

His thumb was throbbing with surprising force.

"...Where in the world is the enemy heading?"



"The mortal plane has gone crazy."

Somewhere in the world, someone cried out.

The innumerable stories playing out on the world below belonged to the children, but still, the deities lurked in the background.

Like marionettes on strings, or actors listening to their lines whispered to them from backstage, or dancers whose performance was rewritten mid-step, the children were led by the divine will of the deities.

"We are merely puppets of the gods and goddesses."

Somewhere in the world, someone gave up.



"Fels, what next?"

"Right at the next corner! That's where the door is!"

The Xenos advanced. They were heading for the red mark on the map that represented their one hope.

Clawed feet struck the stone floor. Wings beat the air. A snake's belly slithered over the ground, hooves beat it, and tails scraped across it. The monsters ran with all their might.

Finally, they rounded the last corner.

"Oh, it's soaked!" Hestia sobbed, holding the book she had retrieved from the puddle.

Then she gasped.

"—Huh?"

She felt as if time had stopped.

"What? How could—? I can't believe it!"

Incoherent fragments fell from her lips as she held the wet binding in her hands. Her eyes widened as she stared at the page open before her. She lost all remaining composure.

"How can this be…?"

Trembling with fear, she let out a piercing cry.

"Ouranos, what is the meaning of this?!"

"…"

On the altar in the underground shrine, the aged god drew his brows together and shut his eyes tightly.

"What the—"

The Xenos rounded the corner and came face-to-face with a horrifying sight.

An enormous stone wall, without a single crack or seam, filled their entire field of vision.

A massive wall blocking their path forward.

The door that was supposed to save them was nowhere to be seen.

“A dead end…?” Lido said in astonishment.

“Fels…what’s going on? Did we make a wrong turn?” Gros asked.

“This is impossible! I’m sure I read the map right…” Fels answered, looking down at the plan.

The mage had followed the drawings the whole way, heading for the western door that *Loki Familia*was unaware of. But still, there stood the enormous wall.

Is there a hidden door? No, the map didn’t indicate anything like that…

Unbelievable. It’s like someone’s been manipulating us the whole time…

Beneath quivering black robes, the cursed skeleton recalled vividly what it felt like to sweat. It was then that the mage heard the voice.

“Hey there, Xenos!”

The cheerful voice came from directly behind them.

“!”

“Pleasure to meet you. Please don’t be afraid. My name is Hermes. I’m just an ordinary god.”

The god had red-orange hair and was wearing a feathered traveling cap. His eyes, the same color as his hair, crinkled as he

smiled kindly at the astonished Xenos.

“God Hermes…?! What are you doing here?” Fels asked.

“It’s quite simple, downfallen Sage. I’m ambushing you.”

“A-ambushing…?!” the Sage sputtered in confusion. The Xenos shared his bewilderment.

What was Hermes talking about? What did he mean by ambushing? What was his aim? Fels’s mind refused to understand the situation they found themselves in.

The Xenos, who were pinned in place, sensed something cold in the god who stood before them. The black-clad mage gripped the map as he asked a question.

“God Hermes…Why is there no door here? Weren’t you the one who obtained the plan of Knossos? This plan, Daedalus’s Notebook—”

Hermes grinned from ear to ear.

“You didn’t really think Daedalus’s Notebook existed, did you?”

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CHAPTER 6 A DEITY'S SCHEME

CHAPTER 6
A Deity's Scheme

As Hestia held the soaked book in her hands, the blood drained from her face.

"The writing isn't disappearing… *The ink isn't bleeding…!*"

The letters weren't even blurred.

The truth struck Hestia like a shock wave.

There was even something strange about the texture of the pages, which hadn't been warped at all by the water. If thousand-year-old paper remained unchanged after absorbing water, then this notebook must be—

"Is this whole thing a magic item…? It's not impossible, and it's certainly not unimaginable, but…?"

The master craftsman Daedalus had supposedly created this cursed book. Hestia had heard that he was one of Ouranos's few children and one of the first generation of humans to be blessed with Falna. But even in the latter part of his life, which fell in the early years of the Divine Era when the deities descended from the heavens, there was no way the technology for magic items could have been this advanced. The skills to manifest abilities—not to mention knowledge about magic items—had been accumulated over the past thousand years. Maybe Daedalus could make an orichalcum door that did no more than open and close, but it was impossible to imagine his creating a book like this.

It dawned on Hestia that someone must have deliberately forged the notebook to look like it was from the Ancient Times—specifically as a deception.

"And this ink that doesn't dissolve…I recognize this."

It was the same type of ink as in the letter that Fels's familiar owl had delivered. That crimson writing hadn't bled in the rain, either.

Fels had written the letter with a Blood Feather, a magic item that allowed blood to be used in place of ink. The red feather pens were popular among adventurers in Orario these days.

And who had invented them? None other than Perseus.

"Of course I didn't get the Notebook from Ikelos," Hermes announced to the dumbstruck Fels and Xenos.

"Dix Perdix owned the original Notebook. But now he's dead. More likely than not, the real one is lying around somewhere in Knossos," he continued.

The heritage of Daedalus was passed on to his descendants. That was true of the Notebook as well as Knossos. Even a patron deity couldn't take it away from them, Hermes explained, still smiling.

His smile served only to enflame Fels's confusion and anger.

"Then what is that book?!"

"A fake. One of my children forged the book that Hestia received. She did a darn good job of it, too, wouldn't you agree? I had her use all sorts of magic items to create the illusion of a thousand-year-old book."

A beautiful woman with aqua-blue hair and dark, tired circles

under her eyes stepped out from behind Hermes. It was Perseus. She had responded to her patron deity's entreaty, and in the space of a few short, sleepless days forged a replica of the book that Daedalus had poured his crazed obsession into.

The only truth Hermes had spoken when he came before Ouranos was that he had thoroughly surveyed Knossos. His familia had searched the same places *Loki Familia*had. In other words, everything in the plans below the first underground level was nonsense—and the maps Hestia and Fels had used were interlaced with lies.

The spot where the Xenos stood now was one of those falsehoods.

"So you drew doors that didn't exist and lured us down here…?!"

"Put it that way if you like. Since *Loki Familia*was guarding all the other doors, I knew you'd be forced to take the bait and try your only other escape route."

A dead end with a nonexistent door.

Fels and the Xenos had followed the Notebook headlong into the god's trap. In that light, it was only natural that Finn had read the situation incorrectly. Of course his instinct for danger hadn't set alarm bells ringing. The Xenos had gone right down the wrong path.

"As long as I knew whether you were heading east or west…all I had to do was trust in my plan and wait. Wait right here, I mean," Hermes explained, rubbing the brim of his traveling cap. "Don't blame Ouranos for this. I commandeered his help, so to speak, in return for everything he's asked of me in the past."

But why hadn't Hermes given the Notebook directly to Bell?

The answer was simple. He didn't want to raise suspicion. By putting Ouranos in the middle, he'd softened the doubts of Hestia and Fels. Ouranos had served as his cover. They had trusted the book without reservations because it came from the strictly impartial old deity.

"Wait long enough and even *Loki Familia*will find you here, although they would never expect you to walk into a dead end of your own accord."

"…!"

"But please don't worry. There's still a way out. If you can get that far, you'll most likely make it to the Dungeon."

Having cornered Fels and the Xenos, Hermes stood in front of them dangling despair and hope before their eyes.

The meaning of the situation was clear.

Their lives were in his hands.

The Xenos looked even more shocked than Fels as the god's smile pinned them in place. Fels's gloved fingers rustled as they rubbed together. Alongside the anger, an overwhelming impatience welled up inside the mage.

This Sage who had lived for eight hundred long years was forced to realize what was happening.

The god was toying with them.

"—Fels, something weird is going on! I dropped the Notebook in a puddle, but nothing happened…It's a fake! Ouranos—no, Hermes—he did something…!"

Hestia's shouts echoed through the oculus and into the fear-laden air of the dead end. Hermes looked at the blue crystal, and Fels, obeying his unspoken command, crushed it. Hestia's voice

was silenced.

“What is your objective, God Hermes…?” Fels asked in a voice saturated with resentment.

“I want to make a deal—or rather, a request,” Hermes responded, narrowing his eyes.

The Xenos could not refuse.

As his follower stood behind him, Hermes looked over the monsters before him and slowly curled back his lips.

“Die for me, maverick monsters.”



Bell and Haruhime stood on a hilltop in the northern section of Daedalus Street. After saying good-bye to Wiene and the other Xenos, they had left the back garden of the orphanage and headed here.

“The town feels quieter now, doesn’t it…?” Bell said.

“Yes, you’re right. By now the Xenos must be back in the Dungeon…” Haruhime replied.

The waves of chaos seemed to be receding from the sprawling slums beneath the railing where they stood side by side. The black mist that had filled the western sector was entirely gone, and they could tell that the excitement was dying down.

As they looked out at the tangled streets of the Labyrinth District, Bell and Haruhime felt a sense of accomplishment but also a certain loneliness.

“…The final Xenos who’s still here…we can’t save him, can we?”

“Master Bell…”

“He’s here of his own free will, and it may be none of my business…but…”

Bell was thinking of Wiene and the others. He wanted the final Xenos to survive if at all possible, but he hesitated to express that thought directly.

Haruhime was giggling at the younger boy’s evasiveness when the goddess’s voice suddenly rang out from the oculus on his gauntlet.

“Bell, Haruhime! Can you hear me?!”

“Goddess? What’s the matter?”

“We need to talk! I want to meet up with you two. I’ll head toward you, so just follow my directions!”

“Uh…um, okay. I understand.”

The desperation in the goddess’s voice bewildered Bell. As he and Haruhime looked at each other, they both realized something was very wrong.

Forgoing any explanation, Hestia immediately began giving them directions. Eventually, they found themselves in a plaza on the west side of the Labyrinth District.

Hestia tottered toward them under a backpack stuffed with the magic map and other items. Without even pausing to thank them for their hard work, she plunged into an explanation of what had happened.

“Daedalus’s Notebook is a fake! And I can’t get in touch with Fels and the others!”

“A f-fake…? And you can’t contact the Xenos…?”

“Wh-what does this mean, Goddess?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know, but…I have a bad feeling about it…!”

The goddess twisted her ponytails anxiously as she responded to Bell’s and Haruhime’s panicked questions. From her expression, they could tell how serious the situation was.

“Bell, I’m sorry to ask you this, but can you go into the underground passage and see what’s happening? I know *Loki Familia*is still around and it’s dangerous, but I want you to check out the situation!”

“Y-yes, okay!”

Without further explanation from Hestia, Bell grabbed his Reverse Veil and was about to run off when she stopped him.

“Wait a minute, Bell!”

“What?”

“Just to be safe, let’s update your Status…We don’t know what could happen.”

Hestia rustled around in her belongings, pulled out her Ichor needle, and drew Bell into the shadows where no one could see them.

“Um, but…everyone just did it together…”

“You fought the Sword Princess, so it’s gonna really—Uh, anyway, it’s fine; just sit still.”

Hestia didn’t want to say any more about that particular skill, so she simply ordered Bell to obey.

“Yes, Goddess?!” he said, and began removing his gear.

“Haruhime, tell Lilly, Welf, and Mikoto to come here.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

Hestia had prioritized meeting up with Bell so that she could strengthen his Status. Now she hurriedly finished up the procedure as she gave orders to Haruhime.

“What the…?! Just how badly did that little Wallen-something-or-other beat you up?”

“Uh, is anything wrong?”

Bell sweated nervously as Hestia gaped at his back. He wanted to know what injuries he’d suffered, but they had no time to waste. He put his gear back on and gulped down several dual potions that Hestia gave him to get back in top form. He was just about to head for the underground passage ahead of Welf and the others when—

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO—!!”

The hideous battle cry of a monster thundered across the night sky.

“…Huh?”

At first, Bell didn’t understand what had happened.

Hestia and Haruhime were stupefied, too. They looked up in the direction that the cry had come from.

A grotesque form was flapping its way across the moon behind a veil of clouds.



“Where is it? Where the hell is that sound coming from?!”

Mord Latro turned red and spit on the ground.

A Guild employee had flagged down him and his companions, and they were now in the midst of very reluctantly carrying out their assigned task. At the sound of the monster's roar—surely the fiercest of the entire day—the rogue upper-class adventurer looked around with a terrifying scowl.

The two ghost-white humans standing next to him pointed at the sky.

"Mord..."

"It's up there..."

"Huh?"

Several forms were visible in the direction they indicated. All of them had wings. As they soar across the sky, their silhouettes grew steadily larger.

They were heading straight for Mord and his companions.

He stared at them intently. The moment the indistinct silhouettes came into focus and he realized that one of them was a gargoyle, he opened his mouth wide and screamed.

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

As the monsters crashed to the ground with a battle cry, Mord and his companions jumped backward as fast as they could.

The monsters landed one after the next, sending up a cloud of dust. Their stone claws ripped through the cobblestones with a terrific roar.

Everyone watching fell completely silent.

Mord and his companions were in the northwestern sector, on the outskirts of Daedalus Street, near the large crowds of evacuees.

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-aaa!"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee-ekk!"

As time once again began to move forward, angry yells consumed the district.

People shrieked and screamed as the heinous winged monsters invaded from the sky. The terror that the helpless townsfolk had been suppressing exploded all at once, and a tidal wave of demi-humans tried to flee the scene.

"A-adventurers!! Beat them back!" a Guild employee shrieked.

"Down with the monsters!" they shouted in return.

The adventurers in the crowd started running, weapons in hand.

Four monsters—a gargoyle, a crimson eagle, an iguaz, and a deadly hornet wearing armor—had landed in the large oval plaza. The adventurers split into a rearguard that hung back to protect the townsfolk and a vanguard motivated by a mixture of courage and greed for the bounties on the monsters' heads.

The first line of troops consisted of animal people who moved with their race's characteristic agility.

But the gargoyle's stone eyes knew no reason as he mowed them down across the troops.

“Yaaaaaah!”

“Ooof!”

A single swipe of his sharp claws sent the animal-person adventurers tumbling across the cobblestones. Humans and dwarves met the same fate. The rearguard fired a volley of arrows, but the solid stone wall of the gargoyle’s wings deflected all of them. Forgetting that they were smack in the middle of town, sorcerers began preparing their magic, but chants turned to screams as the other monsters attacked them.

The sight of adventurers being kicked about spurred the crowd to panic. Adults were paralyzed with fright, Guild staff cowered, and children hugged one another. As people ran barefoot toward East Main Street, the roads became clogged and the evacuation ground to a halt.

“Captain Shakti!”

“…!”

Ganesha Familia’s captain was guarding the townsfolk at the site, but she was flustered for a different reason than they were.

Idiots! Now, here…?!

Shakti, who knew about the Xenos, couldn’t believe her eyes. She was unable to hide her agitation over the strange behavior of these supposedly intelligent creatures. They looked exactly like ordinary monsters on an indiscriminate rampage.

She gritted her teeth and shouted an order to her faction members, who were looking to her for direction.

“The safety of the townsfolk comes first! Obey the divine will of Ganesha and continue assisting with evacuation and protection!!”

“Understood!”

That was her only command.

Meanwhile, Ouka was desperately shouting a different order.

“Chigusa! Work with Asuka to get those kids out of here!!”

“Uh, okay!”

Ouka and several other members of *Takemikazuchi Familia*were among the crowd of totally overwhelmed adventurers. Ouka was trying to beat back the attacks of the winged monsters with the side of his battle-ax, and he clearly had his hands full. Following his instructions, Chigusa shielded the children she’d brought back to the plaza and tried to lead them toward safety.

“Uh-uh…”

“Lai, we have to get out of here fast!”

“…!”

Lai, Fina, Ruu, and the other children were not responding to Chigusa’s and Maria’s calls. They had frozen at the sight of the hideous monsters.

Screams led to more screams, and the plaza succumbed to the downward spiral of terror and chaos.

“What are they doing?!”

Bell had climbed to a rooftop, and he shouted in disbelief as he surveyed the chaotic scene.

“Th-the Xenos are rioting in the plaza…”

“…?!”

Haruhime pressed her hand to her mouth, and Hestia gaped in astonishment. They could not make sense of the nightmarish scene before their eyes. The creatures flailing violently about like common monsters were unmistakably Gros and several other Xenos.

"W-wait a second, Bell!" Hestia shouted.

The boy ignored her and, tossing aside his veil, leaped toward the crowd. He headed straight for the plaza as if the screams of the townsfolk were pulling him forward.

"Lady Hestia!"

An instant later, Welf, Mikoto, and Lilly arrived on the rooftop. They had heard about the chaos, but when they saw it for themselves, they were just as shocked as Bell.

"Hey, this must be a joke…What's going on?" Welf yelled.

"I don't know! How am I supposed to know?!" Lilly shouted back.

"Please calm down, you two!" Mikoto said, regaining enough calm to interrupt their quarrel.

As her familia members shouted next to her, Hestia watched the charging Xenos from a distance. Suddenly a thought occurred to her.

This looks like a play…

The plaza was the stage, the townsfolk the audience, and the monsters and adventurers the cast. As the audience screamed at the bloody, cruel fight scene with ever-increasing terror, they seemed to be waiting impatiently for the turning point to arrive.

Just then, the star, the hero of the play, rushed onto the stage —

"—!!"

Hestia looked up. As she gazed at the empty sky, she furiously cursed the deities who must be watching the scene from some distant perch.

"F-Field General?!"

"I know."

Without so much as a glance at Raul, who was approaching him, Finn took in the scene on the outskirts of the northwestern sector where the monsters had descended.

"This is no different from the Dungeon…" Finn sighed. The night seemed to be one long string of strange occurrences.

He guessed that the enemy's aim was not to attack an evacuation site…and he sensed the will of an intervening third party in the totally incomprehensible and unacceptable behavior of the monsters. Finn didn't like it, but he also knew that once things had gone this far, *Loki Familia*had no choice but to dispatch a unit.

He looked down at his right hand. He was surprised to feel his thumb throbbing slightly.

Is something going on? Or is something about to happen?

As he licked the pad of his thumb, he recalled the words of his patron deity.

"'Get to the bottom of this with your own two eyes,' was that it? And so I will."

"Huh? What did you say, Captain?"

Ignoring Raul, who had overheard his mumbled words, Finn

made a decision.

"Raul, I'm going to lead a unit over there."

"What?! Th' captain himself? Who will stay here at headquarters and give orders?!"

"I'll leave that to Riveria and you. Use this chance to redeem yourself."

"Meeeee?!" Raul shrieked.

Ignoring this dull outburst, Finn quickly set to work. The creature he was most worried about was still alive and well. The prum leader told Aiz and the other first-tier adventurers to remain on alert, then set out toward the northwest, a band of familia members in tow.



"Please do not go toward Main Street! Please follow orders from *Ganesha Familia*!" Eina shouted. She was desperately trying to hold back the out-of-control townsfolk, though their trampling feet and shouting voices created a roar like a waterfall to drown out her voice.

Although she had headed to Daedalus Street largely for personal reasons, she was now doing her utmost to ensure the safety of the townsfolk here on the outskirts of the northwestern area. At least, she had been until a moment earlier.

Now she was trying to guide people through the chaotic plaza, but she wasn't sure she was doing any good.

Did the monsters end up here because they were being pursued? But why come to the evacuation site of all places, given the size of Daedalus Street...?

She watched as the monsters took on adventurers in the center of the plaza.

Despite all her knowledge, Eina's normal role was limited to waiting at Guild Headquarters for adventurers to return. She was filled with just as much fear as the other Guild staff and townsfolk. She willfully tried to steady her shaky hands and feet as she assessed the state of the battle.

That gargoyle is extraordinarily strong!

One after another, not only lower-class adventurers but even those who had leveled up to third tier, and the handful of second-tier adventurers present in the plaza, were thrown back so forcefully they couldn't get up again. The gargoyle's stone body was nearly impervious to long-range weapons as well. He was so strong she suspected they wouldn't be able to take him down without magic.

It was hard to believe, but with *Ganesha Familia*concentrating on keeping the townsfolk safe, this small band of monsters had the upper hand.

*If only*Loki Familia *would show up...!*

Eina watched from the corner of her eye as an adventurer toppled over vomiting blood and was pulled away by a companion, and she prayed for someone to rescue them. At that moment, her eyes met those of the brutal gargoyle.

"—Huh?"

She was certain it was looking at her. She felt like time had stopped. As she gaped at the lifeless stone eyes, she felt like something had reached inside her chest and was clutching her heart.

She did not notice that the purple gems on the bracelet wrapped around her wrist were flashing. Nor did she notice that

the gargoyle was concealing the same type of stone in his hand.

She stood rooted in place as the gray stone form flew toward her with a howl.

"OHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The adventurers looked up in shock at the gargoyle's sudden movement, while the townsfolk let out screams that rent the air like ripped silk.

The rearguard troops were protecting other people and could not make it to her in time with their shields. Ouka, locked in fierce battle, was struck dumb. As people ran this way and that, disappearing behind the gargoyle, Eina's green eyes took in the stone claws that were about to pierce her.

"—Aaaah!!"

But someone blocked those talons.

"?!"

"!"

Just as Eina felt death approaching, a purple-blue flash of metal intercepted it.

The white-haired boy had leaped in front of the gargoyle, Hestia Knife drawn.

"B-Bell…"

"Miss Eina, please step back!!" Bell said in a loud, anxious voice.

The dazed Eina, the townsfolk, and the adventurers were all staring at him, but he did not have a speck of attention to spare for them. His entire body was throbbing with a single question:

Why?

As Bell silently asked the monster before him that question, the hideous gargoyle seemed to narrow his eyes before flying at Eina once again.

“Gaaahh!”

“Wha—?!”

Bell intercepted his lunge. The hand holding his knife shook at the force of the attack, and a fragment of stone flew from the gargoyle’s claw.

The monster spread his wings and once again aimed for Eina.

Gros?!

As Eina stood riveted to the spot, claws met knife again and again.

Perhaps because the gargoyle’s potential was higher, the Little Rookie was forced into an inferior position. Setting aside their grudges for the moment, other adventurers attempted to support him, but the other winged monsters would not let them get close.

Bell had no choice but to fight back against the gargoyle’s fierce attacks. The threatening growls astonished him.

Has he completely lost his mind?!

He recalled the incident on the eighteenth floor. Right now, the gargoyle looked a lot like he had when his brethren were killed and carried away. Had something happened to them now, too?

“Why?...What happened?!”

“…”

The monster did not answer Bell. Only his claws and fangs responded.

As he listened to Bell's bewildered voice, the gargoyle—Gros—pushed down his emotions and swiped his claws through the air.

He was as rational as ever.

His outer form as a monster hid a commitment to an agreement.

Within his stone hand, he gripped a sparkling jewel that resonated with Eina's bracelet.

"Die for me, maverick monsters."

That was what the sinister god had said to Gros and the other Xenos.

"What?!" Lido answered, uncomprehending.

"God Hermes, what are you asking?!" Fels added after regaining the ability to speak.

Hermes responded as if it was the most trifling matter in the world.

"Oh, not everyone needs to die. I'd say three or four of you should do."

His unwavering smile struck terror into the hearts of the Xenos. The deusdea were different from both humans and monsters, and the Xenos found them horrifying without exception.

"I am Hermes. I will hold up my end of the agreement I made with Ouranos—half of it, at least."

He narrowed his long, tapering yellow-orange eyes and curved his lips up.

“As for the other half, I’ll consider that payback.”

He looked the Xenos over.

“To save the lot of you, a boy has been put in a difficult situation. I just can’t bring myself to tolerate that.”

“…!”

“Were you planning to go home just like that after all he’s done for you? ‘We’re sorry, thank you, you really saved us.’ Were you just going to slink back underground with a few shallow words of appreciation? Now, now, even we fickle deities wouldn’t act so insincere.”

His words were a means of negotiating, and they also resembled the skillful lines of a man gently deceiving his lover. But more than anything, they were a poison that widened the Xenos’s wounds until they festered with pus.

Sure enough, the Xenos turned pale and groaned with guilt.

“God Hermes!!”

Fels’s fists were clenched in fury.

The mage was not angry at Hermes’s betrayal but outraged that the god’s divine will was trampling on the hearts of the Xenos and the decision Bell had made of his own accord. But Hermes had no interest in such opinions.

“Let me guess, Fels—you want to tell me that Bell made that decision himself? You’re wrong. You’ve become ensnared in your own situation and in the divine will of Ouranos. Bell had no other options.”

He swept aside Fels’s words before they were even spoken. To him, they were nonsense from a mere child of eight hundred years. He, on the other hand, could see the difference between

Bell's subjective truth and the real nature of the situation.

"The world needs heroes, and I've bet everything on that shining white light. He can't be allowed to have dealings with monsters…Oh no, that would never do."

Fels stood frozen in astonishment at the god's divine will.

"I, Hermes, ask this of you, maverick monsters. Save the boy."

His whispered words were half entreaty, half deception.

"…You're asking us to attack him?"Gros said, to the gasps of the other Xenos.

"You really catch on quick."

"I'll go."

"Gros?"

"I don't think the boy will fight against Lido or Rei or you others. Since I used to abhor humans, I'm best for this role."

"But, Gros, that means you'll—"

"Any way you look at it, we don't have a choice."

Lido and Rei surrounded Gros, who had been their companion since the Xenos first joined together, but he shook his head. Hermes threw them a sidelong glance, silently affirming the gargoyle's words with his smile.

The other Xenos clenched their fangs and hung their heads.

"Brave gargoyle, tell me your name."

"…Gros."

“Thank you, Gros. Although you are a monster, I shall call you by your name.”

He removed his hat respectfully. Then he handed Gros a purple jewel.

“What is this…?”

“Insurance. It’s quite likely that Bell, that nice boy, won’t raise his knife against you even if you attack him. A person he cares deeply about will activate this item. Please attack her first.”

The item maker standing behind her patron deity gasped as if she detested him.

Gros gazed at the jewel.

“I understand…”he said, squeezing it in the stone skin of his hand.

“The girl I am speaking of is most likely in the northwest section of the Labyrinth District. I want you to bring chaos there first. There will be many of those humans you hate so much…but I would appreciate if you don’t kill any of them.”

“You ask for much…”Gros spit out. Then he looked around at Lido and the others. “It’s a promise. Save my brethren,”he said to Hermes.

“Now, now, I am Hermes after all. I keep my end of any bargain.”

“I don’t want to hear it,”Gros said, turning his back to the god and spreading his wings.

Joined by three other winged monsters who offered up their lives alongside him, Gros retraced his steps through the underground passage and took off into the sky above the Labyrinth District.

So this is how I will repay him.

Gros laughed to himself as he flew at Bell and Eina.

In spite of Gros's former hostility, Bell had rescued his brethren, and now Gros was paying with his life for what Bell had done. It was terribly ironic. But perhaps it was fitting that one who had detested mankind as the vilest of creatures should pay in this way.

Especially if he met his end at the hands of a human he had come to be a bit fond of.

Don't second-guess yourself, boy.

He'd told Lido and the others that they were not to begrudge the boy for this.

Gros flapped his wings monstrously at Bell, who was grimacing like a child trying to tolerate pain.

Pretending to be mad with fury, playing the role of a violent monster, the gargoyle bellowed for the boy to sink his knife into the magic stone in his chest.

If you don't, I'll kill the girl—!!

Roaring hideously to urge Bell into fiercer battle, Gros swung down his claws.



"Bell...!"

Hestia and the others had arrived at the plaza-turned-battlefield.

Fewer adventurers were fighting hard now, but the plaza was

still filled with trapped townsfolk. And there was Bell, over in one corner, locked in battle with Gros as he protected Eina behind him.

Eina seemed on the verge of tears as she watched Bell suffer blow after blow. She was desperately trying to get away so as to free him from the burden of protecting her, but the stone wings would not let her pass. The gargoyle's attacks from the air made the battle completely unpredictable.

"Bell...!"

"Mr. Bell!"

Welf, Lilly, Mikoto, and Haruhime were at a loss for what to do. Was it okay to help Bell? Was it okay to attack the Xenos? They had no idea.

Hestia, who was standing beside her bewildered children, was equally unable to make a decision.

Should I tell Bell about Hermes's scheme? But if I do that...!

Hermes had coerced the Xenos into something. But what would be the outcome if she told Bell?

It seemed likely that if things continued as they were, Gros would really kill Eina. Hestia didn't know the terms of the agreement that the Xenos had made with Hermes. If the lives of their kin had been taken as pawns, then her words would only plunge Bell's heart into chaos.

"Support troops are on their way! Keep holding out!"

The words of the adventurer only spurred on Bell's agitation.

Hestia gripped the oculus she had withdrawn from her bag.

At almost the same moment Hestia and her familia arrived at

the plaza, a *Loki Familia* unit led by Finn emerged onto a rooftop overlooking the area.

"What's going on?"

"The evacuation of townsfolk is still not complete! Adventurers from other factions are fighting the monsters—and so is the Little Rookie…"

As one of his familia members reported on the situation, Finn narrowed his eyes and fixed them on the boy and the gargoyle.

"…Take your positions. Ground troops, keep them in check. We'll stay here and prevent them from flying off."

"Yes, sir!"

Bows were readied in response to the faction leader's command.

Just then, a murmur was beginning to ripple through crowds trapped on the edge of the plaza.

"The Little Rookie…"

"…The Little Rookie? You mean Bell Cranell?"

The adventurer they were pointing at was risking his life to save the half-elf. The brave boy had walked gallantly into the most difficult of situations. With their own well-being at risk, people dropped their malice and disappointment and instead watched the scene unfolding before them with clear eyes.

"B-big brother…"

Even the little boy who had cursed him as a traitor now whispered his name in awe.

A change began to sweep over the crowd, which up till then

had been consumed by pure panic.

"Good timing, young Bell. Ah, this is very fortunate."

In a high tower near the plaza where the night winds howled, Hermes gazed contentedly down on the battle between the gargoyle and the white-haired boy.

Asfi stood behind him. Hiding her tired eyes behind her silver glasses, she sighed for the umpteenth time.

"You may be my patron deity, but you make me nauseous..."

"Ha-ha-ha. That's quite harsh, Asfi." Hermes laughed without turning his head. She glared fixedly at him.

"You're using the Xenos for the sake of Bell Cranell...I'll give you that. But what do you have to say about dragging ordinary townsfolk into it?"

"In one sense, those ordinary townsfolk are the root cause of the situation he is currently in. A little staging is necessary, after all, wouldn't you agree?"

There was the theater and the audience, the hero and the supporting players tasked with drawing out his best performance. As Hestia had suspected, Hermes had created a stage on a grand scale. He shrugged and glanced over his shoulder.

"Anyway, you agree with my decision to abandon the Xenos, don't you?"

After all, they would only bring harm to both the boy and the city of Orario.

Asfi remained silent as her patron deity sought her affirmation with his eyes.

"...I'll take my position now," she finally said.

“Right. Rearguard, just in case.”

Hermes waved at Asfi, who was now invisible after slipping on the Hermes Head.

After she silently left the tower roof, Hermes smiled down on the scene below.

“Well…my apologies, Ouranos. Sorry it turned out like this.”

He watched as the boy and the gargoyle flew at each other.

“Coexisting with monsters, you say? Utter nonsense. Friendship with them is no more than a pipe dream,” he said, continuing his imaginary conversation with the aged god.

Hermes had always carried out his clients’ orders calmly and obediently, but here on the top of the tower, he laid bare his true feelings.

“What will happen if we overturn thousands of years of hatred and destiny? Even Zeus would probably say it’s preposterous.”

He gazed at Bell and lowered his voice.

“The mavericks’ hero. Nobody wants that!”

Hermes spread his arms wide and smiled down on the stage where humans and monsters were playing out their opera.

“It’s time to get back to the basics of heroism, Bell.”

The god continued to speak.

“Kill the monsters. Kill them and save the people. Make your comeback as a hero.”

As if he were offering a beam of light from the heavens or pointing out the path to salvation, he pressed his atrocious divine

will on the boy.

"Forget the Xenos."

Ouranos had tasked Hermes with suppressing the disturbance. He was to be the emissary who calmed the chaos in the city and delivered the Xenos to the Dungeon.

But Hermes had no interest in that.

Because he was in a position to use the chaos, he had skillfully manipulated it. That was all.

"If you kill just one of them, you'll see reason. You may suffer, but one day you'll get back on your feet. Lady Freya and I won't let you get bored."

Hermes's divine will was that Bell cut his ties to the Xenos, who would lead him straight to ruin. He had the confidence to drive his hero into battle—the unshakable egotism to lead him into the finale that the deities were longing for.

Controlling human destiny was the gods' favorite game.

He would make Bell break his connection with the monsters and walk forward as the hero of the people and the favorite of the gods.

The divine will of Hermes was focused on that one goal.

"If you don't do it, then your dear Eina will die."

Hermes laughed, narrowing his yellow-orange eyes.

The ever-intensifying fight was pushing the boy toward a choice. The only possible choice, the one the god had prepared for him.

Before the god's eyes, the final act was playing out on that

grand and ridiculous stage.



Why, why, why?!

The fangs that threatened Bell and the claws that pursued Eina once again wounded Bell.

He deflected the next blow and parried it with his knife, injuring Gros. There was no way he could hold back when the gargoyle was trying to kill both Eina and him.

Again and again, other adventurers tried to support Bell, but they were thrown back. Gros's stone wings deflected arrows and flung away anyone careless enough to get close to them. They functioned as two extra arms, both blunt weapons and shields in one.

"Bell...!"

At the sound of Eina's hoarse, pained voice, Bell's face twisted in distress. The adventurers, Guild staff, and townsfolk were all watching his every move and praying that one of his blows would strike down the menace.

Gros.

As he repelled claws with knife, Bell's gaze met the gargoyle's inscrutable stone eyes. He was so confused and sad he wanted to scream. But his voice could not penetrate those ears. His mind raced futilely. The Divine Knife trembled.

He had to make a decision. The decision was like a curse, for if he did not make it, he would lose a person he cared for deeply. It wasn't even a choice.

He tried to think carefully about the situation, but in the face

of Gros's fierce attack, his thoughts quickly came to a dead end.

As he muttered "Why?" over and over, he remembered Wiene's words.

You know what Lido told me? It might not be possible right now…but he said that if people like you exist, then our dream might come true one day!

Our dream.

The dream of the Xenos—of Gros.

…Thank you. You have…my gratitude.

Gros had said that to him.

Perhaps it was only Bell's imagination, but he could see the Gros of that earlier moment on top of the monster who faced him now with such genuine bloodlust in his eyes. He must be mistaken to see volition behind the claws and fangs bearing down on him.

It was as if he knew that Bell did not want to fight him and was telling him not to hesitate—

" *Loki Familia*has arrived!!" an adventurer shouted.

Upper-class adventurers with the emblem of the fool engraved on their armor rushed into the plaza and flew at the winged monsters.

"!!"

The gargoyle began to feel anxious.

Bell Cranell must be the one to take down the monsters attacking the people. This was how they would clear their debt to the boy. It would not do for Gros to utter his last words on a pile of

ashes, his contract with the god unfulfilled.

Realizing he could delay no longer, Gros spread his wings and flapped. Flying parallel to the ground, he launched his special attack. Astonished, Eina and Bell could neither escape nor defend themselves—he was forcing the boy to respond and throwing away his own life in the process.

"Bell?!"

"Tulle!"

Hestia and the Guild staff cried out in unison.

"Assume your positions!" Finn shouted. As other members of his troop prepared to shoot their arrows at the winged monsters, he readied his spear to pierce the gargoyle.

"Now, Bell!"

Standing above the crowd of people holding their breath, Hermes pulled the puppet string—his divine will.

It was the instant before Gros's deadly blow landed.

Bell brought down the hand holding the knife.



"Are we really doing the right thing, Fels?" Lido shouted.

They were inside Knossos, the maze that Daedalus had dreamed up.

Hermes had indeed kept his promise. After Gros and the others flew off, he had delivered the Xenos through the door to Knossos, making use of feints and clandestine routes so *Loki Familia*would not discover them along the way.

“If we’re just thinking about Bell, then this may be the better option. But how can we abandon Gros and the others? It…feels wrong for us to return without them!” Lido cried at the top of his lungs. He had stopped walking as the group headed dejectedly for the Dungeon they had come from.

Rei and the others did not respond.

“You’re wrong, Lido. I believe in him,” Fels said.

In an attempt to conceal the anger in the voice emanating from the depths of the hood, the mage did not turn toward Lido.

“I believe that foolish boy can overcome some god’s trivial divine will—”



“—!!”

The gargoyle rushed at Bell and Eina with a roar so powerful the people watching shrank at the sound. His fanned-out wings tore through the wind as he glided straight toward them.

Bell looked at the approaching gargoyle and his twisted claws that resembled giant stone spears. Everything before his eyes seemed to alternate between standing still and speeding up. The screams echoing toward him from the outside world sounded very far away.

He heard Eina gasping in terror behind him, helpless to defend herself against the monster’s charge.

The gargoyle’s intent to kill was real.

If things continued on this trajectory, those stone claws would surely drown Bell and Eina in a sea of blood.

His instincts were screaming for him to slash the monster with his knife, to plunge its point into the magic stone in that chest that was so perfectly exposed as it charged toward him, to transform the monster's intent to kill into a pile of ash.

The shouts of the adventurers and the shrieks of the masses, too, urged him to kill the monster.

The god's divine will pulling the strings affirmed the voice of his instinct.

It was the instant before Gros's deadly blow landed.

Bell brought down the hand holding the knife.

—

But.

The boy's consciousness turned away from the monster before his eyes and focused instead on a scene deep within his heart.

It was as if he were being guided by a flash of light—perhaps grasping a bolt of lightning deep within himself and pulling it up.

The door to a faded childhood memory flew open.

Do not leave your decisions to other people.

It was the voice of his grandfather.

The same goes for ghosts and gods. I, for one, will never tell you to do anything.

His grandfather's advice was speaking to him.

Do not take orders. Decide for yourself.

His grandfather's eyes were pleading with him.

This is your story.

His grandfather's smile had taught him that long ago.

"Errrgh!!"

Bell shouted out in revolt against the absurd reality all around him.

Without even knowing what he was doing, he tore off the strings of the god's divine will that had wrapped themselves around him without his knowledge. His heart, filled with the memory of Wiene's dream and Gros's gratitude, thrust aside the choice that had been forced upon it.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Time, which had stretched to its limit, returned to its normal pace, and the world regained its color.

The monster's claws were on the verge of skewering both Eina and him.

He made his choice.

He chose to believe.

"—"

He slipped his knife into its sheath, spread his arms, and waited.

Hermes stared from above. Gros widened his stone eyes in astonishment.

In the next instant, confronted by Bell's defenseless form, the gargoyle aborted his charge and flew away from them.

"—Wait!"

Finn reacted faster than anyone. High above the plaza, to the great surprise of his troops, he shouted at them to halt their attack. His blue eyes were glued to the gargoyle that had stopped its charge. His shock seemed to spread to the people watching from below in the plaza, for the same feeling swept through their hearts.

Hestia, Lilly, Welf, Mikoto, Haruhime, Ouka, Chigusa, Shakti, and even Eina all felt the same emotion.

Bell had neither killed the monster nor allowed Eina to die. Instead, he had chosen a third, exceedingly foolish path.

The eyes of the sweat-drenched boy met those of the stunned gargoyle. For an instant, time stopped.

"…"

As for Hermes watching from his perch on the tower, he put his finger to the brim of his hat and pulled it down, as if to hide his wide yellow-orange eyes.

"Aah, so that's how it will go…He really is an idiot."

A queer, incomprehensible silence had descended on the plaza.

The emotion in the countless eyes fixed on Bell was shifting from shock to a suspicion that he did have some sort of deep connection with the monsters after all. It was a spark that could light the fire labeling him an "enemy of the people."

The instant the crowd awoke from its collective daze, a storm of outraged shouts and chaos would likely erupt.

" *Well then*.Asfi, do it."

Hermes would not accept this outcome.

In a corner of the plaza where his whisper fell, a shadow lurked. The invisible Asfi withdrew a flying needle inscribed with a spiral, so red it seemed formed from blood.

It was a Crizea, a magic item designed by Perseus to stir monsters into an excited, brutal frenzy. During Dungeon expeditions, it carried the risk of increasing their strength, but it also caused them to attack one another. It was not difficult to imagine what it would do in a place like this.

Hermes had prepared for the current situation. He had predicted the boy might act in the same stupid way as he had five days earlier.

Following her patron deity's orders, Asfi fixed her green-blue eyes on the gargoyle.

"...I won't ask your forgiveness."

For just an instant, her gaze landed on the boy facing the gargoyle.

As if he sensed her presence, he started and glanced back toward the place where the invisible woman stood.

She was about to shoot the crimson needle.

Urged by instinct, the boy's feet prepared to run.

In that moment, the only figures who moved were Asfi, Bell—and Finn.

"—"

The prum's thumb had never throbbed so strongly.

It was blaring an alarm that something was approaching.

Finn alone lifted his head. The next instant—

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

A monster’s battle cry shattered the still air.



With no warning, the man appeared before him.

“—”

He stopped in the dim alleyway. He was forced to.

The commanding figure was holding a large sword. He was a warrior in perfect physical form.

He knew immediately.

With only one arm, he would lose. No—even with two arms, he might not prevail. That’s how powerful the man before him was. More powerful than the soldiers who had made his blood boil and perhaps even more powerful than the golden-haired, golden-eyed swordswoman who had severed his arm—.

At the same time, there was something familiar about the man who stood before him. He had rust-red hair and eyes of the same color, which gleamed like a fierce wild boar’s. It was not a memory so much as a throbbing of his heart, though he could not remember what it was. But he was certain of one thing. This warrior would kill him.

As he stood before this extraordinary figure, he smiled.

He was grateful for this meeting, even though he knew it would lead to certain defeat. His entire body was buzzing. Struggle was the only way to overcome the hunger. All the more so if his opponent was as powerful as this. Even if he were chopped to pieces—well, that was one of his wishes. There was no reason to

flinch from it and no meaning in turning away.

He brandished his ax and stepped forward on his strong legs.

"..."

In response, the warrior slowly raised one arm and pointed.

"That which you seek lies ahead," the man said.

He stopped.

He opened his eyes wide.

He looked behind him, where the warrior had pointed. The sky stretched wide over the land, and voices echoed from afar. It was the sound of battle. Among them, he felt he could hear the voice of the thing that drove him on.

He turned his gaze forward again. Unexpectedly, the warrior was gone. But that was a trivial matter now.

He began to run, as if he had found his direction. He rushed forward.

He gave no thought to concealing his too-large presence. Tossing aside the screaming hunters in his way, he obeyed only his pounding heart and his hunger.

Crushing the cobblestones under his feet, he bounded to the top of a building beside the road.

"—"

In the middle of the plaza, fighting in the midst of people of all races, was—the white-haired boy.

A flash of light ran through his heart at the scene before his eyes. It was a brilliant white flash that restored all other scenes.

He was awakened. He was brought back to life. He quivered.

Ah!!

That's it! That is it! His dream, his desire, his yearning!!

The answer he had been searching for!!

At last, he had found it. He took in everything surrounding it.

There were many hunters, and he was face-to-face with a brother.

No, there was not a chance he could accept this. This alone he could not allow.

Could he hand over this chance to someone else? Could he leave it to another? This was his once-in-a-lifetime opponent. Rematch. Rematch. Rematch.

He was born for this and this alone.

His blood surged. His body filled with rage. His hunger called forth a tremendous power within him.

A great joy and an even greater hunger for battle welled up inside him. He let out a battle cry.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

A tremendous roar that shattered all hesitation, all sorrow, and all artifice rang through the air.

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CHAPTER 7
THE RETURN OF THE HERO

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The Return Of The Hero

When that battle cry thundered through the air, every first-tier adventurer in Orario reacted instantly.

The golden-haired, golden-eyed swordswoman looked up at the sky over the northwestern sector and started to run.

"!"

The Amazonian twins lifted their weapons and took off running without a backward glance.

"It's here!"

"Let's go!"

The swift-footed werewolf dropped what he was doing and sped off.

"Sounds like it's near Finn!"

And then there was Bell.

"—"

His crimson eyes took in the monster.

Destroying, crushing, smashing.

In an instant, the black beast had charged past any adventurers unfortunate enough to be standing in his way.

He stunned Hermes, stole Asfi's moment to intervene, amazed the goddesses, and trampled onto the stage that the god had prepared, crushing it to pieces.

The townsfolk did not even have time to scream. He plunged forward with such speed that the arrows Braver ordered his troops to fire had no effect, and even the spear he threw himself did no more than mar the beast's skin. Forward he charged—toward Bell.

The boy was his sole target.

"—?!"

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

The minotaur's majestic jet-black form was covered in blood.

Before this hair-raising apparition, Bell reverted to pure instinct.

He thrust Eina away with all his force, and then, desperate to escape the figure charging toward him and the deadly blow of the Labrys held in its single upraised hand, he crossed his arms and leaped backward.

An explosion of cobblestone fragments flew from the ground where the blade of the minotaur's ax made contact, releasing an overwhelming shock wave and wind blast.

Bell's body transformed into an arrow cutting through the air, crashing through the buildings behind him with the force of a river overflowing its banks as he was driven from the plaza.

"Bell?!"

Hestia and Eina screamed in unison as the monstrous bull with two crimson horns propelled the boy through the air.



“What…what happened?!”

Bits of stone rained down on a corner of the dust-filled plaza.

As the scene of destruction came into focus, the shouts of dazed adventurers broke the stillness.

Screams and roars of anger filled the plaza.

In the space of a few seconds, dozens of adventurers had been seriously wounded, and the Little Rookie had been blown away. The violent assault had happened so quickly no one had caught a good look at the enemy, but nevertheless it threw the crowd into an uproar.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“You’re not hurt?”

Ouka and Chigusa were supporting Eina’s back, but all she said in response to their questions was, “Bell…Bell?!” She had been shoved out of harm’s way, but she seemed deaf to their voices as she called Bell’s name again and again in a frenzy. Her Guild uniform covered in dust, she looked out at the panorama of walls with gaping holes in them.

In another corner of the plaza, Welf and Mikoto looked at each other.

“So that was…”

“…The black…minotaur.”

They whispered in horror at the jet-black monster that had disappeared in pursuit of Bell.

Lilly and Haruhime were pale and unmoving, as if they were remembering the terrifying scene. Hestia, too, was struck dumb.

“Asterios…?!”Gros murmured.

Even the Xenos were frozen in place by the unexpected turn of events.

Hidden by the cloud of dust, Gros stared in the same direction as Eina, at the holes where his kinsman and Bell had disappeared.

Finn surveyed the scene from the top of an adjacent building.

“Scouts, pursue the target! But do not act until I arrive! Narfi’s group, after you encircle them, provide support from the rear only, and call Aiz over here!”

“Yes, sir!”

As he fired orders in rapid succession, his troops leaped into action.

Come what may, he would kill the monster here and now. The prum commander had set his mind on it.

It was an *unpredictable element*. Finn’s intuition told him as much. Even his formidable brain could not predict its actions; it was, so to speak, a genuine Irregular. It was sure to become a threat in the future, and it must be taken down.

Finn was about to take off running when he heard a sound.

Stomp!

A figure appeared before him.

“You…”

He stopped and looked up at it.



“Ooo…owww…!”

As Bell pulled himself up from among the rubble, he moaned at a pain that set his entire body on fire.

Right in front of him was a series of stone walls with holes busted through them. It seemed he had traveled quite far from the plaza. If he hadn’t been wearing dual adamantite armor, he might well have broken his back. He forced his shaky body to stand up in the midst of the moonlit ruins.

Just then he heard a loud crash.

“!”

He looked up in surprise at the sound of rubble being crushed underfoot. Through the half-demolished walls, he glimpsed the black monster that had sent him hurtling into them. Bell gasped at the brawny figure so tall he had to look up to see his head. He wore his full plate armor lightly.

There was no mistaking it. This was the final Xenos he’d heard about. The black minotaur.

Was he an enemy or a friend? Could he talk to him?

Thoughts flew through Bell’s head even as he dripped sweat and reflexively took up a defensive position.

“…?”

Then he noticed the silence.

For something that had unleashed such a terrific roar, the

monster was strangely quiet. He had stopped his crashing steps at a slight distance from Bell and was now standing still. As if the wild rampage of a moment earlier had never even occurred, he stared fixedly at Bell.

Bell, too, stood rooted to the ground, forgetting to speak.

"..."

"..."

The moonlight illuminated the boy and the beast.

Standing amid the rubble and ruins with his back to the cloudless night sky, the minotaur looked down on the boy. He was easily more than two meders tall. Bell remained completely still, gazing up at the monster.

Time flowed by tranquilly. The moment of peace was entirely unexpected on the battlefield.

As Bell stared into those eyes that seemed to draw him in, the monster slowly opened his mouth.

"Your name. I want you to tell me your name."

Bell was taken aback by both the human language and the voice that spoke it, which did not in the least match the appearance of the speaker.

It was a low voice. The quiet tone brought to mind a warrior.

The boy stood in a daze, unable to answer. The monster continued to speak.

"A dream."

"Huh?"

“I’ve been having the same dream for a long time.”

The minotaur spoke as if he were delivering a soliloquy.

“A dream of fighting a single human.”

“!”

“This human is the strongest and most worthy of opponents. Even as we fight to the death, our blood and flesh flying, we recognize each other as destined rivals.”

Bell stared wide-eyed at the minotaur.

As soon as he heard the word *dream*, he had recalled his conversation with Lido about the past lives of monsters.

And as the minotaur talked about his own past life, his form reminded Bell of something else.

It was a scene he could never forget.

His first adventure. He had staked his life on that fierce battle. He and the monster had thrown everything they had at each other.

“There is a being who drives me on, in pursuit of a rematch.”

It couldn’t be.

Even as Bell realized the truth, the black minotaur continued.

“I have come here to meet with the being of my dreams.”

He had stated his reason for existence. His deepest feeling, the yearning so powerful it had pushed him to be reborn.

It was not envy toward the human race or longing for the surface that had brought him here but simply the search for his old

opponent.

“My name is Asterios.”

It meant *lightning*.

It expressed his desire for the crimson flash of light that he saw at the end of his dreams.

Even as Bell floundered in disbelief and confusion, at the bottom of his heart, he understood everything.

“Tell me your name,” Asterios implored him again.

“…Bell. Bell Cranell.”

The monster engraved the whispered words into the core of his being. Then he brought the double-edged ax in his single hand to his breastplate.

“Bell, please.”

The boy’s oldest and most worthy of opponents, returned to life, was begging him.

“Fight me again.”

The monster’s will echoed across the moonlit ruins.

Bell knew that he should tell the minotaur to wait, that he was not ready, that he had to return to Gros and the others. But his heart would not let him say those words.

He looked at his feet. He looked up at the massive figure.

The monster’s blood was dripping onto the ground. Countless wounds were etched into his skin, and he was missing one arm. Although he was on the verge of death, he had come this far to fight again.

Bell felt he had to grant his request. No—he felt it would be wrong to run away.

He felt exactly like he had the last time.

He had not fled from that fight, and he should not flee from this one.

"…"

Bell apologized silently to everyone and everything. Then he drew his weapon.

He raised the Divine Knife, holding it backhand, and looked at the black monster.

As Asterios watched the boy prepare to step into battle, his mouth stretched into a broad smile.

And with that joyful and ill-omened smile, he tipped his head toward the night sky and the moon watching over them.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

His roar shook the heavens.

The shot signaling the start of the battle had been fired.



"That sounded really close!"

A *Loki Familia* scout gasped at the thundering roar.

A number of male and female adventurers were searching for the enemy, their nerves taut. Because the buildings were layered on top of one another so densely, however, they could not see him from the rooftops. They leaped down onto the ground and headed

in the direction of the roar.

Their companions who were closer to the holes in the walls had probably already glimpsed the enemy, but the warning bells still hadn't rung. An elven girl among the party was thinking how strange and threatening that was when—

The wall behind her burst open with a loud crash.

"?!"

Fragments of stone flew everywhere.

A cloud of dust mushroomed from the wall, and an instant later a white-haired boy and a savage black bull burst through it.

"UOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

"Yahh!!"

Before the eyes of the stunned *Loki Familia*members, Bell and Asterios fought in close combat.

Asterios swung the double-edged Labrys, and Bell retreated. Even the wind coming off the weapon might injure him; indeed, several human bystanders were already bloodied from the backdraft, which spoke to the obvious gap between their Status and that of the monster.

Bell abandoned his pride and aimed relentlessly for the monster's right side, where the Sword Princess had cut off his arm, rather than the left side where he held the Labrys. Asterios smiled at the rabbit's swift footwork and sharp knife thrusts, easily intercepting every one of them.

"He's fighting the black minotaur…!"

"Bell Cranell?!"

The ax screamed through the air. Fragments of rock flew from the cobblestone as boots kicked fiercely against it. The fight between boy and monster was a battle of speed against strength. The adventurers watching from the periphery squeezed their hands into tight fists, frustrated to be mere spectators to the show.

Finn had told them not to get involved under any circumstances. But just standing there with pale faces was a disgrace to *Loki Familia*. How could they sit back and let the very same boy they'd showered with criticism do all the fighting?

Roused to action, they followed their captain's orders and surrounded Bell and Asterios. They grasped their bows, arrows, spears, and longswords and were just about to attack simultaneously from both close and distant range when the monster let out a howl.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

"Eek!!"

That single terrifying roar pinned them in place.

The howl was incredibly powerful. The monster's menacing voice aroused a primal terror in the adventurers that stopped them in their tracks. The Level 2 rearguard sank to their knees, while the Level 3 front line stiffened as if they were about to fall over dead.

You're in my way, the monster seemed to be saying. Asterios had no mercy for those who were unqualified to fight. Gripping the handle of his ax, he swung his clenched fist into the adventurers holding spears and swords, throwing them against the walls of the surrounding houses so hard that blood dripped from their mouths.

The elven archers in the rearguard blanched as Level 3 adven-

turers went flying through the air. But the black colossus closed in on them next. Tears welled in their eyes as they stood frozen.

"Hey!"

As if to remind the minotaur where his true opponent lay, Bell slashed his knife toward the minotaur from the side.

Asterios smiled and turned away from *Loki Familia*, returning Bell's blow with one from the Labrys. The elves gaped at the Little Rookie, who unlike them was not immobilized by terror.

I know that howl.

To Bell, it was uncomfortably familiar.

He had already gotten past this particular wall on his first adventure. He would not be cowed by it for a second time.

He raised his black and crimson knives and rushed the frenzied monster.

"Hey, where'd the gargoyle and those other monsters go?!"

As the distant roars of the minotaur echoed across the plaza and the dust finally began to settle, adventurers shouted to one another. It seemed the winged monsters had taken advantage of the chaos to abruptly disappear.

In an abandoned corner of the plaza, Welf and the other *Hestia Familia*members were preoccupied with something else.

"What the hell were you doing out there?!" Welf shouted.

He and Mikoto had thrown their veils over Gros and the other Xenos, rendering them invisible and therefore saving them, but Welf's hair was practically standing on end with anger.

“H-humans…”

“Do you think I’m going to forget that you just about killed me?!” Lilly screamed.

“Sir Welf, Lady Lilly, please calm down!” Mikoto said, forcing herself to do the same.

“Everyone, this is not the time or place…” Haruhime added. All she could do was watch in confusion as the others quarreled.

Hestia stood to the side, quickly assessing the situation.

*Why isn’t*Loki Familia *here in the plaza? Are they trying to get to the minotaur?*

Her mind raced as the wind carried to her ears sounds of what could only be Bell’s battle with the black beast.

“Haruhime! You gave Wiene an oculus, right?”

“Yes, ma’am! When we parted, I gave her mine.”

“Excellent,” Hestia said, clenching her hand into a fist.

That meant they’d be able to meet up with the Xenos who had the key. Now was their only chance to get Gros and the other three winged monsters to Knossos.

Hestia screamed into her oculus.

“Bell, keep fighting!”

“What I mean is, just go crazy, okay? *Loki Familia*members—and everyone else in town—are all focusing their attention on you. I know it may be dangerous. I’m sorry!”

The voice coming through the blue crystal on Bell’s gauntlet did not make him anxious. He was already fully focused on the

battle at hand. If his mind wandered for an instant, he would be killed. He would fall prey to the Labrys. In the space of a second, Hestia's information had faded to monochrome and was stuffed into a corner of his mind.

He's strong…!

Again and again, the Labrys threatened his life, but still Bell made his way around to his opponent's right side and aimed his knife above the spot where his missing right arm had been. But the minotaur saw through his plan. His skill and tactics were far sharper than what Bell remembered from their past encounter. A feeling similar to impatience gnawed at him.

As Bell wavered over what to do, the minotaur hungered for strength and nothing else.

Bell pushed away his hesitation, drew close to his opponent's right side, and once again aimed his two knives at his opponent's blind spot.

"Kuh!"

"?!"

The monster had used his enormous ax as a shield, and now one leg came crashing down. The ground crumbled beneath his foot, destroying Bell's stance. The next instant, Asterios brought down the Labrys. Bell dodged, responded with a kick, and leaped backward.

White hairs were torn from Bell's head, and droplets of his blood joined the spray of sweat.

Every celch of his opponent's body was a lethal weapon. Any one part could kill Bell. As the boy shivered in horror, the minotaur smiled as if to say Bell had no time for such distractions, then swung his red horns through the air.

“Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Bell thrust up his gauntlet to block, but he could not deflect all of the blow’s force.

As the earsplitting screech of metal rent the atmosphere and sparks flew, Bell spun through the air onto the roof of a building. But Asterios pursued him, and no sooner had he landed than the monster kicked the boy’s body.

“Aaaah!”

Bell crossed his arms to guard his body with dual adamantite. The world shook violently as he absorbed the full force of the blow.

He heard the sound of the bone in his forearm cracking, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He flew backward toward the plaza once again.

“Huh? Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!!”

The human bullet inscribed a gentle arc across the sky as it flew toward the plaza with incredible speed. As Bell’s form approached, the people in the plaza scattered frantically.

He landed headfirst and rolled into a corner of the square, sending up clouds of dust.

“B-Be—?!”

Hestia stared wide-eyed at Bell’s far-too-swift return, but her scream was cut off midway by the shriek of cobblestones crumbling underfoot as Asterios descended from the sky.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah-hhh!!”

The loudest screams yet echoed from the plaza.

The black monster's reappearance fueled the terror and chaos of the crowd. As the throng of townsfolk stampeded toward Main Street, children could be heard sobbing within the melee.

"Waaaaaaahh!"

The adventurers, on the other hand, shouted as they ran. They were desperate enough to do anything. Perhaps the sight of the crying townsfolk moved even their hardened hearts, for they felt impelled to protect the women and children. They forgot their terror and closed in on Asterios from all directions.

But then the monster bellowed again.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Asterios's power affected every adventurer uniformly. He brought destruction to all in equal measure, sweeping aside dozens at a time. In the space of a few seconds, countless weapons were crushed to dust, fountains of blood sprayed through the air, and even the strongest of the upper-class adventurers sank to the ground as the monster reduced his attackers' numbers to a mere handful.

Ouka and Chigusa, who had hung back to protect the townsfolk, stood pale and petrified as they watched the scene unfold. *Hestia Familia*, who were trying to help Gros and the other Xenos escape, as well as Eina and the other Guild employees, were similarly immobilized by fear.

"—"

So were the children.

Lai, Fina, and Ruu were among the group of orphans who had not yet escaped the plaza. They could not help watching through

the gaps in the crowd.

The black monster, its massive one-armed form smeared in blood, was the most ominous and atrocious thing they had ever seen, and the sight of adventurers flying this way and that like leaves in the wind was a scene from their worst nightmares. They did not know if the black forms spinning through the air were weapons or human arms.

This overwhelming monster was completely different from the gargoyle and winged beasts they had been watching just a few minutes earlier.

Oh, aah—

To Lai, it looked like a windstorm of death.

If you touched it, you would die. That was the nature of the thing before his eyes.

He had only heard about floor bosses, never seen one, but he imagined that this was what they were like.

It was only natural that this most horrendous of monsters terrified the children to their very core. It was inevitable that they could move only their eyes and nothing else.

"UOO—"

In the space of an instant, the minotaur trampled the adventurers. Then it turned and looked straight into the children's eyes.

Lai felt all hope drain from him. Fina and Ruu knew then that fear had no limits. Time slowed to a hellish crawl as their hearts tightened in their chests and their breath caught in their throats.

"Run, everyone!!" Maria screamed. She had been separated from the children and was standing toward the back of the crowd. But the children did not budge. Caught in the monster's gaze,

they could not move so much as a finger. And just like the children, the adventurers in the crowd had lost heart. Not one stepped in between the children and the beast. It took a step toward Lai, Fina, and Ruu as if it was searching for something. But just as the children felt that their hearts would explode from the overwhelming fear—

"—Yahhh!"

A white-haired adventurer burst through the cloud of dust and rushed the black monster.

"!!"

Bell's sudden appearance shook the children free of their frozen daze. His fluttering white hair drew a pure-white arc as he flew at the monster, red knife in one hand and black in the other.

The minotaur felt a renewed surge of joy at the sight of his rival.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Lai saw it all. The scene was burned into his memory.

Bell was howling as blood flowed from his head and stained his face red.

He was different from all the other pale and shaking adventurers.

No one else would stand up to the monster, but Bell would.

He was the only one willing to engage the windstorm of death in battle head-on.

"Ah—"

Bell's expression was completely different from any Lai had seen him make before. He had seen him miserable, smiling bitterly, afraid, and crying. Lai had felt Bell had betrayed him, yet his memories of him were happy. But none of these Bells matched the one before him.

That's—

Here was the image of a man roaring heroically.

Here was the face of a man throwing himself into an adventure.

That's—an adventurer.

The boy stared at Bell. His hands and feet shook. His chest grew hot.

Lai didn't know what this feeling was—like he was about to cry.

He knew just one thing.

Bell Cranell was neither a traitor nor a coward. He was an adventurer.

"……!"

Lai opened his mouth and tried to speak.

There was something he had wanted to say for a long time.

Bell had been drowning in despair, and he wanted to apologize, to tell him something.

But he couldn't form the words. He felt as if a string were wrapped around his throat, preventing him from speaking.

Fina and Ruu felt the same way. They stood next to him, tears

trickling down their cheeks.

Lai willed his mouth to move as tears blurred his vision, too. Just then, he heard a voice.

"Gooooooooooooooooo, Little Rookiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii-iie!!"

The deep voice thundered across the plaza.

"!"

"Get 'immmmmmmm!! Kill the damn monnnnnnnster-rrrrrrrr!"

It was Mord, the rogue adventurer.

He and his companions had stayed a safe distance from the battle, but they were watching with beet-red faces, fists clenched tightly. Mord spit, and then shouted his battle cry at the fighting boy.

Lai turned his head to look at Mord's, and the string around his neck seemed to fall away. The boy squeezed both hands tight, shut his eyes, and yelled as loud as he could.

"Go get 'im, big brotheeeerrrrrrr!!"

"This is…"

As Hestia gazed around the plaza in a daze, she noticed a change begin to occur.

"Bell! Big brother!"

“Yeah! You go…!”

“Give ’im hellllllllllllllllllllllllll…!”

Mord’s thundering shouts echoed alongside Fina’s and Ruu’s earnest cheers. *Ganesha Familia*was urgently attempting to evacuate everyone from the plaza, but when the panicked townsfolk heard the shouts, they stopped.

Everyone realized in astonishment what was happening.

A single adventurer was taking on the enormous monster and his horrifying ax, rushing at him with two terribly puny knives. The adventurer evaded the earth-splitting swing of the ax by a hairbreadth, then leaped at the monster with knives flashing.

The townsfolk blanched at the sight. The Guild employees were at a loss for words. The other adventurers clenched their fists.

This was a fight. This was a fierce struggle in which human and monster were threatening each other’s lives.

“Bell…!”

Eina could not stop herself from whispering his name.

Everyone watching realized the same thing.

There was no calculation in this fight and no ambition. It was pure will. Pure thirst for victory.

No one thought now to slander Bell as an “enemy of the people.”

Criticisms steeped in malice and ridicule shaded with despair lost all meaning in the presence of this battle.

This was true mortal combat.

The sight of the adventurer bravely facing down this terrifying monster was worth more than a thousand explanations or excuses. There was not a trace of falsehood in the face of the one roaring at the black beast.

"Go..." a human finally whispered.

"Fight hard!" an animal person yelled.

"Don't give in!" an elven girl screamed.

They were shouting at the boy locked in battle with the fierce monster in the center of the plaza.

A single word cascaded into a gigantic wave of voices.

"—!!"

As the lethal struggle unfolded in their midst, the pale townsfolk shouted until they were hoarse. The Guild staff turned their lost words into cheers. The adventurers raised their clenched fists to the sky.

All were shouting in support of Bell.

All saw the image of a hero in the boy's brave fight.

An adventure...

The shouts of the spectators rang in Bell's ears as he dodged the Labrys, keenly aware that his movements had sped up.

And that his heart had returned to where it began.

I want to have an adventure.

The voices around him sounded distant. Everything but his opponent disappeared from his field of vision.

All traces of hesitation and indecision had vanished from his face.

He forgot the Xenos, and Aiz, and the future. He forgot all the things that had been worrying him and focused solely on the fight at hand. He gave himself heart and soul to the smiling opponent before him.

He was starving, exactly as his opponent was.

Bell realized instinctively that beyond the hunger for victory lay everything connected to his existence. This was a fight to save the Xenos, to reach the same level as his idol, to achieve the future that Wiene dreamed of. In other words, a fight for strength.

Onward, to adventure once again!!

His crimson knife yielded at last to a powerful blow from the Labrys. As the people watching screamed, Ushiwakamaru shattered to pieces.

I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm going on ahead.

Instantly, he shot a Firebolt from his empty hands, and then flew at the tottering minotaur surrounded by a shower of scarlet sparks.

Bell roared.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

The roars of the boy and the thundering shouts of the crowd echoed through the Labyrinth District.

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

"You, Amazon the Slasher!"

"If you move a hair, we will have no mercy."

Tiona held her double-edged sword at the ready as she stared at the four armed prums before her. She was standing on the edge of the plaza where the battle continued to rage, but she could not move forward.

“Get out of my way!!” Tione shouted.

She, too, was blocked. The first-tier cat-person adventurer Allen Fromel was standing in her way. He parried each slash of her kukri knives with his spear.

“What the hell are you doing?!” she yelled, outraged that someone had obstructed her pursuit of the black minotaur.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” he responded with a chilly stare, then glanced back toward the ongoing fight between the boy and the monster. “Can’t you see the kid’s trying to be a man?” He spit on the ground.

“You’re a fine one to interfere,” Tione spat back.

Meanwhile, a good distance from where Tiona and Tione were stalled near the western edge of the plaza, the werewolf Bete stood on the edge of a roof on the eastern side and clicked his tongue dramatically.

“Tch…”

As he looked down on the white-haired boy, his face and its lightning-bolt tattoo twisted into a grimace.

Aiz stood near him, watching the battle in silence.

“…”

The two young elven boys guarding her and Bete—one with a white sword and the other, a dark elf, with a black sword—stood with their weapons at ease. They, too, were gazing down at the fight.

"...You've gone and done it now, haven't you, Ottar?"

Finn stood nearby, facing the boaz warrior Ottar. He sighed.

"..."

The boaz was silent.

First-tier adventurers from *Freya Familia*were blocking all *Loki Familia*leaders from moving. But that was not all. Troops under Captain Ottar's command had also pinned in place all the other *Loki Familia*members. That was why none of them had rushed into the plaza when the black minotaur appeared.

"I have only done what my goddess ordered."

Ottar turned and threw his sword off the edge of the roof, his voice melting into the night air. The huge hunk of silver spun as it cut through the wind, landing point-down in the center of the plaza at the feet of Bell and Asterios.

Both human and monster stared at it. The next instant, Bell leaped toward the weapon, seized the grip, and pulled it from the ground.

The mad bull shuddered with pleasure as the final battle of his dreams came to life.

"Yah!!"

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Sparks sprayed into the air as the sword clashed with the Labrys. As the battle continued with new fury, the onlooking crowd screamed and shouted even louder.

"Ha-ha-ha...I wonder how Hermes feels now!"

Freya was on the top floor of Babel Tower in the city center.

Watching from her perch at the highest point in Orario as the furious fight unfolded, the goddess sighed rapturously.

"Is this the fate laid down by some individual? Or is it simply a miracle? Whatever the answer…I am grateful for it."

She was grateful for this turn of Fortune's wheel—for the encounter between the boy and the monster. The beautiful goddess flushed and chewed gently on her bent pointer finger. She had left everything to her children so she could watch this scene.

Lost in admiration, she gazed passionately at the sparkling pure soul locked in combat with the raging bull.

"To think I am able to watch this fight once again!"

"Hey now…What's going on here?" Hermes muttered.

Asfi reversed her invisibility and appeared behind him on the top of the tower where he stood.

"Lord Hermes…The situation has spun out of control. In all the chaos, the Xenos got away from me."

Hermes did not respond. He simply stared at the plaza, stupefied.

The stage he had so carefully prepared was completely destroyed. His scheme had turned to dust.

Asfi watched her stunned patron deity silently.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew off his traveling cap. Hermes snarled, roughly pushing back his orange hair.

"Everything is ruined…!"

A single monster had crushed the plan he had labored so diligently over. Drowning in a despair he had never experienced be-

fore, the god clenched his teeth and glared at the minotaur with deep hatred.

Yet at the same time, there was joy in his eyes as he looked down on the plaza.

"Oh, damn. I may as well accept it. I've lost! How could I possibly have imagined this scenario?"

The plaza echoed with battle cries, roars, cheers, and prayers. The people in the crowd were completely drawn in by this genuine battle between boy and beast, forgetting even their desire to escape. Hostility and despair had been replaced by a whirlwind of excitement.

Even if everything had played out according to Hermes's plan, it likely wouldn't have gone this well. The god would not have held the people's hearts in the palm of his hand like this. Of course not. Even when the boy was in the midst of battle with the gargoyle, he had been suffering and constantly resisting.

All-knowing, all-powerful god though he may be, Hermes could not have conjured such a scene. It was better than a real adventure.

"Is this what you meant? Was this it, Zeus? Did you disappear from Orario because you foresaw this?!"

Behind him, Asfi gasped. Both she and Hermes were completely enraptured by this scene as brilliant as lightning that swept away the darkness.

"Only one who resisted the divine will of a deity could shine like this!"

The world wanted a hero.

It wanted a blade to rip through the darkness of old, a light to overcome long-held desires, a roar full of ugly yet noble life.

It did not want a puppet who danced for the deities but rather the potential to overcome thousands of years of stagnation in the mortal plane.

It wanted a familia myth, a story woven from pure will.

"In the end…is this black beast the polestar that will burn the weaver's hand and show him the way?"

I'm a complete clown.

Hermes shivered in humiliation at the strange scene that so eclipsed his own divine will.

"The wisdom of the Sage, the strategies of Braver, the schemes of a god…This pure power has smashed them all to pieces."

Hermes narrowed his eyes as he drank down the last dregs of his own shame.

"Ah, such a beautiful, loving fight to the death…"

His voice was full of respect for this struggle between the boy and the monster—this scene from a heroic tale that had gripped the hearts of the people and would not let them go.

"Oh…!"

As the crowd shouted and trembled, Hestia, too, shivered and pressed her hands to her chest. All she could see in the gaps between the wall of waving people was Bell's back as he faced down the black monster.

"Lady Hestia!" Lilly shouted.

"…Let's go! We'll leave the minotaur to Bell! We can't get in his way!!" Hestia replied. They had to escort the hidden Xenos to Knossos. Borne up by the surge of battle created by their familia

member, the remainder of *Hestia Familia*was prepared to risk their lives to do what must be done.

Before leaving the plaza behind, Hestia looked one last time toward the center. The sight of a new story being written across Bell's body burned itself into her memory.



"The mortal plane isn't half bad."

Somewhere in the world, someone spoke.

The innumerable stories playing out on that mortal plane belonged to the children, but still, the deities lurked in the background. That was certainly true.

But.

No matter how much the strings were pulled, or the lines whispered from backstage, or the movements rewritten mid-step, there were naughty children who did not listen. They raged across the stage, most of the time making mistakes too terrible to look at and drawing contemptuous laughter. But sometimes, they overturned the preestablished harmony entirely.

They turned stale operas into hitherto unseen dramas.

"It's always you children who surprise us and surprise the world."

Somewhere, someone smiled.



The struggle between Bell and Asterios raged on.

There was not a soul in Orario who did not hear the voices rising from the Labyrinth District.

They were cries of neither terror nor sorrow but rather a feverish, limitless excitement.

Even the townsfolk who had shut themselves inside out of fear now timidly opened their high-up windows or ventured onto roofs. They turned toward the eastern part of the city and pointed wordlessly toward the plaza in the Labyrinth District.

The fever spread.

Most of all, it spread among the deities who danced in joy, their shadows stretching over the city. And then—

"They're moving!!"

Bell had been hurled down at the feet of the screaming townsfolk in the plaza, and now he vaulted off the cobblestones as high into the sky as his Level 3 Status would allow him, hoping to prevent the townsfolk from being drawn into the fight. Of course, Asterios followed.

The sound of two pairs of feet landing on a roof was followed by the thunder of the Labrys making contact, and then the pounding of running feet.

Asterios's gaze never wavered from Bell as the boy left the Labyrinth District. The two forms ran alongside each other across the rooftops.

Where can we fight—?!

Avenues, alleys, and East Main Street passed below Bell's gaze. Guild staff and evacuees stood out in the roads staring up at them, their presence limiting his choices. Finally, he caught sight of a large open space up ahead—

"—Come here!"

As if drawn by the voice of the beautiful goddess on the top floor of the huge tower, Bell descended into Central Park, in the heart of the city.

"Huh?"

"The Little Rookie?! And what is that…?!"

The huge crowd of adventurers guarding Babel looked on in astonishment as Bell and Asterios once again plunged into combat.

Their eyes bulged at the sight of the stunning black minotaur, but when they tried to join in the attack, the monster howled as if to say, "Stay away!" The Level 1 and 2 adventurers were rendered completely useless.

"Keep your hands off!"

"Quick! Escape!"

As the crowd in Central Park rapidly thinned, voices urged the few remaining second-tier adventurers to leave as well. The yells came from smiling deities. In obedience to these pleasure-seeking gods and goddesses, the adventurers fled, dragging their companions with them.

"Ganesha?!"

"…Help the unconscious adventurers! Ilta, don't you get involved! Our priority is evacuating any nearby townsfolk!"

Ganesha Familia members who had been guarding Babel obeyed their patron deity and got to work rescuing people. The red-haired Amazon Ilta expressed some irritation but nevertheless led the other upper-class adventurers in the rescue operation.

The deities were bent on removing any interference they deemed senseless.

The eastern side of Central Park was now the battlefield for the final clash between Bell and Asterios.

“Yaaaaa!!”

“UOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

The sword and the ax collided again and again. Again and again, the sound of metal on metal rang through the air.

As if drawn by the music of the battlefield, adventurers and townsfolk throughout the city fixed their eyes on Central Park. They looked down on the fight from familia headquarters overlooking the park, from the roof of the theater towering over the Pleasure Quarter, and from the buildings in the center of the city.

Every time blood spurted from one of the monster’s wounds, the townsfolk trembled. Every time Bell was thrown into the air, the adventurers gripped the railings and leaned forward.

“Kill the monsterrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!! Yeah! Right theeeeeeeeeeere!!”

“Shut up, Mord!”

The adventurers had converged again after following Bell and Asterios out of the Labyrinth District and had resumed their shouting and screaming. Eina was among the Guild employees who had followed along despite the risks. With the help of Ouka and Chigusa, she climbed onto the roof of a shop next to the park and was watching Bell.

“How about right here?” Ouka asked.

“Yes, this is great, thank you!”

Even the animal people who had planned to defy the orders of the deities and shoot at the monster, the elves who had lifted their wands and begun to chant, and the adventurers bent on annihilating the minotaur eventually lowered their weapons and simply stared like the residents of the Labyrinth District.

"...Yeah! Get 'im!" they shouted.

As if time were repeating itself, they began yelling angrily, as if to show their adventurers' spirit.

"Mr. Cranell..." whispered Lyu, who had come running to the park.

"Hey...Am I seeing things?" said Aisha with a smile. She was standing next to Lyu.

Nearby, Daphne and Cassandra trembled violently as they watched the boy face the terrifying creature all alone.

"What in the world is that kid doing...?" Daphne gasped.

"Oh geez...!" Cassandra said.

"Welf's familia is nothing if not fun," said Tsubaki, squinting through her good eye.

"Bell...You'll die if you keep this up!" said Nahza, gripping her silver prosthetic with her left hand.

As cheers thundered through the air, the townsfolk, the deities, and everyone else in the city trained their eyes on the adventurer and the monster.

" ——————————— !!"

"UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!!"

Bell and Asterios raged against each other, both wringing the

last drops of power from their bodies.

Bell's arms screamed as they wielded the huge sword. But that was all. Although his fissures spiderwebbed across his bones, he felt he could move them endlessly. On and on he swung the sword, transforming the fire of searing pain into power driving his attacks.

He slashed at Asterios, then used the force of the minotaur's interception to spin around and slash at him again. Again, the Labrys blocked his blow and smashed down Bell's desperate Fire-bolt, swinging his ax diagonally a hairbreadth from the boy's chest.

The ax's blade grazed his gauntlet, and the oculus buried within it cracked into a thousand shards.

"...Shit!"

Bell's equipment was falling off piece by piece. The fasteners on his gauntlet were broken, and its surface was covered in scratches. The epaulettes he had used as impromptu shoulder guards fell off from the force of Asterios's blows. Even the mud beneath the minotaur's feet became a threat as Bell slipped and slid over it.

Bell's entire body was stained red.

But the blood was not his.

It was the fresh blood that gushed from Asterios every time he raged. The minotaur was not only missing one arm; he was on the verge of death. His body was inscribed with wounds that easily could have brought him toppling down.

Had that not been the case, Bell would have been killed instantly.

If he had both arms, if he had not been on the edge of death—

Asterios had come to this battle after Aiz and many other adventurers had injured him. This fight came at the end of a long road.

If Bell's opponent had been in the prime of health, the boy would not have lasted a minute.

He was that strong.

He was ridiculously, fiercely strong.

"U-U-OOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

The Labrys and the black fist that held it swooped in on Bell, who was powerless to deflect it fully.

Behind Asterios, Bell saw Dix. He saw Aiz, the idol whose feet he could not even touch. He saw Wiene, who had once turned to ash and disappeared because he was not able to save her. He saw his own powerless image.

Behind the Labrys, he saw Dix's spear, and Aiz's sword, and Wiene's tears. They woke in him a mad hope that tore at his heart.

I want to be strong.

So I can overcome this worthy opponent—and overcome my own powerless self.

I want to be strong.

So I can beat this worthy opponent—and so I never lose anything again.

Be strong.

Like a hero.

Like a hero who protects the ones he cares about.

Like a hero who struggles on even when reality crushes him and hypocrites mock him.

I.

Want to be…a hero.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-aaa!!”

Bell roared.

He thrust himself forward beyond his limits and ran full speed into a world of white.

He dashed with all his might through a white field where everything burned with white heat, toward the black minotaur who waited on the far side.

“?!”

He lunged forward on his left foot with such force it blurred before the eyes of his audience, and at the same time he swung the huge sword.

His opponent could not respond in time to this boundary-shattering speed. The sword crashed into his armor, but still Bell did not stop. He unleashed a storm of blows onto the tough full plate armor.

“U—UOO!!”

As if it had reached the limits of its patience, the Labrys flicked Bell’s sword high into the air.

The spectators screamed, but Bell ignored them and leaped

forward at full speed.

The upward kick that exploded into his left cheekbone caught Asterios completely off guard. Not to be outdone by his opponent, Bell had turned his body into a weapon and unleashed his rabbit's claws on the minotaur. Asterios somehow withstood this kick to his face from a first-class adventurer—but the next moment, the minotaur was plunged into shock.

Still hovering in midair with his left foot extended, Bell thrust out his right arm like the barrel of a gun.

"Firebolt!"

He released six consecutive bolts.

"—O?!"

They were fired from such close range that the adventurers watching gasped. The decisive blow crushed one of the minotaur's eyes.

The force of his own blast threw Bell back. The instant he hit the ground, he ran toward Asterios at full speed. In his right hand, he grabbed the sword that had come spinning down from above his head, tottered backward a few steps, then lunged at the monster and slashed with all his might.

"GUO?!"

Diagonal downward slash.

"UO?!"

Horizontal mowing strike.

"OOOOO—?!"

Uppercut.

Three flashes of light all told. This time the minotaur's full plate armor split open, and the enormous body gushed a fountain of blood.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO-OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO?!"

The adventurers and gods screamed as if their chests would explode at the sight of Bell's full power awakened.

As for Asterios, whose left eye had been obliterated and whose body had suffered a deep wound—he smiled.

A quiet, powerful expression so uncanny it silenced the cheers of the crowd for a moment.

The boy's will to fight was as fierce as ever. He rushed forward with the huge sword, burning with determination.

Asterios's feet pounded into the ground, splintering it underfoot.

Bell's feet carried him forward with blinding speed.

Each could see only the other. Their eyes flashed as they charged toward their final clash.

""

———————————————————————————————— !!""

It was the final match.

The roars of the boy and the beast filled the air. No trace of elegance could be found in their duet—only the battle cries of two beings hungry for victory.

Persistence clashed fiercely against strength.

Even as the ringing hunk of silver warded off the bloody double blade, the minotaur's powerful leg crashed down to cut Bell's parry short. The sword and ax were pulled back, only to meet again an instant later in a swirl of flashing light and flying sparks.

The ax grazed Bell's shoulder, and blood spurted out. The sound of flesh being crushed came from within the armor that had deflected the blow.

Bell's right hand shot a Firebolt that burned the monster's body, but mere contact with the inhumanly strong opponent was enough to damage more of Bell's gear.

Even the Divine Knife and the crimson horns played their part in the epic battle, inscribing purple-blue and crimson arcs of light between the ax and the sword.

This clash of wills and stubborn determination had nothing to do with pride.

Each accepted no compromise from the other, instead urging him on like an image in a mirror.

The adventurers leaned backward to avoid their blows. The townsfolk shuddered. The deities smiled and cheered. Wordless screams flew toward the battle. The crowd standing around the edge of Central Park forgot even to breathe, instead pouring their whole selves into one continuous scream.

The beautiful goddess's silver eyes glittered feverishly.

The half-elf trembled and turned pale at the sight of the deadly struggle.

All those who had crossed paths with the boy watched with bated breath as the fight approached its final stretch.

And as they watched, the boy and the monster desperately staved off the end of their battle.

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

“Ooof!!”

The Labrys struck a powerful blow to the sword raised hastily to ward it off.

Bell’s feet left the ground and he was thrown backward as if he were a mere feather. The moment his back hit the cobblestones, he rolled and saw Asterios in the center of his field of vision.

“—OOO!”

About ten meders separated them.

As if he had been waiting impatiently for this moment, Asterios brought his left hand—and the Labrys in it—crashing onto the cobblestones. With his one arm planted firmly down, the minotaur dipped his head low.

A buzz of anticipation swept through the crowd of watching adventurers. The minotaur seemed to be preparing himself to use his most deadly weapon—his horns.

He charged forward with incomparable power, crushing everything in his way.

Bell stared at the raging bull outlined against the limestone tower. In an instant, he guessed his intent and brought his sword directly in front of his body.

He was about to unleash the Hero’s Attack.

A chime sounded, and white light gathered.

“!!”

The trigger for his skill was the image of an argonaut, his role model.

The argonauts had wanted to become heroes, and they had overcome their checkered fate to do so.

Bell thought about this original heroic tale as he drew back his sword.

“—”

“—”

The image of the crimson horns burned into the boy’s eyes. The converging white sparks of light pierced the monster’s gaze.

Their eyes met. Both brimmed with a will to fight that erased all boundaries. A single second stretched on forever.

Their limbs cried out, their hearts hungered, their warrior’s resolve burned fiercely.

Bell’s red eyes met the monster eyes of Asterios.

And then—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

They rushed at each other.

Don’t lose!

For the first time, Eina prayed not that the fight would end—but that Bell would win.

The adventurer and the minotaur turned their bodies into powerful bullets that shattered the cobblestones as they shot forward.

The townsfolk, the deities, and the adventurers gasped at the thunderous roars.

In an instant, the mad rush reduced the space between the two forms to nothing.

Bell had been charging for twenty seconds.

He swung his sword down and then up again.

Aiming for his opponent's red horns, Bell unleashed a ferocious slashing attack of white light.

"_____"

One instant.

That was all it took for Bell to realize the destructive crimson light of his opponent was crushing his pure white radiance.

The next instant—

"—Uwaah!"

He had lost.

His Hero's Attack had been defeated.

A mortal shock resonated through him as his body flew high into the air.

"—"

Complete silence fell over Orario.

Bell's body rose straight up from where he had collided with Asterios, blood spewing from his mouth.

All eyes followed that form into the air, all faces turned white, and all watched as fragments of the shattered silver blade twinkled with white light in all directions.

"B-Bell—"

Eina pressed her hands to her mouth. She felt as if time had stopped.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

Meanwhile the monster, having crushed the boy's worst attack, let out a victory roar and circled triumphantly. Then he stopped and reversed direction abruptly enough to crush stone as he headed toward where Bell would fall. He charged forward like a truly wild bull and, the instant the boy hit the ground, set on him again.

"Eeyaaah!"

The outstretched black arm pounded onto Bell, and for a second time he vomited blood. Asterios caught up his body and dashed toward the lofty limestone tower.

"T-take shelter!! Runnnnnn!!"

The handful of *Ganesha Familia*upper-class adventurers guarding the door to Babel fled as fast as they could in the face of that unrivaled, unstoppable rush.

A moment later, the minotaur crashed through the door and walls of the huge tower.

" ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ ?!"

Still gripping Bell under his left arm, Asterios charged with overwhelming force into the grand hall on the first story of Babel. He hurled both Bell and the Labrys against the floor, which resembled an enormous stained-glass flower. The superhuman

strength of the blow inflicted equal damage on Bell and the floor, which in the next instant began to cave in.

When Bell fell through the destroyed floor, he tumbled straight into the huge hole waiting in the basement. The hole that led to the Dungeon.

He fell, and fell, and fell.

Spitting blood and wrapped in a peculiar floating sensation, he was pulled to the bottom of the earth along with masses of rubble. The nighttime lights of the surface receded before his blurred vision, and the moment arrived.

Bang!!

"Oof!!"

He crashed to the first floor of the Dungeon with a deafening *thud*.

An electric shock seemed to run down his back and through the rest of his body. For a few seconds, he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was tormented by a searing pain that would have killed him instantly had he not leveled up earlier that night. He coughed up a clot of blood stuck in his throat and cracked his eyes open.

He was lying on his back, and far above, he could see the dim night. It must be moonlight shining through the door of Babel Tower. The inside of the tower was completely dark, perhaps because the collapse had snuffed out the magic-stone lamps. Part of the spiral staircase inside the cylindrical hole had been destroyed as well.

Bell lay motionless on a bed of rubble. The collapse must have also damaged this underground floor, because the walls were

webbed with fissures, and they glowed with only a weak phosphorescence. They reminded him of a cave illuminated by moonbeams.

As Bell stared into the blackness above his head, his mind moving sluggishly…a black shadow fell over him.

"Bell…"

"…!"

At the sound—not a monster's roar but a word spoken in human language—Bell summoned the last of his remaining strength and lifted his head. The black minotaur stood quietly beside him like a triumphant victor.

"Now we are even…" Asterios said, gazing down on Bell's tattered form.

The boy stared back at him.

"Next time," the minotaur warrior said. He had lost an arm, one of his eyes had been crushed, and his entire body was covered in wounds. He raised the Labrys to his chest.

"Next time—we'll settle this."

Asterios smiled broadly and looked up.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

He roared his monster's victory song…and disappeared.

Bell saw only empty space before him.

The minotaur had vanished into the dark depths of the Dungeon.

"…"

Like a marionette whose strings had been cut, Bell dropped his head back onto the pile of rubble. Silence settled around him, as if the battle had been no more than a fantasy.

Definitely—probably—the repair of the Dungeon will take priority, Bell's hazy mind told him. *No new monsters will be spawned, and the low-level ones like goblins and kobolds will probably hide far back in the recesses in fear of all this noise and shaking. I'm sure I'll be fine if I just lay here for a while.*

He felt as if he were floating in a soft, fluffy dream. The battle with the monster seemed somehow unreal. But the horrible pain tormenting his entire body was very real, and it would not let him escape reality.

"...I lost."

The whispered words floated up the vertical opening to the surface and rose into the moonlit sky.

Bell looked at the hole in the painting of the sky on the ceiling of the first underground floor.

"I wonder...if all the Xenos...If Gros and the others escaped..."

The oculus in his gauntlet had been crushed and scattered. He had no way of contacting the goddess. But he was sure she and his other familia members had taken care of it. They must have succeeded, by using him and Asterios as decoys.

So there was some meaning in his battle after all.

"...Well then, I'm glad it happened this way."

Because he had kept on fighting and drawn the whole city into it, Wiene and Lido and the others had been able to return to the Dungeon.

If he had won, Asterios would have died.

If he hadn't lost, Asterios wouldn't have been able to return to his brethren in the Dungeon.

It was best this way.

"I'm glad I lost…"

Victory and defeat were secondary.

It was all for the best—

"…That's a lie."

Bell mumbled the words to himself.

"…All of that is a lie."

His quiet voice grew teary. The tip of his nose felt hot, and the scene above his head blurred.

Tears spilled from his eyes.

"I'm not happy I lost…!"

He was disappointed.

He was so upset he wanted to die.

Setting aside the Xenos, his mission, and everything else, he was excruciatingly disheartened.

Bell wanted to beat Asterios. He wanted to beat the old enemy who had appeared before him for another round.

As an adventurer, and as a man, he wanted to beat that worthiest of opponents.

“ *Sniff, sniff…*!”

He tried desperately to hold back his pitiful wails.

But independent of his will, the sobs convulsed from his throat.

He thought of Asterios’s words.

Next time, we’ll settle this.

The game wasn’t over yet.

Bell had been lost since he met the Xenos, and Asterios had given him a reason to fight.

Next time, I’m coming to kill you.

So don’t falter.

Become stronger.

Asterios had given him a reason to grow.

“ ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ ngh…!”

I promise you.

One day, I’ll create a place where we can live together.

To make that happen, from now on, I have to do more—

He’d said all those things. He’d promised.

He’d been right. From now on, he had to do more—he had to be more.

More, much more.

If he was going to keep his promise to Wiene, and if he was going to settle things with Asterios, he had to become much, much stronger.

And so another goal was set.

Bell had found something to aim for other than his idol.

Everything he needed now was connected.

So that I reach the level of my idol.

So that I'm sure no one I care about is ever again killed.

So I win next time.

I will become stronger.

I will become much stronger.

So that I never lament my powerlessness again.

Now, cry in disgrace.

Cry uselessly.

Cry now so you can start running again tomorrow.

"W-w-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...!!"

Bell covered his eyes with his arm and, the wretched sobs began.



"Bell!"

Eina was running.

After the monster had disappeared into Babel with Bell, she had climbed down to Central Park faster than anyone else.

Panting from the exertion she was unaccustomed to and swinging her arms furiously, she rushed toward the limestone tower.

"Please wait, it's dangerous!" a *Ganesha Familia*guard shouted.

But she ignored the warning and ran through the ruined door to Babel.

Waiting on the other side was the enormous hole in the floor leading underground. As she realized the extent of the destruction, the blood drained from her face.

He couldn't have been caught up in this, could he?

She peered into the hole. Far down at the bottom, beneath the entrance to the Dungeon, she glimpsed a white form. As if propelled by some invisible force, she flew to the staircase leading underground. She clattered down flight after flight. For once, she regretted never having received the Falna. If she had, she could have leaped straight down the hole to the boy's side.

The magic-stone lamps were broken, and Eina stumbled repeatedly in the poor light. But though she faltered, she never stopped.

Finally she arrived at the rubble-filled first underground floor and the spiral staircase leading through the huge hole to the Dungeon. Despite the damage, she managed to make her way down.

"Bell!!...Bell?"

She found him lying on top of the rubble covered in blood but

still breathing—and crying.

Huge tears were streaming down below the arm covering his eyes, and his whole body shook with sobs. He was crying disgracefully, pitifully, and with all his heart.

“Bell…”

He was crying.

The boy was crying.

Not the child’s whimpers she had seen many times before but the bitter tears of a man.

Real tears that welled up from the depths of his heart.

Eina’s chest tightened painfully at the sight of this unfamiliar Bell.

She didn’t know what to say, but she wanted to do something, so she quietly walked up to him and knelt on the ground.

She wrapped both her hands around his right hand. He squeezed back so hard it hurt.

Eina realized something had begun to grow in her heart.

A sweet, painful throbbing that she could not turn back from.

Illuminated by the faint, moonbeam-like phosphorescence, Eina stayed there by Bell’s side all the way until help arrived.



EPILOGUE **AND SO I START TO RUN AGAIN**

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EPILOGUE
And So I Start To Run Again

Phosphorescence faintly illuminated the darkness.

In a large room also lit by magic-stone lamps, Fels faced the monsters.

“We’re so sorry about all this, Fels. We really put you through so much…”

“Don’t say that, Lido. I knew I was taking on a big job when I got involved. To tell the truth, I was reluctant to do it at first.”

“…Damn it, Fels, thank you.”

The lizardman stretched out his powerful monster’s hand, and Fels shook it with gloved bones. The other Xenos standing around them joined in with words and mews and grunts of thanks.

They were in one of the Dungeon’s Hidden Villages of the Xenos. Several days had passed since that long day of battle in the Labyrinth District, and during that time, Lido and the others had returned safely to this village where their remaining brethren were waiting.

“Even you made it back, Gros…You really do have the devil’s own luck, it seems,” Lido said.

“…Yes, I did fail to die,”the gargoyle replied.

“You shouldn’t say that!”Rei scolded.

“I sure am glad, Gros!” Wiene said.

Fels watched with deep respect as the monsters chatted among themselves.

After the battle, Lido, Wiene, Gros, and the others had managed to meet up once again. It was Hestia, Lilly, and their familia members who had brought the winged monsters to Knossos, and for that they were infinitely grateful. But *Hestia Familia*insisted that it was all thanks to the fact that *Freya Familia*had set its sights on immobilizing *Loki Familia*.

Everything had originated in the epic battle between the boy and the minotaur. If even one thing had gone wrong, the scene before Fels now would not have existed. Not if Bell and *Hestia Familia*hadn’t been there for them.

“Thank you for healing us all with your magic. You’ve done so much for us. By the way, I have a really old magic potion that belonged to an adventurer, if you want it…” Lido offered.

“That’s all right. I’m only bones, so I can’t drink it…But Lido, what about him?”

Along with healing the other Xenos, Fels had tended the near-fatal battle wounds of the minotaur and even restored the severed arm they had preserved on ice. Afterward Asterios had thanked Fels briefly, but that was all.

“He’s returned to the Deep Zone…to train again.”

“…I see.”

“He said he had to become stronger, to settle things once and for all.”

Fels’s black robes shook as Lido talked about the minotaur warrior who had found his dream. The mage was thinking of Bell,

who seemed to be the favored child of fate in both good and bad ways. He truly was a hapless creature.

"...Well then, Lido. I'm off. Ouranos is waiting with more work."

"I understand...Fels!"

"?"

"When you return to the surface, please tell Bell..."

"..."

"...No, it's nothing. I want to tell him myself. After all, I did promise," Lido said, a wrinkly smile forming on his lizard's face.

"Yes, that would be better." Fels nodded.

"Fels!"

"What is it, Wiene?"

"See you soon! Next time, I hope Bell is with us, too!" she said, beaming.

"...Yes, see you," Fels replied, with a pang of regret at being unable to smile back at the group of Xenos gathered to say goodbye.

Though the inability to smile at the world that Bell and *Hestia Familia*had saved was frustrating, however, the distress was tempered with just a hint of thankfulness that a skeleton's eyes could not shed tears, either.



Far away from the Dungeon, the chaos on the surface continued

for a time.

The cleanup work in Daedalus Street was a prime example. Slum though it was, repair work was carried out with the utmost urgency so that the evacuees could return home. There were endless tasks to accomplish, from setting up temporary tent facilities to dispatching adventurers and Guild staff to calming the residents. The one bright spot was that the townsfolk were greatly comforted by *Loki Familia*'s assistance with the efforts. The Guild chief Royman, however, was rumored to be drowning under the ever-growing mountain of problems, starting with the ongoing reconstruction of the Pleasure Quarter.

Meanwhile, false information was spreading about the fate of the monsters who had appeared on the surface.

People said that while Bell Cranell had been battling the violent black minotaur, *Loki Familia*had exterminated the others. In fact, the rumors were started on the orders of Ouranos, who knew the whole story. Even Royman did not know all the details about this secret agreement to spread misinformation. Surprisingly, however, *Loki Familia*—whose pride had been wounded during the incident—did not oppose the scheme.

Various faction members and first-tier adventurers had their own opinions about it, but they accepted the Guild's negotiations and announcements. Fake drop items, supposedly from monsters with bounties on their heads, were displayed in front of Guild Headquarters, drawing bitter tears from the other adventurers. The deities pretended to grieve deeply, and the townsfolk were relieved.

As for the boy who was at the center of all this—

"It's not as if everything is back to normal, but I do feel Bell has salvaged his reputation among the children. It was just like the war game at the end there."

“Is that so?” the aged god said.

Hermes was sitting before Ouranos giving a report on the recent events.

Once again, Hermes was carving chunks of wood as he sat on the altar illuminated by four torches.

“Even though Bell let the minotaur get away, many people are praising him. That fight seems to have had an enormous impact.”

Hermes shrugged as he mentioned the boy’s adventure, which of course was very familiar to him. At the very least, no one was disparaging Bell anymore. The young children would probably even look up to their little hero. The other adventurers most likely regarded him with awe and respect and had finally accepted him as one of them.

That was how intense the battle with the minotaur had been.

Asterios had no ulterior motives. He knew nothing of Bell’s reputation. All he sought was a rematch with his old opponent.

The end result of his actions, however, was that the adventurers and townsfolk had witnessed with their own eyes his iron-strong will to fight and kill. It was, without question, the real thing.

Hermes set the finished carving of Asterios and his double-edged sword on the chessboard next to the rabbit.

“…I was outwitted this time. I was taken in. If Freya was the one who had me in the palm of her hand, then she probably feels satisfied, but…”

Hermes glanced at the carved minotaur and smiled with irritation. Then he stood, brushed his hands together, and turned toward Ouranos on his throne.

“Well, my report is done. Did you have any questions?”

“…Can I count on your help next time?”

“If you can promise me that Bell won’t get wrapped up with the Xenos again, then I will continue to help you for the time being. Now that the existence of Knossos has become public, there’s no use in us quarreling. But let me ask you—do you feel okay about everything?”

“With Zeus and Hera gone, the military forces at my command are limited. I don’t have much choice,” Ouranos replied in a businesslike manner. He was playing the role of a pillar of stability and public peace.

“I understand,” Hermes said, raising both hands. “Hestia and Bell may well dislike me after all that’s happened. For now, I’ll keep my head down and act in good faith.”

“…”

“—All the same, this hasn’t changed my plans.”

He intended to keep acting in the interest of his hero.

He donned his traveling cap, which he had been holding between his hands. The look in his yellow-orange eyes seemed to be telling Ouranos that they may well butt heads again in the future.

“Please excuse me. If I stay any longer, I fear I will provoke your antipathy once again.”

With that, Hermes exited the Chamber of Prayers and climbed the stairs to the surface.

A short time later, a sound issued from the hidden door to the other, secret passage leading to the chamber. Fels emerged from the shadows.

“I’m back, Ouranos…Was someone here?” the mage said, looking at the chessboard set before the altar.

“Hermes came by.”

Although Fels had no face to show emotion, the sullen pause that followed was revealing enough. After a moment, the black hood trembled as if Fels was sighing.

“I accompanied the Xenos safely back to their village. No lives were lost during the disturbance on the surface.”

“Is that so?”

Fels looked up into the god’s eyes, as blue as the sky.

“Of course, we were not able to demonstrate the value of the Xenos’s existence. The problems between them and the surface dwellers have in no way been resolved. The road remains long and rough,” Ouranos said.

“With the recent events, their dream may have become even less realistic,” the black-clad mage replied frankly.

“But there were definite benefits as well.”

Fels nodded at the words of the aged god.

“God Hermes seems unlikely to accept the Xenos…but I choose the same path as him, Ouranos.”

Many different emotions flickered in the voice echoing through the chamber. The immortal fool, flesh and skin long since gone, spoke to the flickering flames of the torches.

“I, too, will bet everything on the boy.”



“ *Little Rookie Miraculously Returns Alive!... The Adventurer Who Stood Alone Against the Monster*...I can’t stand these fickle people!”

Welf gazed down at the unfurled scrolls and sighed as if he’d had all he could take.

“Isn’t it a good thing, Sir Welf? The misconceptions about Bell have been fixed now,” Mikoto said.

“And people around town aren’t giving us the cold shoulder anymore. You seem to feel like you owe them something...but that will fade with time,” Haruhime added in an attempt to comfort her companion, who was reading the headlines of the news bulletins circulating in the city.

Now that *Hestia Familia*had accomplished what needed to be done, free from the tension of the past few days, they were relaxing together in the living room of their home.

“The adventurers who were watching Mr. Bell and me have completely disappeared since everything ended, too,” Lilly said, gazing out the window of the large room.

“Yes, and I was sure that everything of value would be gone when we came back...but we weren’t robbed after all,” Hestia replied from the sofa.

After delivering the last of the Xenos to Knossos, when all their work was truly done, they had returned home expecting to find the doors and windows destroyed—but that was not the case. Someone did seem to have broken in and searched the place, but there was no sign of rough behavior. Nor was any of their important property damaged or missing. It was as if some exceedingly strong familia had been keeping an eye on things.

“So now things are back to normal...”

"...except they aren't."

Mikoto finished Lilly's sentence. Their eyes scanned the living room slowly for the shadow of the dragon girl. Even Lilly could not hide her longing for the girl who was missing from the warm family circle. After a moment, everyone in the living room looked at Haruhime.

"Are you okay, Haruhime?" Hestia asked.

"...Yes. We'll meet again," she answered with a bright smile. "We promised each other."

Mikoto watched the renart girl hug her pinkie quietly to her chest. Everything was over and their worries were gone, but their hope remained.

A very modest sense of fulfillment descended on the little familia.

"But there's still Bell to think about..."

Welf's voice echoed across the living room, where the boy was nowhere to be found.

Haruhime and Mikoto looked at each other, and Lilly turned to Hestia.

"Lady Hestia. Is Mr. Bell...?"

"...Yes."

Hestia looked away from Lilly and stared up at the ceiling, narrowing her pale-blue eyes.

"Today, too..." she muttered.

The wind was blowing.

A morning wind from the blue eastern sky.

Bell felt the cool breeze rush over him as he stood on the high city wall. He was looking out quietly on the center of the city and the huge limestone tower.

Eventually, the sunrise lit up the clear sky. It glinted off golden hair.

A girl had come to stand beside him.

"Miss Aiz...?"

"Yes...Good morning."

"...Why are you here?"

"I'm not sure...I guess I thought if I came, I might find you."

"Oh really?"

"Yes."

"..."

"..."

"Miss Aiz."

"?"

"Will you teach me how to fight again?"

"...Even after what happened?"

"Yes."

“…”

“…”

“…You’re a sly one.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“…”

“…”

“…All right.”

“…Really?”

“Yes…You have the same eyes.”

“?”

“The ones I always see in the mirror.”

“…”

“Yes…but they’re different…They’re not strange like mine. They’re more beautiful.”

“…Ha-ha.”

“…Why are you laughing?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“…”

“…”

“I…have some things to take care of, so I’m not sure when I can do it.”

“That’s okay…Thank you.”

“Not at all.”

“…”

“…”

“Miss Aiz.”

“What?”

“I…want to become stronger.”

“…Really.”

“Yes.”

“I’m going now.”

“…See you.”

“Okay.”

His golden idol disappeared beyond the sunrise.

For once, he did not watch her back as she left.

Instead, he was looking far into the distance.

He was focused on the limestone tower that touched the heavens—and the underground maze sleeping below it.

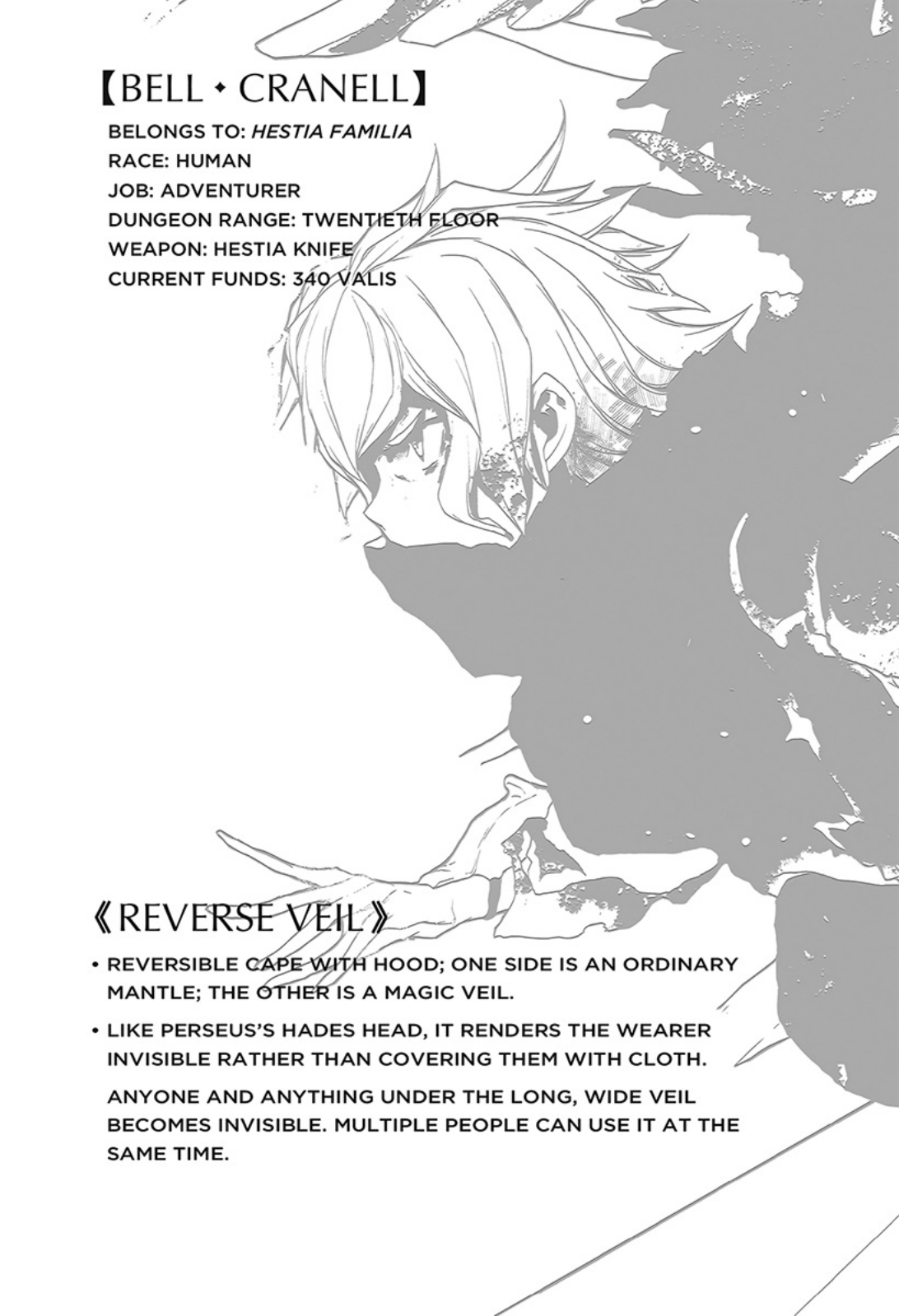
At the Dungeon where his promises and his final battle waited.

“…”

He squeezed his throbbing pinkie and thought about the lingering pain of his wounds.

He repeated his vow to the sunrise, then turned his back on the appointed place.

And so the boy starts running once again.



【BELL • CRANELL】

BELONGS TO: *HESTIA FAMILIA*
RACE: HUMAN
JOB: ADVENTURER
DUNGEON RANGE: TWENTIETH FLOOR
WEAPON: HESTIA KNIFE
CURRENT FUNDS: 340 VALIS

《REVERSE VEIL》

- REVERSIBLE CAPE WITH HOOD; ONE SIDE IS AN ORDINARY MANTLE; THE OTHER IS A MAGIC VEIL.
- LIKE PERSEUS'S HADES HEAD, IT RENDERS THE WEARER INVISIBLE RATHER THAN COVERING THEM WITH CLOTH.

  ANYONE AND ANYTHING UNDER THE LONG, WIDE VEIL BECOMES INVISIBLE. MULTIPLE PEOPLE CAN USE IT AT THE SAME TIME.

STATUS

Lv. 3

STRENGTH: SS 1001 **DEFENSE: SS 1100** **DEXTERITY: S 989**
AGILITY: SSS 1291 **MAGIC: A 877** **LUCK: H** **IMMUNITY: H**

《MAGIC》

【FIREBOLT】
- SWIFT-STRIKE MAGIC

《SKILL》

【LIARIS FREESE】
- RAPID GROWTH
- CONTINUED DESIRE RESULTS IN CONTINUED GROWTH
- STRONGER DESIRE RESULTS IN STRONGER GROWTH

【ARGONAUT】
- CHARGES AUTOMATICALLY WITH ACTIVE ACTION

《GAUNTLET WITH BUILT-IN OCULUS》

- WELF'S IMPROVEMENT TO THE GAUNTLET ON THE PYONKICHI RABBIT ARMOR.
- MADE BY REMOVING THE RUBY FROM THE BACK OF THE GAUNTLET AND REPLACING IT WITH AN OCULUS.
- ABLE TO COMMUNICATE AT LONG DISTANCES WITH THE PAIRED CRYSTAL IN HESTIA'S POSSESSION. IMAGES CAN ALSO BE SENT IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.
- BELL USES THE GAUNTLET FREQUENTLY BOTH AS A COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE AND A DIR-ADAMANTITE PROTECTOR.

AFTERWORD

Andromeda did it in two nights.

A natural Miss Andronage.

Well, that's to be expected of Andromeda.

I believe she worked harder than anyone else in this volume.

I used to do track-and-field. One day, my coach told a fellow teammate and me that we reminded him of Tom and Jerry. I think it was because we both ran long-distance events, and toward the end of the races we would break out from the pack and take turns chasing each other to the finish line (I was probably Tom).

I still remember those last one hundred meters at the homestretch—his arms swinging powerfully in front of me, his long strides, the soles of his feet kicking up to his thighs, the sight of his back moving out in front of me. I would struggle with all my might, but still, he would leave me behind. The sight was truly nightmarish. I still dream about it sometimes and wake up drenched in sweat. I believe my teammate was my rival.

The rest of the time we got along well and even ate together sometimes. But on the day of a race, I'd search the program for "Jerry's" name, and as soon as I found an event we were both running, I would become acutely aware of a desire not to lose.

Rivals are probably a good thing.

Maybe the term "worthy opponents" is a little too cool for

what they are, but thanks to their mere existence, new goals seem to spring up one after the next. It wouldn't be quite accurate to say the minotaur—who is both a hero and a worthy opponent for Bell—was the only reason for the Xenos storyline that began in Volume 9…but I certainly wanted to create a rival for him. After I completed these three volumes, I made up my mind that there could be no other rival for my main character than the minotaur. I hope that he will agree to join Bell in this game of tag as the series proceeds.

And with that, I will move on to acknowledgments.

I would like to express my gratitude to my editor TK Otaki, to Editor in Chief TK Kitamura, who joined the manuscript team for this volume, and to Yasuda Suzuhito for drawing the beautiful illustrations. My deepest thanks, as well, to all the other people who helped produce this book. And to all the readers who have taken this book in their hands, thank you a thousand times over.

I am also deeply grateful to the staff and cast who produced the limited-edition dramatized audiobook CD that was released for Volume 11.

I had originally intended to continue the third section of the story even after the Xenos storyline ended, but after completing this volume, I decided that it would be best to make a clean break. And then there was the fact that the story of the Xenos took much longer to tell than I originally expected, continuing for three full volumes…

In any case, the next volume begins a new chapter, in which I plan to return once again to exploration of the Dungeon. I hope you'll join me for that tale.

Thank you for reading this far. Farewell for now.

Fujino Omori