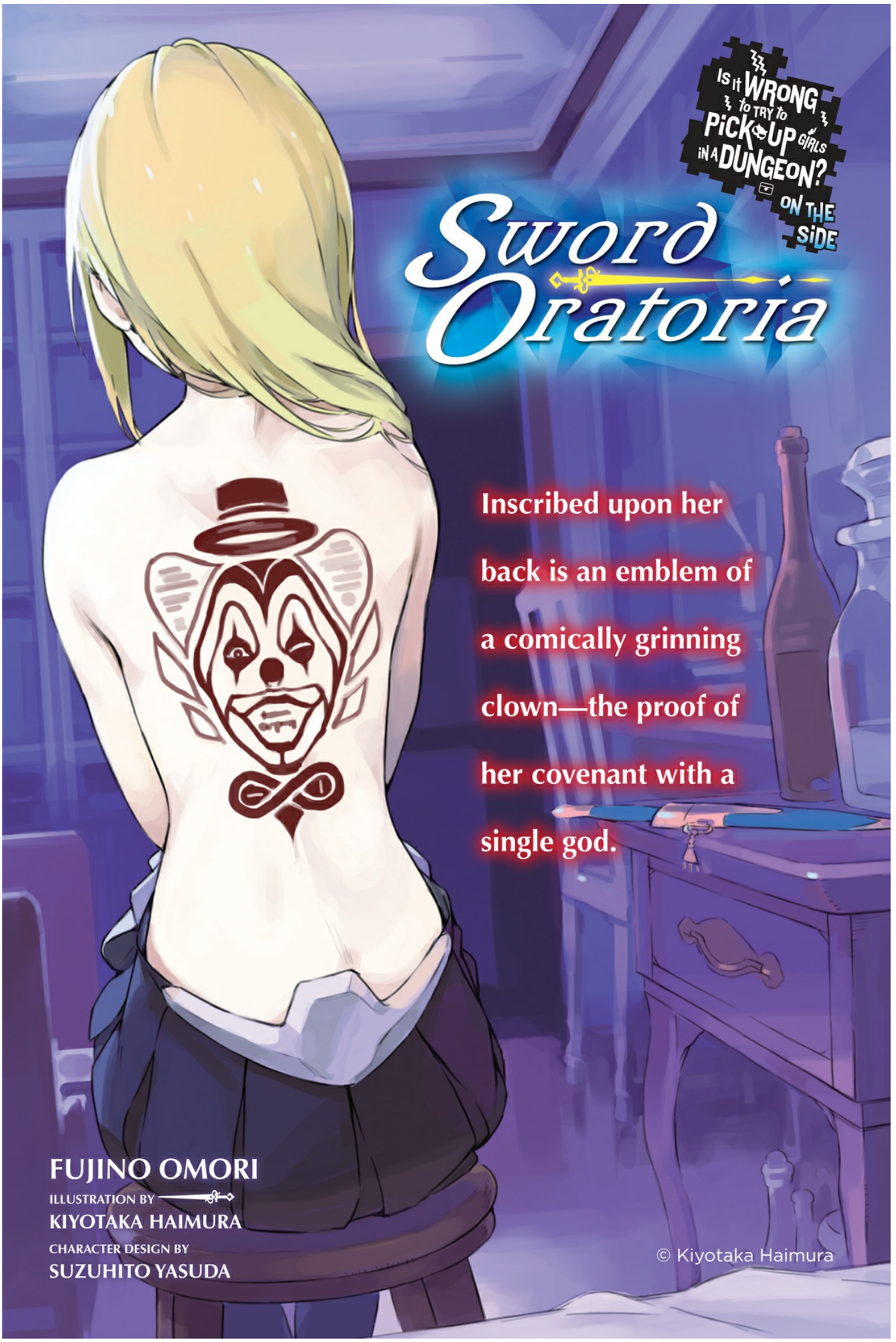

Is it WRONG to TRY to PICK UP GIRLS in a DUNGEON?
ON THE SIDE
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CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA
Sword Oratoria
1

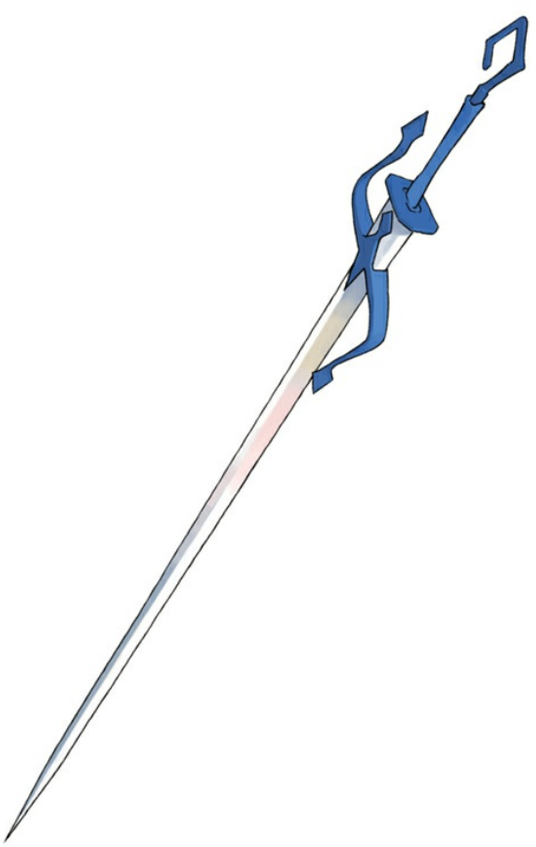

Is it WRONG to TRY to PICK UP GIRLS in a DUNGEON? ON THE SIDE
Sword Oratoria
Inscribed upon her back is an emblem of a comically grinning clown—the proof of her covenant with a single god.
FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY
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CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA
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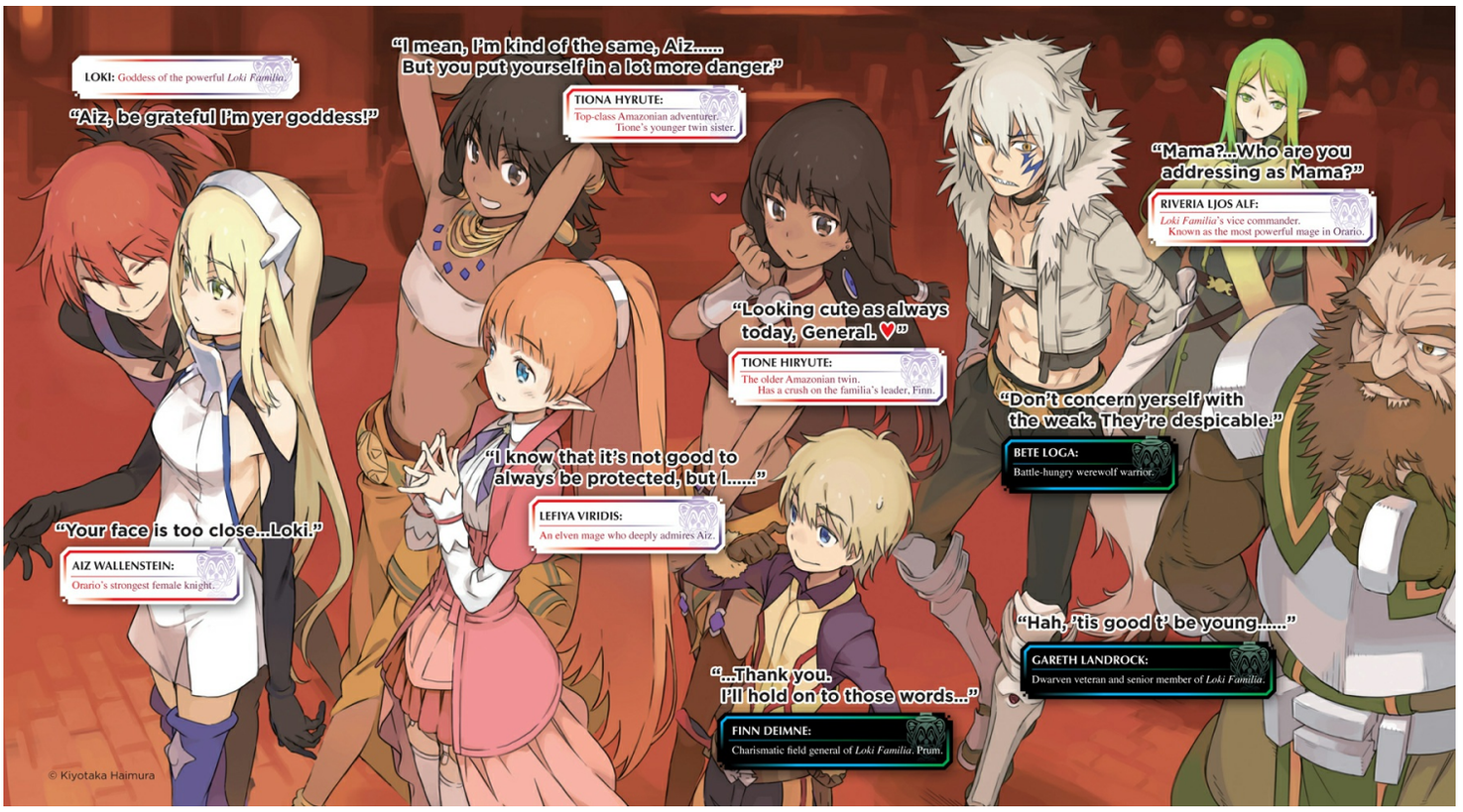
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CHAPTER 2 ♦ Dungeon Confusion
CHAPTER 3 ♦ White Rabbit
CHAPTER 4 ♦ Between Tranquility and Turbulence
CHAPTER 5 ♦ To Battle

EPILOGUE ♦ Under the Sky



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LOKI: Goddess of the powerful *Loki Familia*.
"Aiz, be grateful I'm yer goddess!"
"I mean, I'm kind of the same, Aiz.....
But you put yourself in a lot more danger."
TIONA HYRUTE:
Top-class Amazonian adventurer.
Tione's younger twin sister.
"Looking cute as always today, General. ♥"
TIONE HIRYUTE:
The older Amazonian twin.
Has a crush on the familia's leader, Finn.
"Mama?...Who are you addressing as Mama?"
RIVERIA LJOS ALF:
Loki Familia's vice commander.
Known as the most powerful mage in Orario.
"Don't concern yerself with the weak. They're despicable."
BETE LOGA:
Battle-hungry werewolf warrior.
"I know that it's not good to always be protected, but I....."
LEFIYA VIRIDIS:
An elven mage who deeply admires Aiz.
"Your face is too close...Loki."
AIZ WALLENSTEIN:
Orario's strongest female knight.
"Hah, 'tis good t' be young....."
GARETH LANDROCK:
Dwarven veteran and senior member of *Loki Familia*.
"...Thank you.
I'll hold on to those words..."
FINN DEIMNE:
Charismatic field general of *Loki Familia*. Prum.
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Gold and silver streaks flashed before her eyes.
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One was the flash of the blade that severed the creature's neck.
The other, a swish of beautiful sparkling golden hair.
"Blow with the power of the third harsh winter—My name is Alf!"
"—I won't let you."
"……You're gonna regret bruising my hand, YOU WEED!"



VOLUME 1

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
KIYOTAKA HAIMURA

CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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PROLOGUE

DAWN OF THE LABYRINTH



Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

Тан Лабірынт пачатку

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PROLOGUE

DAWN OF THE LABYRINTH

The chorus of roars grew into a deafening wall of sound.

The ground trembled from the pounding of the many feet running across its desolate surface.

A sea of monsters with horns that curled above their heads like mountain goats raced across the terrain. The horselike heads that rose from the creatures' bodies could only be called hideous. They snorted heavily in unison, rolling their bloodshot eyes around to glare at their squirming prey.

The immense black mob of massive creatures worthy of the name "monsters" advanced as one, clubs of various shapes and sizes in the grip of their meaty hands. The ones at the front raised their weapons high above their heads, ready to strike.

"Shields, ready—!!"

Right on cue, a line of metal rose. Many crashes on the shields rang an instant later.

A row of more than twenty of the wide shields absorbed the first wave of punishment. However, their wielders were driven backward, their heels digging into the ground.

"Front line, don't break formation! Rear guard, continue attacking!"

Trying to withstand the ferocious barrage was a group of humans and demi-humans—a line of stout, muscular dwarves wielding large shields in both arms, protecting groups of elves and animal people equipped with bows and arrows and staffs. A pair of Amazonian twins with wheat-colored skin wove their way among their compatriots' volleys to engage the monsters head-on.

A single flag stood between the two units, flapping in the intense winds of the

battle swirling around it.

Sewn into its fabric was an emblem bearing the mark of the trickster: a comedic smile.

It was the symbol of those who'd joined the familia of a particular god.

"—!!"

The battle unfolded on a landscape devoid of any greenery. There was nothing but reddish rocks and sand, a boundless desert as far as the eye could see.

Every step taken, every impact sent a cloud of red dust into the air. Imposing walls stood far off in the distance, and above was a *ceiling* that resembled a midday sky.

They were far below the surface, somewhere in the Dungeon's Deep Levels.

While sounding battle cries that would never reach the surface, the battle lines of man and beast continued to widen.

"Tiona, Tione! To the left flank, now!"

It was the voice of the shortest boy on the battlefield—the prum field general—barking orders as fast as he could.

His instructions cut through the chaos of battle, desperately trying to turn the balance to their favor. More and more of the beasts were arriving, the battlefield constantly changing and evolving.

"Awww, it doesn't matter how many bodies we have, it won't be enough!"

"Stop complaining and move your asses!"

The Amazonian sisters heard the order and dashed forward, cutting down three more monsters.

In truth, this was a scene straight out of a nightmare.

The horde of monsters had appeared out of nowhere. No matter how many of the beasts they slaughtered, more took their place and continued closing in. The adventurers were in danger of being overrun.

Every single monster towered over its human and demi-human opponents.

Swinging clubs that resembled the fossilized bones of ancient creatures, they relentlessly hammered the front lines. The dwarves grimaced as shock waves of pain tore through their bodies. The ends of the formation were forced to retreat, their line of defense slowly morphing into a half circle, steadily shrinking in size.

The situation had turned desperate.

"*Riveria!* What's taking so long?!"

One of the Amazons yelled at a figure standing just behind the front lines, the one they were desperately trying to protect.

Surrounded by a ring of archers and mages loosing spells and arrows continuously, the beautiful figure's voice rose up to the heavens.

"—Soon, the flames shall be loosed."

Silky, jade-colored hair seemed to dance in the air along with her long white mage's robe. She held a long white and silver staff horizontally with both hands at shoulder level.

An elegant and refined elf, her leaflike ears pointed outward from her soft, feminine face.

"Creeping flames of war, inevitable destruction. The battle horns sound out on high and the atrocity of conflict will envelop all."

Her beauty seemed misplaced on such a chaotic battlefield. Her voice grew steadily louder as she continued her incantation.

It was a powerful, yet melodic casting.

A ring of jade light emerged from beneath her feet, growing steadily wider as thousands of luminous motes rose high into the air.

The elf's beautiful eyebrows sank, her concentration nearing its peak as her eyes locked onto a spot just beyond the front line.

"Come, crimson flames, ruthless inferno!"

As the sound of her spell reached the ears of her allies, they knew that she was their last hope.

Not yet? Not yet? the fighters thought impatiently. Gritting their teeth, they mustered what strength they had for the next wave.

“—Groooooooooaaaaaah!!”

On the other side of the shields, the monsters—the Fomoire—howled together.

One particularly large one from the middle of the group charged forward, knocking its own allies out of the way in the process. It had taken it upon itself to break the barrier with its own menacing club.

Its intimidating shadow fell over the line of dwarves. One of them peeked out from between the small opening between his shields in time to see the club coming straight down.

The blow was much more powerful than any before it. Not only did it knock the dwarf clean off his feet, but the impact knocked those around him off balance. The other Fomoire immediately saw the opportunity and rushed in.

“—Bete, close that hole!”

“Tch—What the hell’re ya doin’ over there?!”

The perimeter had been broken. A werewolf moved to engage the incoming monsters, but he was too late. Several of the beasts made it past the front line.

The archers and mages, who had been protected by the line of dwarves up until now, went pale as the Fomoire began their violent assault.

“Lefiya?!”

A young girl was launched skyward.

Although the elf mage managed to avoid the oncoming club, her light body was thrown several meders by the shock wave of the weapon slamming into the ground.

“—hff.”

“Fuoooo…!”

As the girl rolled to a stop on the sand, a black shadow fell over her.

The Fomoire’s visage was hideous. It wasn’t just any Fomoire, but the

abnormally tall one that had broken through the front line.

The elvish girl made eye contact with the giant. Time stood still in the face of those pulsing red orbs.

The beast's rising club was reflected in the girl's dark blue eyes.

Then—

Slash.

"Huh?"

Streaks of gold and silver cut into her line of sight.

At the last second, a geyser of blood shot out of the Fomoire's body. Its head tumbled through the air before landing on the red sand with a dull thud.

"…"

The shocked girl lay there for several seconds, blinking.

Standing with her back to her was a female knight with long blond hair. *Whoosh.* The figure silently whipped around her silver blade.

"Aiz!" one Amazonian girl happily called out after witnessing the monster's defeat from her spot on the front line.

The girl called Aiz made sure that the elf, still on her back, was unhurt before charging back into the fray.

Whistling with the sound of the wind, the tip of her silver saber twinkled.

Closing the distance between her and the remaining monsters that passed the barrier, she disabled them all with a few quick strikes, allowing the remaining archers and mages to finish them off.

"Hey, Aiz, wait!"

But she charged farther forward.

Ignoring the voice that cut through the din, she made her way toward the Fomoire still trying to break through.

Kicking off the ground with a small eruption of red sand, she jumped high over the heads of the dwarves and directly into the enemy ranks.

“…Amazing.”

She heard it.

She heard the awed expression that fell from a dwarf’s mouth directly below her.

Aiz spun her body in midair, her blade performing a deadly dance.

One hit, then another. Monsters in her wake lost arms, legs, and heads as the blond girl’s weapon became the eye of a hurricane of blood.

There was an element of beauty as well as cruelty in how the girl wasted no motion, no effort in her every action. Her weapon connected with the necks and torsos of her targets, expertly avoiding their bulging arms to deliver killing blows.

The monsters’ front ranks were being decimated, with more falling every moment.

All watched her with an element of awe and fear. The Sword Princess Kenki had arrived.

“Thou become the consuming inferno.”

“Consume all and bring the battle to its end!”

Behind the barrier, the spell had reached a crescendo.

The long incantation was nearing its end.

“Aiz, get back here!”

Upon hearing her name, Aiz looked over her shoulder and changed direction.

The girl launched herself into the air amid the infuriated roars of the remaining Fomoire. Acrobatically twisting at the top of her arc, she landed safely behind the barrier.

“Incinerate, Sword of Surtr—my name is Alf!”

The magic circle grew to an enormous size, accompanied by a deafening roar as the jade ring surrounded the entire battle party.

Every corner of the battlefield was within its range.

Raising her white silver staff toward the ceiling, the elf mage Riveria triggered her spell.

“Rea Laevateinn!”

A wall of flames.

From the ground within the magic circle sprang countless columns of flame.

Safely within the jade circle, many of the battle-party members had to shield their ears from the thunderous eruption. The pillars of fire kept growing, extending all the way up to the ceiling. The remaining Fomoire were caught up in the firestorm and torn apart, not to mention being swallowed whole by the inferno.

The monsters’ cries of pain were snuffed out one by one as their forms vanished.

This was an area of effect magic, capable of destroying everything in a given area. A horde of more than fifty monsters was reduced to ash in mere seconds by this spell.

Sparks flew as intense heat filled the floor.

One by one, the members of the battle party lowered their weapons.

The faces of Aiz and her fellow adventurers were dyed by the crimson flames.



There was once a great Hole in the world.

It was as if the mouth of the planet had opened wide. This Hole existed long before humanity had discovered it for themselves. No one knew how it got there.

The Hole continuously gave birth to evil creatures, seemingly a door to some monstrous realm.

Hideous creatures of all shapes and sizes emerged from within, taking over the forests, mountains, valleys, oceans, and skies of Earth. The monsters’ sweeping conquest stretched across every domain. All the surface races put aside their differences in order to reclaim their dignity, regain control of the

world, and take revenge for their fallen kin. The disparate species rallied for a great counterstroke.

The newly emerged heroes led the charge as all peoples fought a war of attrition against the invading monsters—until the beasts were forced all the way back to the Hole from which they came.

Inside the Hole was a completely different world.

It was a realm divided into many levels—an underground Dungeon.

Illuminated by strange light sources in the absence of natural sunlight, never-before-seen species of plants and previously undiscovered ores and minerals were found throughout the labyrinth. Whether it was these new discoveries or the monsters that lived off the power of the magic stones in their chests, the Dungeon was absolutely brimming with the unknown.

Humans and demi-humans constructed a tower over the Hole to serve as a "lid" to prevent the monsters from coming aboveground.

At the same time, the humans couldn't help but wonder what lay at the bottom of the Hole. It wasn't long before eccentric people who thought the vast subterranean frontier needed to be fully explored began to appear.

Eventually, these people would become known as "adventurers."

For them, the call of the unknown was irresistible.

Time passed.

The era known as the "Ancient Times" abruptly came to an end.

The gods descended from heaven.

The beings from a higher plane came down to this land that they called "Gekai"—the lower world.

They were bored of their eternal existence in the upper realm of "Tenkai" but were entertained by the people of earth—"children," in their eyes—specifically the many cultures they had created and their constant struggle against monsters.

The gods' decision to descend from heaven caused many changes.

Mankind gained access to unlimited potential through the Blessings of deities, resulting in rapid increases of physical strength as well as an explosion of invention and creativity.

Of course, this included exploration of the monster den beneath their feet.

The Labyrinth City, Orario.

Built over the Hole, the city went through many cycles of destruction and rebirth in becoming the greatest metropolis in the world.

People gathered from far and wide for fame and fortune, and to discover the uncharted lands that lay sleeping below.

Outlaws, obsessed with their desires; adventurers, burning with their love of the unknown; and deities, wanting to be entertained by all the unfolding stories —they are at the center of this world.

This is where all their hopes, dreams, and stories intertwine.

The olden days, during which people would offer their prayers to the gods for enlightenment or good fortune, have ended.

Now is an era when mortals can plainly ask for their smallest wishes to be granted, receive fragments of divine charity, and make their dreams come true.

For fame, for fortune, for the unknown.

To reach distant heights, to fulfill their desires—their most earnest wishes.

The Era of the Gods has begun.

CHAPTER

1

Loki Familia



Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

Сям'я Локі

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CHAPTER 1

LOKI FAMILIA

Many different noises filled the air.

Some people were busy sparring, the sound of their metal blades clashing through the din of conversation. Everyone had a job to do—some carried massive weapons over their shoulders, some pounded iron stakes into the ground, and others trotted here and there carrying messages.

It was the scene of a midsize campground.

A girl with long, flowing blond hair made her way through the busily working groups that were an indiscernible mix of humans and demi-humans.

Her thin, feminine body was protected by light armor and blue battle clothes. Her soft skin was very smooth, her slender face symmetrical and easily recognizable at a distance. Eyes, the same golden hue as her hair, seemed to sparkle with a distant light.

Men, women, elves, and even goddesses who saw her couldn’t help but be attracted to her youthful beauty.

An air of mystery hung over her as she trudged her way through the bustling campsite, carrying a large folded cloth in her arms.

“M-Miss Aiz!”

Upon hearing her own name, the girl—Aiz—came to a stop.

Turning, she saw a girl with bright golden hair tied behind her neck standing there.

Two long ears pointed out of her head like leaves on each side of a tree branch. Long, parted bangs framed her face.

She was an elf, a race heralded for their beauty and elegance.

“Th-thank you for coming to my aid earlier! I’m always such a burden to everyone…I’m truly sorry!”

“…Have your injuries healed, Lefiya?”

The elf was very shy, repeatedly bowing to the blond girl, when Aiz responded with her question.

Lefiya’s body seemed to twitch with nervousness as she repeated that she was fine over and over again in different ways.

The elf girl, Lefiya Viridis, was the mage whom Aiz saved at the last second in the middle of the battle that had taken place not too long ago against a horde of monsters.

Her soft features had an innocent quality to them, and she was an elf through and through. A whole range of expressions formed on her delicate face as she struggled to keep her composure in the face of her savior.

She did her best to convey her appreciation to the person she owed her life to but was quickly unnerved by awkward silence.

“…Really, I am sorry. I know that it’s not good to only be protected, but I always—”

“I do not mind.”

The elf’s face darkened for a moment, looking as though she still felt remorse as she hung her head in shame.

Aiz meant what she had said, but the girl couldn’t look her in the eyes.

Despite her aloof expression, Aiz’s mind raced as to how to lift the young girl’s spirits. At long last, she reached out with her right hand.

Pausing for a moment, her fingers dangling in midair, she gently placed her hand on Lefiya’s head.

The young elf’s shoulders shook as Aiz clumsily patted the girl’s golden hair. “It’s okay.”

Lefiya finally lifted her face, eyes moistening with tears.

The two stared at each other for several seconds before the young elf blushed

and snatched the cloth from Aiz's arms. "I-I'll carry this!"

"Ah." Aiz couldn't react as the cover for her tent disappeared from her grasp.

"—A-I-Z!"

"Huh?!"

"…hm?"

Pounce! Aiz felt a sudden weight on her back as two arms wrapped around her shoulders.

Lefiya watched in surprise as a young Amazon playfully hugged Aiz from behind.

"Tiona…"

"What'cha up to? Is Lefiya depressed again and came to be cheered up?"

"I-I didn't come here to be cheered up!"

The elf blushed at the Amazonian girl's words. Aiz watched the two of them as the teasing Tiona laughed at the elf's sudden embarrassment, her expression softening. Tiona had healthy, glowing skin the color of wheat. Her face showed no signs of negativity; the girl was overflowing with positive energy.

She wore a traditional Amazonian outfit, and most of her skin was exposed. Rather than a shirt or robe, she had only a single strip of cloth wrapped around her chest and wore a long pareo-style skirt around her waist. Her midriff and limbs were essentially bare.

The moment her brown eyes met Aiz's gaze, the girl's face lit up like a sunflower.

"You've got nothing to worry about, Lefiya. No one gets out of a brawl on the wastelands of Moitra without a scratch. Apologizing for every little thing is just going to put Aiz in a tough spot. Right, Aiz?"

"…Yes."

"Um…I-I understand."

Tiona smiled for a while at Lefiya, who tried to shrink away as much as possible.

But now, the Amazon tightened her grip around Aiz's shoulders.

"Still. Aiz, why were you so reckless?"

"…"

"Even though I tried to stop you. All you had to do was clean up behind the wall. You didn't have to charge straight out into those Fomoire." Tiona's tone changed to something just short of interrogation.

Tiona was reproaching Aiz for independently deciding to charge in during their battle with the monsters. But Aiz didn't know how to respond. All she could do was apologize for making her friend worry about her. "…I'm sorry," she said softly.


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“I mean, I’m kind of the same…but you put yourself in a lot more danger.” Tiona squeezed her arms a little bit harder as she continued her lecture. Aiz felt the weight of the Amazon on her back but couldn’t look at her.

“You know what it is about you, Aiz…?” Tiona began in a slightly irritated voice, her elbow wrapped around Aiz’s neck. The blond girl didn’t try to break free from the rough embrace despite the sudden squeeze.

Lefiya watched the two of them from a few steps away with a lonely and slightly jealous look in her eyes.

“Hey! Ya gonna make me hurl! Get off!”

“Oww!”

A long leg suddenly swung in from the side and kicked Tiona in the small of her back.

The leg belonged to a young man with wolflike ears and a sleek gray tail. Although both of his eyes were half closed, one of them was twitching in irritation.

A werewolf had appeared next to the girls.

Tiona angrily hopped off Aiz’s back and turned to face the newcomer.

“What’s the big idea?! That really hurt, you know?!”

“Said ya were making me sick, didn’t I? No need ta get all worked up. I didn’t come down here to see that!”

“Sure, you say all that, Bete, but really, you’re just trying to make a pass at Aiz again, aren’t you? You blowhard!”

“Why, you…you wanna start something?!”

“See, just as I thought! Sorry, you wolf in sheep’s clothing!”

“Bring it on, ya nasty girl!”

“Um, e-excuse me, you two, fighting right now isn’t really…”

Bete and Tiona’s conversation was quickly spiraling out of control, so Lefiya cautiously tried to break up their argument.

Aiz, left standing all alone, watched the events unfold with a distant expression.

Drawn in by the commotion, another Amazon like Tiona walked up to the group and stood shoulder to shoulder with Aiz. “What’s going on here?…Like I need to ask.”

“…Tione.”

The two looked very similar, with the exception of this new Amazon’s long hair, which extended down to her waist and considerably larger bustline.

Tiona’s twin older sister, Tione, took one look at the group, sighed, and then turned to face Aiz.

“The general would like to speak with you. Go now. I’ll take care of these two.”

“…Sorry.”

“Oh, it’s fine.—Hey, you two, if you’ve got time to be playing around, then you can come and help me put up this tent.”

Aiz could hear Tione taking over the situation as she left the others behind.

She made her way through the camp that was taking shape.

The human girl headed toward the center, where a large tent had already been constructed. A flag was staked outside the cloth structure—one bearing the comedic smile of the trickster.

Loki Familia.

Aiz, Lefiya, the Amazonian twins, and Bete were all affiliated with the god who owned this group.

These groups, each headed by one of the deities who’d come down from Tenkai, were known as familias.

For these deities, their time spent on Earth was nothing more than a game for their own amusement. They had agreed to seal away their divine powers—powers of omniscience and omnipotence known as Arcanum—to keep the playing field level. This meant that the gods and goddesses on Earth were

physically powerless. Therefore, they provided their “children” with Blessings in exchange for protection and support while living on Earth. It was a symbiotic relationship; each depended on the other. But the gods were competitive. They had enjoyed centuries of entertainment from seeing who had the strongest, richest, and overall best familias.

The people who had received their Blessings lived and worked together, becoming a family of sorts—a familia.

“Finn.”

“Ah, Aiz, you’re here.”

There were many familias all over the world. The deity who led each decided that group’s specialty from many different possibilities.

As for *Loki Familia*—they specialized in Dungeon crawling, pressing as deep into the labyrinth as possible, as well as developing the floors that were already cleared.

“Ga-ha-ha, we were just talkin’ about you, Aiz.”

“Gareth…Now is not the time for laughing.”

Aiz pulled back the cloth doorway to find three demi-humans gathered around a short table.

The first was another elf like Lefiya, named Riveria Ljos Alf.

Across from her was a robust dwarf, Gareth Landrock.

Lastly, standing at the head of the table was the young prum boy, Finn Deimne.

The three of them were the highest-ranking members of *Loki Familia*, the brain trust.

“Well, then, I think we can skip the formalities. Do you know why you’re here, Aiz?”

“…Yes.”

“In that case, I can get right to the point. Why did you ignore your orders to reinforce the wall?”

Finn, who stood only as high as Aiz's elbow, spoke in a very calm manner. He had soft yellow hair and blue eyes as clear as a lagoon. Despite looking younger than anyone else, the young man had an air of knowledge that inspired trust in all who laid eyes on him. He made all the decisions concerning the familia's Dungeon activities. Finn was the top, the field general.

"You are very strong, Aiz. That's why you were given the rank of captain. I shouldn't have to say this, but your actions have an effect on everyone beneath you. There will be problems if you don't understand that."

"…"

"Is the rank too much pressure?"

"…No, sir. I'm sorry."

Finn could practically see the gears turning in the girl's head.

A smile grew on the boy's face as Aiz reflected on her actions and gave a genuine apology.

"Aww, don't be so hard on her, Finn. Aiz was probably just tryin' to bail us out, divin' inta the Fomoire like that. My brethren on the wall were nearly finished."

"If you're willing to say that, the fault also lies with me. My incantation took too much time."

Gareth stroked his long beard as he and Riveria chimed in to lend Aiz a hand.

Aiz's shoulders sank, her expression still as aloof as ever. The dwarf arched his eyebrows slightly while the elegant elf had nothing else to say and fell silent.

Taking in the whole scene, Finn put on a strained smile and, after a short while, looked up at Aiz.

"Aiz, *we are in the Dungeon*. No one knows what will happen. Not everyone can move like you, fight like you. Promise me you won't forget that."

"…I promise."

"I can tell just by looking that Tiona has already given you a talking-to as well. You may leave."

Aiz made a quick bow to acknowledge him as Finn made it clear that there was nothing left to say. She directed her gratitude toward Riveria and Gareth as well.

As Aiz left the tent, she contemplated the general's words then suddenly looked up.

There was no sky, only a domed ceiling composed of rock. Innumerable pillar-like objects jutted down from its surface, illuminating the floor bit by bit with an inexplicable light.

The Dungeon—a boundless underground maze that loomed just beneath the surface of the aptly named Labyrinth City, Orario.

Aiz stood in a deep part of the mysterious realm that continuously spawned monsters.

Loki Familia was based in Orario for a reason. The only dungeon in the world was right beneath their feet. Adventurers came from far and wide to venture into its depths. Therefore, many gods and goddesses sent their followers into the Dungeon to reap the economic opportunities that it provided, as well as to increase their influence.

Aiz's familia was one of them.

"Hey, clumsy! Why can't ya pitch a single tent, ya boneheaded Amazon!"

"Shut your yap! You suck as a teacher, you know that, Bete? I've done nothing wrong!"

"Lefiya, I'll finish up. Go help the others prepare dinner."

"S-sure."

Loki Familia was currently in the middle of an expedition.

They'd traveled deep into the Dungeon and planned to spend many days attempting to unearth some of the secrets lurking within it. Right now, they were focused on creating a base camp and trying to squeeze as much rest into this downtime as possible.

They had just emerged from an intense battle—but none of the party members looked tired. In fact, many looked excited and filled with satisfaction

at what they had accomplished thus far. The atmosphere around camp was pleasantly relaxed. Aiz walked past all of her industrious allies as they put the finishing touches on their camp and talked among themselves.

Tents had been constructed all over the place and quite a few large cargo boxes were scattered about. Making her way past the containers filled with spare weapons and supplies, the girl's line of sight instantly opened up as she headed out of the camp.

It was unbelievable that this kind of view could be seen so far underground.

She was surrounded by a forest of ash-colored trees. In fact, the trees looked more like they'd been covered in an ash-like snow rather than having that color and texture as their natural appearance. The forest spread out in every direction, covering the landscape all the way to the end of the floor. Several rivers wound their way across the ground, like the veins of a leaf. Aiz listened to the crystal-blue water flowing around her.

The light pillars above her head were weak, making the surroundings feel like dusk on the surface.

They had chosen to construct their base camp on the top of a ten-meder hill overlooking the landscape. Aiz could see everything on the floor from her spot on the ledge.

"…"

They had arrived on the fiftieth floor of the Dungeon.

Many Dungeon-crawling familias resided in Orario, but this was the leading edge of exploration.

Of the thousands of adventurers living in the labyrinth city, very few had ever seen the forest of ash. Aiz stood by herself and took it all in.



Loki Familia had gathered together to eat around the light of many portable magic-stone lamps.

They were on level fifty of the Dungeon. The risk of being overwhelmed or ambushed on this floor was significantly lower because monsters *were not born*

on this level. They had reached a safe point. There were several floors like this in the Dungeon, and each of them was used as a resting point by adventurers. That was why *Loki Familia* had chosen this floor to set up their base camp.

"I want to congratulate all of you on a job well done in the Moitra Sands. It's thanks to everyone's individual strengths that we've made it to the fiftieth floor. Allow me to show my appreciation to all of you, thank you."

"The forty-ninth floor is *always* rough. Especially today, with all those Fomoire popping out of nowhere."

"Be grateful the floor boss, Balor, wasn't there."

"Ha-ha. Anyway, this deserves a toast. We don't have any wine, but all the same—"

"Cheers!"

The Amazonian twins chatted between themselves after Finn's opening address. Conversations broke out all over camp after everyone took a big swig from their glasses. Being in the Dungeon, they couldn't afford to let down their guard, but with delicious food and drink sprawled out in front of them, most were able to relax a fair amount.

A large pot, roughly the size and shape of a cauldron, had been set up in the middle of camp. Every adventurer in their group had gathered around it. Bubbling inside the vat was a broth made of herbs collected from within the Dungeon and mruits—a type of fruit that shared the same flavor and texture as meat. Both ingredients were normally food the Dungeon provided for its monsters, but they were still suitable for human and demi-human consumption and were perfect for long journeys like this one.

Normally, adventurers were forced to subsist off limited, tasteless rations brought down from the surface. Having this much food at once was a treat for everyone involved. This had been all part of Finn's plan—carefully budgeting the space available in the cargo boxes. And now all of the adventurers under his command were able to indulge in flavors that could not be found anywhere else.

"Um, Aiz, are you sure you don't want anything to eat?"

“Yes, I’m fine…”

“What’s with the act? I can hear your stomach from here! Have some, have some!”

Lefiya noticed Aiz sitting by herself, staring at a bite-size block of rations between her thumb and forefinger. The moment that she walked over to start a conversation, Tiona appeared behind her with a bowl of meatless broth in her hands.

The girl’s golden eyes sparkled for a moment as the soup’s fragrance wafted into her nose. But her iron will held strong and she looked away. Aiz was a firm believer that sudden changes in diet would have a negative effect on her condition. She resisted the smiling, wheat-skinned Amazon’s advances with all of her might.

Tiona was persistent, but it was her sister, Tione, who lost patience first and smacked her across the back of her head.

“Now would be a good time to go over our plan moving forward.” The vat emptied and cleanup under way, Finn made his way to the center of the group.

Everyone except for the lookouts formed a circle around him. He made eye contact with each of them in turn.

“The goal of this expedition is to document new information on the Deep Levels. That has not changed. However, we have a quest to complete before proceeding to the fifty-ninth floor.”

A request or mission given to adventurers to carry out was called a quest.

A client would offer a reward to adventurers in exchange for fulfilling said request.

Adventurers accepted quests from many different clients, be they familias, merchants, or the Guild.

“A quest…The one issued by *Dian Cecht Familia*?”

“Indeed. They would like us to bring back a large amount of water from the Cadmus Springs on the fifty-first floor.”

Finn acknowledged Tione’s question with a nod. Tiona suddenly appeared at

her sister's side and was quick to voice her opinion.

"Cadmus Springs…Gahhh. Such a pain. Why did you accept that one?"

"The reward they've proposed is worth that pain. Also, they've treated us well in the past, so we couldn't ignore it."

"Bastards, sendin' us to do the dirty work…"

Riveria stepped forward to answer the question as Bete snarled behind her.

Ignoring his allies' misgivings about the content of their mission, Finn started to explain the plan. "We'll send two small teams to the fifty-first floor. Avoiding combat as much as possible to conserve weapons and items, both teams will quickly secure the water and return to camp. Any questions?"

"Oh! Me, me! Why are we splitting into two parties?"

"Because they want a lot of water. One group can only carry back so much. We'll need at least two full containers to fill their order."

Gareth supported Finn's plan. "We've got storage problems of our own, with the food an' all. Floor fifty-nine is still ahead of us, so we can't spend too much time on a quest. Splittin' up's faster, more efficient."

Expeditions were also a battle against time. It had taken them the better part of five days to reach the fiftieth floor. The trip back to the surface always had to be considered. The schedule was tight, and they couldn't afford to lose any time or supplies getting sidetracked.

"Also, a big group like this can't move well in the Cadmus Springs. While it hurts to split our forces, it's for the best…Any other questions? If not, let's figure out party members." Finn looked around again as he asked his question. Since no one responded, he started issuing orders.

Without fail, Tiona had her hand wiggling high in the air a moment later. "Oh! Oh! Me—I'll go! Come with me, Aiz!"

"Sure."

"I mean, if we didn't get to go, then who would? Small groups, top-class adventurers only, you understand?"

“That settles it, Tione’s with us!” Tiona was quick to snatch her sister’s wrist and pull her into their battle party.

“Huh? Wait, I should be with the general…!”

Finn ordered the familia’s strongest magic user to stay behind. “Riveria, please stay with the camp. I want your Mind rested and ready to go once this quest is over. Of course, protect the camp if need be.”

“…I suppose it cannot be helped.”

Magic used mental energy—*Mind*—as a power source. Riveria had already expended a large amount, so she didn’t try to argue with the general’s decision.

Looking outside the circle, Riveria’s eyes fell on one girl.

“Lefiya, take my place alongside Aiz and the Amazons.”

“All right…Wait, me?!”

“There’s no problem with that, is there, Finn?”

“Sounds good to me. We’re counting on her to be your successor, so now’s as good a time as any to get some experience.”

“G-General?! Lady Riveria?! I-I’m not—!”

“Lefiya, over here!” The young elf’s objections were quickly silenced as Tiona grabbed her, too, and brought her into the group.

“That bein’ the case, the other top fighters’ll form the second team: Finn, Bete, myself…and…”

“Hey, Raul! We need a supporter over here.”

“Y-you talking to me?!”

“Yeah, who else?”

The two parties for the quest had been set. They were as follows:

Team One: Aiz, Tiona, Tione, and Lefiya.

Team Two: Finn, Bete, Gareth, and Raul.

“…Hey. Will the ladies be all right?”

“Hmmm…” Finn considered as Bete pointed out the imbalance of the other battle party’s composition.

Being an Amazon, Tiona was a pure berserker in combat. Additionally, Aiz’s ferocity in combat was such that she had been given the title “Battle Princess” by the people who knew her best.

While Tione appeared cool and collected on the surface, she could be much more destructive than her younger sister and Aiz together. Moreover, Team One’s magic user, Lefiya, was at a lower level than the other fighters. There was no way she could keep up.

Finn raised his head after a heavy silence.

“Tione, I’m counting on you. I hope my trust isn’t misplaced.”

“—Leave it to me!!” The elder Amazon, who was secretly quite taken with their baby-faced leader, couldn’t have been happier to hear those words.

Tiona knew immediately what her sister’s suddenly pink cheeks meant. “So simple,” she mumbled with a cocked eyebrow.

The battle parties decided, the adventurers managed to get a few hours of restless sleep.

Leaving Riveria in charge of camp, the eight of them set out for the fifty-first floor.

CHAPTER
2

DUNGEON CONFUSION



Гэта казка нашага сям'і.

лабірынт блытаніны

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CHAPTER 2

DUNGEON CONFUSION

“Here I gooo!” Tiona gleefully charged into battle.

The double-bladed sword in her grasp was large enough to make anyone look twice.

Both of her hands were on the handle that connected the two blades. The oncoming monsters suddenly fell silent as the Amazon whipped her weapon around like a children’s toy.

“That’s *five*!” In one great slice, she put all of her weight into a jumping attack and sent the monsters flying.

Completely ignoring the corpses piling up around her, the warrior let her instincts kick in. Finding her next target in the blink of an eye, Tiona took off in that direction.

“Aiz, cover that moron! Don’t let her get out too far ahead!”

“Understood.”

A silver streak followed Tiona into the next wave of monsters, tearing asunder everything in its path.

The streak came to a stop as Aiz withdrew her saber from the head of a monster, her golden locks flowing as she turned to face the next enemy.

Dungeon floor fifty-one.

Despite being tasked with completing a quest, Aiz’s party had been drawn into battle.

Part of the Deep Levels, the fifty-first floor’s layout was nothing short of bizarre.

The walls, floor, and ceiling were completely smooth and flat. Every corner

was a perfect right angle, as if carved by some master architect. Intersections were common, making the entire floor into an insane square beehive. Those brave enough, or crazy enough, to step into this realm lost their way in no time. The Dungeon walls were made of a black substance somewhere between stone and soil in texture.

Lights overhead illuminated the relatively wide passageways as Aiz's battle party confronted a horde of robust monsters.

"Black rhinos."

Rhinoceros monsters that walked on two legs. Standing at just over two meders tall, they barely qualified as large-category monsters. What really set them apart, however, were their two horns, one long and one short, jutting from the front of their faces.

Their hide was as strong and thick as high-quality armor. These beasts were walking fortresses compared to the Fomoire on floor forty-nine.

But.

"—?!"

"Yah-ha!!"

Pieces of them were flying through the air.

A double-bladed sword being swung with playfully reckless abandon was cutting through their horde with deadly ease.

Two large swords fused together at the hilt—while many large weapons were known for their destructive power, this particular piece surpassed all of them. The thick, solid blades tore through the monsters' bodies like they were nothing more than tissue paper. Massive limbs went airborne with each swing.

The wheat-skinned girl might as well have been a kid on the playground, dancing with her friends. The sheer force she wielded far exceeded what her small frame should allow.

Tiona loved her bespoke weapon, dubbed Urga, and knew exactly how to use it.

"—!"

As Tiona and Urga danced their way to a killing spree, Aiz was busy protecting her blind spot from a continuous stream of would-be attackers.

She was equipped with only a saber. It looked like nothing more than a toothpick when compared to Tiona's weapon of choice, but the enemy monsters couldn't keep up with the sleek weapon in Aiz's skilled grasp. The blond girl stood even with Tiona as the two of them slaughtered their enemies.

No matter how many bodies it pierced, no matter how much blood flew through the air, the silver saber never lost its luster.

Forged by smiths who carried the Blessing of a god, Aiz's weapon had been endowed with a superior characteristic: Durandal, the Unbreaking.

Already a top-class weapon, it was physically impossible for the blade to snap during combat.

A Superior weapon made by the High Smiths of *Goibniu Familia*, it was called "Desperate."

Aiz chose to wield her beloved sword because it allowed her to always fight that one extra second without holding back.

"Aiz, I call the right!"

"Okay."

Tiona collided with the enemy ranks with the ferocity of a raging typhoon. Meanwhile, Aiz slew monster after monster with sharp, precise strikes. Their battle looked like total chaos from afar. However, neither one allowed the other to be attacked from behind. Time seemed to slow down as they kept just enough distance to stay out of each other's way, yet remained close enough to cover each other's blind side by switching places at the last second.

Through their trust and teamwork, small mountains of monster corpses formed around the battlefield.

"Four more coming in from the right! Reinforcements arriving from the back! Lefiya, signal us when you're ready!"

Aiz and Tiona engaged the horde of black rhinos directly while Tione supported them from the middle of the formation with throwing knives while

shouting orders.

In the face of the oncoming onslaught, Lefiya raised her staff at the back of their formation and began to recite her spell.

“—Take up your bows to face the marauders. Answer the call of your kin and nock your arrows.”

Monsters residing in the Deep Levels were far more powerful and savage than their brethren on higher floors. Visibly shaken by the horror before her eyes, Lefiya struggled to keep her voice steady as she summoned her Magic.

Thunderous footsteps shook the ground beneath her feet. Lefiya couldn’t see straight.

“—OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

“?!”

Suddenly, the wall right beside Lefiya *broke open*.

Shielding herself from debris, the elf peeked around her arms to see an absolutely terrifying red and purple spider, with eight hairy legs and many menacing eyes—a deformis spider.

The monster, born directly from the Dungeon wall, jumped straight toward the vulnerable mage.

A perfect ambush. Time seemed to stand still for Lefiya, watching the creature’s jaws wide open, fangs glinting in the dim light.

At that moment, a blade flashed before her eyes and sliced the beast’s head in half.

“Eeeek!”

“Keep casting, Lefiya.”

“R-right!”

Tione had jumped to Lefiya’s aid, long black hair flowing in her wake.

She grabbed the handle of her Kukri throwing knife, still embedded in the beast’s neck, and gave it a sharp twist before yanking it out. The still-twitching deformis spider split in two pieces as it collapsed to the ground.

“Ah, err, um…!”

Lefiya had regained her footing, but there was too much adrenaline pulsing through her veins. Try as she might, she couldn’t focus.

Taking a few moments to concentrate, she inhaled all the way down to the bottom of her lungs and opened her mouth to start the spell over from the beginning. It was at that moment that Aiz and Tiona took down the last of the black rhino horde.

The halls were filled with an eerie silence, with all the monsters’ lifeless bodies lying at their feet.

“I-I’m so sorry…I…”

“Nothing to worry about, Lefiya. These things happen to everyone.”

The blood-streaked Urga over her shoulder, Tiona walked up to the elf with Aiz not far behind. The blond girl sheathed her saber as Lefiya continued to apologize. Tione joined them after a quick sweep of the area.

The elf had completely missed her window to attack, missing the opportunity that Aiz and Tiona had created for her. She had never felt so useless.

“I shouldn’t have come after all. At Level Three, I’m only holding you back…”

“Calm down, Lefiya.”

Tione placed her hand on Lefiya’s trembling shoulder.

Slowly, cautiously, the elf raised her face to meet the Amazon’s gaze. Tiona jumped up behind her sister and added her own encouragement.

“Your Level might be a little low, but your Magic is strong enough to roast anything down here. Riveria chose you herself, yes? Have some confidence.”

“What was that Magic power ability of yours again—that thing Loki said a while back…? Oh yeah! The big ka-boom! With a Skill like that, you could wipe out any monster in one hit!”

“You see, that’s…”

Lefiya lost the ability to argue the moment her Skill was brought up.

Her golden hair flowed to the side as she looked over her shoulder and down

her back.

Every person, human or demi-human, who had received a god's Blessing had hieroglyphs—the writing system used by the gods—engraved on their back, without exception. The jumble of characters was the Blessing itself.

"Falna"—known to the people of earth as *Status*.

A Status was built on the excelia gained from any kind of experience from any part of a person's life. A deity used the excelia contained within a person's spirit in order to increase their individual skills and abilities, based on the information therein. It was a god's grace in every sense of the word.

For the children of Gekai, Falna was the key to becoming stronger, reaching new heights and nothing more. Adventurers killed monsters in battle to gain excelia, had their god or goddess add it to their Status to become stronger, and repeated the cycle. For them, a god's Blessing opened the door to limitless possibilities.

A Status was made up of five basic abilities: Strength, Defense, Dexterity, Agility, and Magic power. Additionally, Statuses included brackets for magic spells and skills that differed from person to person, based on the strength of the spiritual "container" they possessed. The Level was the most important part of the Status. A "level up" occurred when an adventurer acquired more excelia than their spiritual container could hold. Not only did leveling up dramatically increase all of their abilities, but it brought them *one step closer to divinity*.

Lefiya's Status was Level 3. Her Skill increased her Magic power, making her a perfect fit for the rear of the formation as a mage.

As Tiona had said, having this Skill meant that, out of this party of four, Lefiya was capable of inflicting the most damage.

"B-but I can't even defend myself. If Tione hadn't been there to protect me, I would've died a pointless death…"

However, the rest of the party was Level 5.

They were some of the very few adventurers in Orario who were allowed to be called "top class." They were the cream of the crop. In terms of pure strength and skill, Lefiya didn't even come close.

In truth, she wouldn't stand a chance if she were to face any of the monsters on this floor on her own.

The elf desperately tried to deny everything her allies said to encourage her.

"…Mages do different things than we do." This time, it was Aiz who spoke up.

Lefiya couldn't hide her surprise when the stoic blond girl joined the conversation.

"Riveria taught me so. We protect mages from monsters, and mages like you protect us…So, um…"

Aiz's words began to slow.

Not used to being the center of attention, having three pairs of eyes on her at once made her feel so out of place she couldn't string words together.

Growing redder by the moment, the girl desperately tried to say what was on her mind, until her gaze drifted away and she said these words:

"We will protect you, always…So save us if we get in trouble, okay?"

Aiz's golden eyes met Lefiya's. The elf's dark blue eyes opened wide as she felt a sense of friendship and trust embedded in the girl's tone. Her lips trembled for a moment, tears welling up in her eyes before the golden-haired elf responded with a deep nod.

She took a moment to collect herself and control her breathing.

The dark clouds that threatened to dampen the mood of their party broke apart, replaced by a kinder aura.

Tiona broke out into a toothy grin and playfully smacked Aiz on the shoulder.

The human girl stepped away, and Tiona laughed as Aiz massaged the point of impact.

"Shall we collect these magic stones? We can't expect Lefiya to get all of them by herself."

Seeing the situation had been resolved, Tione brought their focus back to the job at hand. Splitting into teams of two, they set to work.

They had to cut deep into the chests of the monster corpses to remove the

magic stones embedded inside.

Dark purple in color, the stones served as a power source for monsters. With their “hearts” gone, their bodies instantly lost color before dissolving into piles of ash then disappearing altogether as if they had never been there.

“Tione, you’re leaving behind the drop items? Sure we can let them go to waste?”

“All those big horns and pieces of hide would just weigh us down. The spring water takes priority.” Tione sounded a little annoyed by her sister’s question, as if the answer should have been obvious. The four adventurers left the battlefield, despite the monster parts littering the floor.

Occasionally, after a monster’s magic stone had been removed, a piece of it would be left behind. Adventurers called these pieces “drop items.”

Magic stones and drop items could be exchanged for money at the Guild or sold directly to merchants on the surface. This was how Dungeon-crawling familias made a living.

“Lefiya, are your shoulders okay? I can carry more, y’know.”

Lefiya politely declined Tione’s offer. “Th-thank you for the offer, but I am okay. Please, let me do this much.” In addition to her staff, the elf was carrying several bags over her shoulders, as well as the water container in a backpack that hung down to her waist.

In addition to adventurers, there was another type of Dungeon job: the supporters.

Normally kept out of combat, their main role was to collect the magic stones and drop items after the battle and return them safely to the surface. On top of that, supporters carried spare items and weapons for the adventurers in the battle party. To put it bluntly, they carried the bags. They were porters.

However, they were vital to the success and efficiency of adventurers trying to make a living in the Dungeon. Therefore, familias would assign their weakest members to this role, when a professional supporter wasn’t available.

Since Lefiya couldn’t do much more than support her party members from a

distance, she had volunteered for this job.

“…Incoming.”

“From where, Aiz?”

“Ahead…and behind.”

It happened when they were in the middle of a long hallway.

Aiz’s eyes narrowed, and her ears perked up as she heard the sound of distant cracking coming from farther down the hallway and from where they had just been.

A heartbeat later, just like the deformis spider that had attacked Lefiya earlier, monsters burst forth from the Dungeon wall. Several of them.

The top-class adventurers moved to protect Lefiya as she gasped in surprise, and they were forced into combat once again.

Monsters were born from the Dungeon walls.

They came forth like baby birds emerging from eggs, breaking the walls like a shell.

Every monster was born fully grown and able to fight the instant they burst from the Dungeon wall. The lower the floor, the stronger the monster was at birth. The beasts born in the Deep Levels of the Dungeon were the stuff of nightmares.

The Dungeon was the mother of all monsters.

That was all that humans and demi-humans knew for sure about this underground labyrinth. It was also generally considered fact that the Dungeon itself was just as alive as a person or monster. For example, the walls within the Dungeon would heal from any amount of damage if given enough time. An entire hallway could be scorched by flames and yet look completely normal a few days later.

Why was there light underground?

Why were the monsters born?

How did the labyrinth recover?

Humanity had tried to unravel the mysteries of the Dungeon since the Ancient Times, but every attempt had led to only more questions.

Even the all-knowing gods who descended from on high hadn't told a soul what was really going on. Whether they were hiding something or they really didn't know, there was no chance of gaining any useful information from them.

They would always dodge the question. "The Dungeon is the Dungeon. What else do you need to know?"

Therefore, it would have to be mankind that would find the answers.

This "unknown" might very well be what adventurers were trying to find.

"You know, there doesn't seem to be as many monsters around today."

"Much better than having to run away. Not having to fight is just what we wanted."

"That's not quite what I meant but…eh."

Aiz's battle party continued progressing through the fifty-first floor, encountering only a few monsters along the way. Thanks to that, they were making great time.

Tiona was at the front of the formation, Aiz right behind her, followed closely by Lefiya and the ever-vigilant Tione in the back. The women stayed in a single-file line as they fought back an anxiety that only the Dungeon could produce.

The monster-less Dungeon was filled with a powerful silence, like an old dam that was just barely holding back the water. There was something unnatural about it. Anything could happen at any time within these walls, making the quiet all the more disturbing.

The carefully laid-out patterns of the early stages of the floor were gone, replaced by massive stairwells that connected to higher points on the same level, countless four-way intersections, and hallways that split off into three or four paths at once. The square beehive had become a knot.

All four of the adventurers stayed on high alert, eyes and ears wide open so as to not miss any sign of danger. They did, however, have a map to show them the way through the maze. They broke away from the main path—it would lead

them to floor fifty-two—and instead went toward a back corner of the floor.

“Almost there…Let’s go over a few things before we get to the spring.”

The wide hallway began to narrow in front of them, signaling to Tione that their destination was just up ahead.

The others kept walking as the Amazon reviewed the finer points of their quest.

“The only thing we have to do is get the water…but a battle with Cadmus, the Great Dragon, is probably unavoidable.”

“Cadmus, um, isn’t it…?”

“Yep, really, really strong…”

“In terms of Strength alone, stronger than the floor boss Udaeus, I think.”

There were special floors throughout the Dungeon in which one extremely strong monster appeared. These monsters, known as floor bosses, struck fear into the hearts of adventurers. The Guild had a classification for them: Monster Rex.

Typically, floor bosses were a full level above all of the monsters located on their floor. They presented the largest challenge for adventurers in the Dungeon and required a great deal of teamwork to take down.

Lefiya gulped down the air in her throat as she realized that the dragon they were about to face had more physical power than a Level 6 floor boss.

“C-can we distract it long enough to finish the quest?”

“Impossible. Not while that dragon is on guard. If you think you can gather spring water during the fight, you’ll die.”

“Last time, it hit me hard enough to turn my guts to soup.” Tiona giggled as she remembered being swatted like a fly. Lefiya stared at her, turning pale as all of the blood left her face.

“We finish off Cadmus before getting the water.”

“I-I understand…”

“Tione…what’s the plan?”

“Our usual. Aiz, Tiona, and I will engage head-on. Lefiya, hit it with your best magic. Then we go in for the kill.”

“Lefiya, show us what you can do this time, okay?”

“A-all right.”

The party came to a halt. The end of the narrow hallway was in sight. Light filtered in from the wide-open chamber, often called a “room” by adventurers.

The Cadmus Springs were in that room.

“…”

Tione made eye contact with Aiz, and both silently nodded. The Amazon took point from her younger sister, with the others adjusting formation behind her.

The four of them advanced as quietly as they could, walking in step to mask one another’s footfalls. Tione stuck out her arm, mouthing the word *wait* to her allies, and slowly crept forward by herself.

The other three would rush forward on her signal. All eyes were locked on the Amazon, their muscles tense and hair standing on end. Lefiya’s lips trembled as she tightened her grip on her staff. Even Tiona’s carefree air was gone. Aiz was completely focused on her ally’s arm, unblinking.

Crouching on the ground, the three girls waited for Tione’s call.

“…?”

The first one to notice something wasn’t right—no, something was completely off—was Aiz.

Her eyebrows curled down with a frown as she suddenly stood up.

“Wha—wait, Aiz.”

“…Strange.”

“Huh?”

“It’s too quiet.”

Curtly responding to Lefiya’s whispered objections, Aiz moved forward.

Tione hid her body against the wall as she stuck her head into the room,

looking for monsters. The blond girl walked right past her.

What greeted her eyes was overwhelming.

“What happened…?”

“Everything’s messed up…?”

Tiona had followed Aiz into the room and was just as shocked.

The room was filled with lush trees, enough to be considered a small forest. However, every single one of them was broken, lying in pieces, or completely uprooted. The floor and walls of the room showed signs of a struggle; fresh cracks and debris littered the area.

But the most disturbing sight in the chamber were the strange marks on the walls and trees that looked melted.

Even now, putrid black smoke was emerging from the purplish spots all over the room.

“Grooossss…”

Tiona covered her nose and mouth with her arm.

The girls entered the room with confusion all over their faces. Even more attentive to sound and movement than they had been in the hallway, the four of them stuck together as they made their way through the tree stumps.

Despite the carnage surrounding them, there was one spot that remained intact.

Ripples traveled across the surface of pristine, crystal clear water in the corner of the room. The spring had been protected.

The water was flowing out of a natural crack in the wall—a small stream that originated from the cavern beyond the Dungeon wall. The light blue liquid twinkled as it collected in a basin surrounded by wildflowers.

And just in front of this marvel of Dungeon nature was a large pile of ash.

“Isn’t this…”

“…What’s left of Cadmus?”

Their whispers filled the air, sounding much louder to the anxious girls than they should have.

The shape of the large pile of ash in the grass matched the dragon in her memory. The master-less chamber was still; there was nothing else alive in there. Even if there were other monsters, there was no doubt in her mind. This pile of ash used to be the Cadmus dragon.

The monster had lost its magic stone. Aiz and the others soon joined Tione, the ash at their feet.

"…Did a different familia slay it…?"

The silence getting to her, Lefiya said the first thing that came to her mind.

Tione slowly shook her head.

"Very few parties of adventurers can make it this deep. We would have known if any of their familias launched an expedition at the same time as ours."

"…Take a look."

Aiz's whisper got their attention. The blond girl kneeled beside a particularly large lump in the ash.

She carefully wiped it away to reveal what was buried underneath.

"The drop items are still here…"

A golden piece of the dragon's wing emerged from the ash.

"Cadmus Hide."

An extremely rare drop item, there was no guarantee it could be collected even after defeating Cadmus. It was so valuable that this piece alone would have paid for the armor and weapons for every member of their expedition combined.

Considering all the money that adventurers spent every time they set foot in the Dungeon, it was difficult to believe that anyone would leave that behind.

"Well, then, what happened?"

"*Something* was here. Something strong enough to kill Cadmus. Not adventurers."

Silence fell.

The Amazonian twins closed their mouths. Aiz stared at her reflection in the shiny gold hide on the ground next to her knee.

Lefiya gritted her teeth and rubbed her arms. She was the only one to physically express what everyone was feeling.

“…I’ve got a bad feeling. Let’s move it.”

No one was about to object to Tione’s order.

They collected the Cadmus Hide, as well as a piece of a melting tree to help explain to Finn what they had seen. Lefiya took a few containers out of her backpack, dipped one into the spring, and procured the water.

Normally, the dragon would have fought tooth and nail to protect its precious spring water. Trying to take that water away from it should have been extremely hazardous work. Except this time, the dragon wasn’t here.

The quest was over in a flash. Lefiya had collected more than enough of the liquid to satisfy their client. She didn’t know what to think as she closed the last of the containers and returned them to her backpack.

“Looks like we didn’t have to split the party after all.”

“True…”

The adventurers left the room. Going back the way they’d come, Lefiya forced a smile as she tried to lighten the mood. Aiz seemed to be deep in thought; her gaze was focused on the path ahead as she spoke.

The Amazonian twins were leading the way and trying their best to figure out what they had just seen.

“So…what’s your take?”

“The only thing that would make sense is another monster, but…”

Tione let her words hang.

Cadmus was an extremely rare monster that had been strong enough to contend with a floor boss, as well as act as the guardian of the springs.

Therefore, it was the strongest monster on the fifty-first floor. Actually, if all

Monster Rexes were taken out of the equation, it was one of the strongest monsters known to man.

Even swarms of black rhinos and deformis spiders wouldn't stand a chance.

…An Irregular.

Aiz listened to the two sisters' conversation and suddenly remembered a word that she'd heard her god use.

They advanced a little bit farther until—

"—GAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

It came out of nowhere.

A bloodcurdling scream that could've come out of the deepest pits of hell reached Aiz's battle party.

It brought forth gruesome images of someone in immense pain. The echoes bounced off the walls in all directions, assaulting their eardrums from every possible angle. The four women instantly took off toward it because that scream sounded familiar.

"That voice!"

"Raul…!"

They followed the sound as best they could; everything else was luck.

Every monster that happened to be in their path was cut down in its tracks or thrown out of the way as the adventurers raced through the square intersections. That is, until something major appeared at the other side of a long hallway.

"What *is* that?!"

"A-a caterpillar…?!"

Aiz's golden eyes narrowed as Tiona's and Lefiya's voices sounded behind her.

It was a massive beast of a monster.

Its long body was a faded yellowish green. However, there were several brilliantly colored spots and patterns that symbolized natural poison in animals.

Lefiya's guess was based on the countless "legs" jutting out of its snakelike lower body. It truly looked like an oversize caterpillar. Many thin flaps—arms, most likely—jutted out from each side of the mountainous lump of an upper body that seemed to be at the front of a fat snake. Each of the flaps had four slits at the end, resembling fingers.

Aiz and her companions had ventured deep into the Dungeon many times, and yet none of them had ever seen this monster before.

—A new species?

The monster undulated its body. At its crest, the waves reached four meders high—high enough to hit the ceiling and send chunks of it crashing to the floor. At the same time, it was wide enough to all but block off the narrow hallway. Aiz watched it move for a moment and couldn't help but think it resembled an armored chariot.

"General?!"

Just in front of the charging beast, running for their lives, were Finn and the rest of team two.

Top-class adventurers even stronger than Aiz or the Amazons had turned their backs to an enemy and were fleeing at top speed.

Tione called out to them in fright. "!"

But the first to move was Tiona.

Her eyes flashed as she dashed toward the oncoming monster.

She ran right past team two, determined to stop its advance herself.

"Tiona, don't!"

She didn't listen to Finn and picked up speed.

The beast saw her coming and raised the part of its body that must have served as its head and opened its mouth with a disgusting, slushy sound. The muscles of its upper body clenched for a moment before a massive stream of liquid shot out of its open jaws.

The speckled black and purple liquid looked like liquid marble as it hurtled

through the air. Tiona dodged it easily before spinning and plunging Urga directly into the beast's "chest."

"—!"

"?!"

The monster's high-pitched shriek would have shattered glass. At the same time, Tiona's eyes opened in surprise.

The same liquid that the monster spat up just a moment ago came gushing out of its open wound. The Amazon was able to whip her head out of the way in the nick of time.

Unfortunately, a strand of her hair wasn't so lucky—and with a hiss, it started *melting*.

A feeling of dread shooting through her veins, Tiona landed on the ground and immediately took off in the other direction.

"Huh…?!"

Tiona looked down at her weapon as soon as she reached the two teams and couldn't believe her eyes.

Half of Urga was missing.

No—half of Urga had melted away.

The liquid that filled the enemy monster's body was eating the metal as she ran.

What's more, the strand of hair right next to her ear, along with her beloved sword, was smoking. Tiona was lost for words as she watched them drip away before her very eyes.

The unthinkable had happened: Her weapon had been destroyed.

"—aaaiii!!"

The monster let out another shriek and launched even more of the liquid toward the adventurers.

Tiona had to quickly juke to the side to avoid it. Aiz and the others sidestepped out of the way of the droplets that made it that far out.

Hisssss. The line where the liquid hit erupted into black smoke as the floor started dissolving and melting away.

“No one told me about this! Why didn’t someone let me know?!”

“Finn tried, you dimwit!”

Tiona yelled at the top of her lungs as she fell into team two’s formation. Running alongside Bete, he was quick to snap at her.

Adventurers and the monster. Aiz, Tione, and Lefiya exchanged glances in silence before turning around and taking off as fast as they could.

A group of top-class adventurers forced to make an early exit. It was unthinkable, and yet it had come to pass.

“Just what *is* that, Finn?! This isn’t funny! My beautiful Urga!”

“I don’t know. They just showed up on us.”

Urga’s bubbling blade had dissolved almost all the way to the hilt, and black smoke that smelled like rotten flesh was all that was left of the weapon. Tiona ripped out the strands of hair that had been hit by the vile liquid as she and Finn exchanged words while on the run.

Their team had arrived at a different location within Cadmus Springs, beat back the dragon, and were on their way out when they were ambushed by a group of these strange beasts. However, all of their weapons were lost in the first few moments of combat and they were forced to withdraw.

That was Finn’s summary.

“What do you mean ‘they’? There’s more than one of that thing?!”

“Open your eyes, dammit! There’s a ton of those things behind the big one!”

“Gahhh.”

“General, was anyone hurt?”

“The three of us are okay. However, Raul is in bad shape. Took a direct hit of that stuff.”

“He’s gonna shuffle off the mortal coil if we can’t get some potions on him!”

Finn and Gareth, the latter carrying Raul's limp body over his shoulder, responded to Tione.

The young human's limbs swayed from side to side with the dwarf's strides. Even now, the same dark smoke and putrid smell rose from his body. "Uug… ahh…" He was only moaning, now too weak to scream out in pain. The man's light armor was almost gone, literally hanging by threads next to purple and black skin.

Every bit of color left Lefiya's face when she saw her ally's horrible condition.

"Huh, wait a second…That monster is attacking black rhinos?!"

Tiona looked over her shoulder and yelled at the top of her lungs.

The group had just passed an intersection. Large groups of black rhinos had emerged from both side paths and had the group of caterpillar monsters sandwiched in what should have been a death trap between walls of massive horns. However, the same purple liquid splashed over the attackers. The massive mouths of the caterpillar monsters then proceeded to swallow their assailants whole.

"Those monsters attack anything that moves, adventurers like us or other monsters, without hesitation."

"Does that mean they're not picky?"

"Hmm, I wonder. They don't appear to have standards, but…I have a feeling that they prefer other monsters."

Finn glanced over his shoulder and gave his opinion.

Tione looked down at the prum, his boyish blond hair waving as he ran. The Amazon quickly took a piece of tree bark out of the bag she was carrying.

"General, Cadmus Springs showed signs of a large-scale battle when we arrived. The Cadmus dragon had been turned to ash, drop items uncollected. This tree bark was in the same place."

"I see…That settles it. These things are strong enough to kill Cadmus."

Finn spoke as he took the tree bark from Tione and closely inspected it.

The piece of the tree had turned the same color as Raul's skin and had the same stench as what was left of Tiona's weapon. There was no question he had been exposed to the same liquid.

"A cannibal, of all things. Very fitting for a monster…"

"Coulda come up from a deeper level, or the Dungeon spat out a new breed of monster…I'm not wild about either of those." Bete couldn't hide his disgust as Gareth chimed in with his own theory about the beast's origin.

Heavy footsteps raced through a seemingly endless hallway with no exit in sight.

"Finn, can they be beaten?"

Aiz spoke for the first time.

The battle party fell silent; only their footsteps and the distant echoes of the massacre behind them could be heard.

Aiz was toward the front of the group. She looked back at Finn, running in the middle, and waited for his response.

"Physical attacks inflicted damage. However, we lose a weapon for each hit, just like what happened to Tiona. We can't fight like this."

"…"

"Facing a swarm of them would be near impossible," Finn continued. "Now, Magic, on the other hand…It might be difficult under these conditions, but if we can buy enough time for an incantation, a blast of powerful Magic *could* wipe them out…"

He fell silent.

Even before his mouth closed, every set of eyes went to one particular person in their party. Even Raul, with one foot in the grave, raised his head just enough to look at her.

This surge of attention hit Lefiya like a stone wall. "Huh? *Whaa?*" Her face jerked from side to side, looking at her allies.

"Company arriving from the front!"

Sure enough, flowing pale-green bodies could be seen at the other end of the hallway.

Finn started issuing orders as soon as Tiona sounded the alarm.

“Everyone, turn right into that hall, now!”

Changing direction, everyone took the last option available for escape.

This new hall was not wide enough for them to run side by side as a group. Shifting to a single-file line, the adventurers raced down this new path.

“Tione, how is your stock of weapons and items?”

“Er…ah! Nothing has been lost. With the exception of Tiona’s weapon, everything’s still here.”

“Good. Give Gareth and Bete some weapons. The room up ahead is a dead end. Take Raul to the very back and heal him with potions.”

The fifty-first floor of the Dungeon was as expansive as any city. However, their prum general didn’t need a map. He had already memorized every inch of it. Admiring her commander’s knowledge, Tione immediately followed his orders.

Finn’s group had lost all of its spare items and weapons the moment that Raul was hit by the corrosive liquid. Therefore, the Amazon took spare weapons and items out of the large backpack that Lefiya was carrying.

“Hey, what the hell ya want me to do with this?! They’re gonna melt anyway!”

Bete awkwardly took hold of a Kukri knife, a weapon he’d never used before, and snarled in frustration.

Finn licked the base of his thumb and held it at shoulder level.

“My thumb is shaking.—Most likely, *they’re coming*.”

The dead end came into view as Finn mumbled those meaningful words.

The group emerged into a square room with no other exit.

The moment everyone got inside, the walls on three sides—directly in front, as well as on the left and right—started *cracking*.

“!!”

The other adventurers turned pale.

All of them had far too much experience not to know what those cracks meant. Monsters were about to be born from the Dungeon wall.

Many of them. In moments, there wasn’t a flat surface on any of the walls in the room.

A monster party.

That was the term for when a large number of monsters was born in one place. They were about to be surrounded on three sides. This kind of event haunted the dreams of all adventurers, and it was one of the Dungeon’s craftier gimmicks.

As if the labyrinth itself had been planning it all along, the trap had been sprung.

“Bete, Gareth, Tiona! Protect those two at the back, and take down as many as you can! Aiz and I will face the new breed. —Attack!”

Finn issued commands as if he’d seen the trap coming.

Thanks to that, there was no confusion when his allies sprang into action, forming a protective wall around their injured supporter and engaging the enemy directly.

Their movements were refined, coordinated.

More than thirty black rhinos emerged from the walls, roaring as they stood for the first time. Pieces of the Dungeon wall flew through the air in every direction, shattering.

“Lefiya, stay behind us and start your spell. You are vital to this battle, so hurry.”

“…! Yes, sir!”

Lefiya understood the importance of her role and nodded to Finn before getting into position.

Her dark blue eyes clouded with doubt for a moment. The elf quickly shut

them tight and shook her head from side to side. When they opened again, there was no sign of uncertainty.

Finn didn't look at her as he walked up beside the blond human girl.

"Aiz."

"I know." Aiz nodded, making eye contact with the prum.

The entrance to the room started to shake in front of them. Suddenly, one feminine voice cut through the air:

"Awaken, Tempest."

Her magic activated at the sound of her short spell.

"Airiel."

Wind blew.

Air currents strong enough for the eye to see surrounded Aiz like the loose clothing of a dancer.

The girl's shiny blond hair rode the currents, flowing in every direction.

Airiel.

Aiz's one and only magic spell.

It had the ability to increase attacking power and speed, as well as protect its owner by generating wind. Her magic provided a skill boost, an enchantment.

Feeling the normally still air of the Dungeon coursing around her, Aiz unhooked the sword attached to her waist. Rather than removing it from its sheath, she held it out to her commander. "Finn."

"A Durandal, huh…I'm not doubting you, but you think it will work?"

"Maybe…"

"Can't count on that."

Finn drily chuckled as he took Desperate from Aiz and handed her a spare longsword.

Aiz spun it around, twisting her wrists a few times before pointing it directly forward. That was the exact moment when the large, chariot-like body of the

caterpillar monster appeared at the entrance to the room.

“—!!” The monster let out an earth-shattering shriek as it turned its eyeless face toward the two adventurers in its way.

The large slash in its chest was still leaking the purple liquid as it lumbered its sickening body forward. Black smoke emerged from the floor wherever the splatter happened to land.

It was the same monster that had destroyed Tiona’s weapon, the massive one.

“Don’t try to do too much if the wind doesn’t protect you. Remember, all you need to do is buy time for Lefiya, that’s it.”

“Yes.”

“I’d say good luck, but I don’t think you need it.”

More and more of the green caterpillars were piling into the room, like an avalanche of mucus.

Their body sizes came in a wide variety. The big one towered over everything, but some of the monsters were barely tall enough to look Finn in the eyes.

Tiona’s group had already engaged the black rhinos. Even amid the intense clashes of horns on metal, *hyunn*, the flick of Aiz’s sword cut through the din.

The wind shook.

“—I’m going ahead.”

She kicked off the floor.

The girl’s body disappeared in a deafening howl of wind.

The enchantment allowed her to move even faster than normal.

A veritable hurricane accompanied Aiz as she headed straight for the enemy monsters.

“!”

Only the largest of the group was able to react to this new threat in time.

It opened its massive jaws and spewed out a stream of the dark purple liquid

at the oncoming attacker. However, the girl didn't alter her path.

Aiz swung the blade into a wide, rising arc.

The wind shielded her, flicking the liquid harmlessly off to the side.

The previously unblockable attack had been wiped away by a silver streak.

"—"

Striking distance.

Slicing the frontline monsters while dodging oncoming streams of the corrosive liquid, Aiz halted their advance using the wind from her sword strikes to funnel the streams into one spot.

The lumps of flesh at the front of the caterpillar monsters slid into pieces. Protected by the layer of flowing wind, Aiz's longsword didn't succumb to the splatters of her enemies. The wind surrounding her body also shielded her from the backlash. Her enchantment provided her with a simultaneous attack and defense.

The girl's golden eyes narrowed.

Her right arm was a blur, her blade tearing through everything in her path.

—Aiz Wallenstein.

The blond-haired, golden-eyed girl whose name was already known as that of one of the strongest adventurers around.

A female knight of the Labyrinth City, Orario, she was a top-class adventurer in every sense of the word.

Her title: Kenki, the Sword Princess.

"—?!"

A merciless series of slashes.

A mixture of blinding speed and deadly accuracy, she proceeded to cut down every monster with no hesitation.

The monsters who felt her blade let out a dying shriek as torrents of the marble-patterned liquid poured out of their wounds.

Suddenly, all the defeated monsters' pale-green bodies started pulsing as if their nervous systems had lost control of the muscles in their bodies. Until, BANG!

"Incoming!"

"OOOOOOOOOOO?!"

Every dying caterpillar monster exploded, showering the area in an acid rain.

The forward adventurers managed to dodge the liquid, but the explosions caught Tiona's group off guard. Luckily, they retreated just enough that their black rhino assailants inadvertently shielded them from the splash. The monsters yelled out in excruciating agony before collapsing to the ground.

"Well, well, these things turn into bombs after taking lethal damage." Finn sighed before charging the caterpillar monsters himself.

His first opponent was a midsize monster. Its pile of an upper body leaned forward, stretching out its flat arms—its shape reminiscent of the body of a stingray—in an attempt to knock the prum off his feet. Finn used his small frame to easily dodge the attack.

Protective battle cloth tied around his waist swished outward as he ducked low and drew Aiz's Desperate from its sheath. Then he jumped up, guiding the blade through his opponent.

"Good, this'll work."

Finn ignored the monster's cries. Instead, his eyes were locked on the blade of the weapon as it split the beast in two.

Desperate's silver blade was coated in the purple liquid and smoking like everything else that came in contact with the creature's secret weapon. However, it was intact. Finn grinned, realizing that the blade truly was a "Superior." Superiors were a class of weapon forged by High Smiths, giving it a unique characteristic or ability. Shifting his focus back to the battle, *Loki Familia*'s field general jumped into the fray.

Finn set his sights on the caterpillar monster's vulnerable appendages. Two, three legs went flying.

Half of its balance gone, the wormy beast fell to the ground.

Even though Finn couldn't keep up with Aiz and her magically enhanced state, he was still remarkably agile and extremely intelligent—not a single movement was wasted. His fighting style was the result of constantly having to defeat larger foes using technique and courage.

If they exploded on death, immobilizing them was a far better strategy. The prum zipped around the battlefield, completely focused on his mission.

"!"

Elsewhere, Aiz was speeding up.

Thanks to Airiel, she could deliver two slashes in the time it normally took to make one. Enemies were literally falling to pieces in her wake.

The monster's Defense was no match for her magic-enhanced blade. With Aiz protected by a layer of constantly moving wind, the monsters were occasionally showered in their own acid by the air currents.

But more importantly, she was moving so fast that the monsters didn't have time to line up an attack.

They lost track of her for a moment, flat arms outstretched after missing their target. Next thing the beasts knew, searing pain was boring into their bodies.

The blond girl was nothing more than a momentary shadow, too quick for any of them to follow.

"Aiz!"

"!"

Finn was charging in from the front of the largest monster of the swarm. Aiz quickly changed direction and they pincered the beast from two directions at once.

The prum went low, knocking the creature off balance, as Aiz came in high from behind.

Her blade made contact with the creature's upper body, plunging deep and tearing through its insides until it hit something promising.

Her strike had broken the magic stone inside the beast. It instantly crumbled into a pile of ash.

“Stay with me, Raul!”

“Nah, it’s too late for me, Miss Tione. I’m a goner, doomed.”

“If that’s true, I’ll finish you off now! The general needs my help—I can’t be wasting time on a dead man!”

“No! Please don’t kill me…!”

Tione had been working hard, using every potion and antidote the group had to keep Raul alive. The young human was on his back, suddenly pleading with her as the Amazon nervously surveyed the battlefield.

At long last, the flood of monsters coming into the room seemed to be leveling off.

Aiz and Finn were holding the line, overpowering each individual monster, but the number of enemies wasn’t decreasing. It was too early to relax.

There was a limit to how long they could hold off the green avalanche. Their room would be overrun if they allowed the battle to continue.

“Proud warriors, marksmen of the forest. Take up your bows to face the marauders. Answer the call of your kin and nock your arrows.”

A good distance away from Aiz and Finn, Lefiya was in the middle of her spell.

Her eyes burned with a sense of purpose. Of course, there was a hint of fear. But her mind was focused on the words of a girl she admired.

—Save us if we get in trouble, okay?

She could not falter. They were depending on her; now was her time.

They were in trouble, and her magic was going to save them.

Her voice strong and steady, Lefiya knew what she had to do.

“Bring forth the flame, torches of the forest. Release them, flaming arrows of the fairies.”

A magic circle appeared at her feet, glowing stronger with each syllable of her

spell.

There was more to a Status than basic abilities. Advanced Abilities were derived from it as well, like “Conjure.”

When an adventurer with high Magic ability ranked up, there was a chance they might unlock a new skill that dramatically increased their magic output. Magic strength, range, and Mind efficiency increased with the ability Conjure. The magic circle at Lefiya’s feet was proof of her skill as a mage, and of her Advanced Ability.

More and more rings forming complex designs emerged within her magic circle.

Lefiya’s beauty was illuminated by the pale golden light bursting forth from beneath her.

“Fall like rain, burn the savages to ash.”

Her spell complete, volatile magic energy coursed through her entire body.

Lefiya raised her head and called out to her allies:

“I’m ready!”

The whole room lit up at the same moment as her call. The only spot that was still shaded was a small circle around Tione and Raul behind her.

Making sure that Aiz, Finn, and the rest of her allies had time to retreat, the elf rose her staff high into the air and triggered her magic.

“Fusillade Fallarica!”

Countless flaming streaks rained down on their enemies.

Every monster in the room was pierced by many of the burning shots and caught fire. Their cries were drowned out by the deafening roar of the inferno that now encompassed the entire room. Arrows that missed their targets buried themselves deep in the walls and floor, creating a flaming fence to prevent their escape.

Tens of thousands of bolts kept falling from the ceiling, resulting in a sea of flames. The room was overtaken by red and orange light and inundated with

scorching heat.

There was nothing left of the black rhinos or caterpillar monsters when the flames died down, not even ash.

“See, I told you it would work! Ka-boom! One shot! You’re amazing, Lefiya!”

“A-all I did was focus all of my Mind, so…”

“Too damn flashy—you, Riveria, and every other elf……Singed my fur, damn it!”

“Ga-ha-ha! That’s better! Almost in the clear!”

Tiona, Bete, and Gareth came back into the room, forming a protective triangle around their allies. They quickly dispatched the few monsters that managed to get close enough to Lefiya to avoid the flames.

The enemies gone, Tiona continued singing Lefiya’s praises as Aiz and Finn came back inside.

“…Thank you, Lefiya.”

“Ah…You’re welcome!”

Aiz wore her usual aloof expression, but her lips were unmistakably softer than usual.

Even the small smile was enough to catch the elf off guard. But a moment later, tears of joy welled up in her dark blue eyes.

Just for that moment, the adventurers enjoyed the taste of victory.

“…”

“General? What’s wrong?”

Tione approached a silent Finn, careful to avoid the glowing sparks still on the floor.

She could see Raul, still breathing and rubbing his stomach, out of the corner of her eye.

“Before we escaped into this room…we were in a hallway that connects directly to the fiftieth floor. Since the monsters came at us from the front…”

“…Oh, no.”

“I might be worried about nothing, but…I can’t take that risk.”

Once again, Finn looked down at his right thumb.

Pressing his tongue against it, he looked back up at Tione with fearful eyes.

“Gather the others. We’re returning to camp at full speed.”



A steep, rocky hill connected level fifty-one to level fifty.

There was a hole at the base of the western cliff on the fiftieth floor of the Dungeon. It sloped down at the same angle all the way to the next floor. Adventurers on their way to floor fifty-one could hop and bound their way down, but the return trip was much more difficult.

What made this trip particularly ominous for *Loki Familia* was the trail of dark-purple smoking spots surrounded by pale-green residue. None of the adventurers bothered using their hands as they scaled the cliffs in no time.

Distant sounds of battle greeted them as soon as they emerged from the hole.

“The camp…!” Tiona said in disbelief as the group made their way through the ash-covered forest.

Picking up speed, the group made it past the tree line.

“Riveria? Everyone?!”

Vast plains opened in front of them. The only noticeable topography was a decent-size hill with a solid rock face. However, a parade of pale-green bodies was making its way straight up.

Facing down the onslaught at the top of the hill were Riveria and the rest of their company, trying to take shelter from the purple liquid being spat in their direction.

They were able to find some protection on the crest of the hill, but the area was already littered with smoking weapons and shields, deteriorating by the second.

“Archers, loose!”

“This is the last volley!”

“Irrelevant—loose!”

At Riveria’s command, every archer leaned over the crest of the hill and shot their arrows straight down at the oncoming monsters. The arrows that hit instantly dissolved in the liquid that spewed forth from their wounds, but the impacts made the creatures lose their grip on the rock and fall onto other monsters farther down. Several of the beasts fell to their deaths on the ground below.

“There’s still this many…?!”

“At least they haven’t surrounded the camp.”

Lefiya squealed in fright. Finn calmly assessed the situation next to her.

The caterpillar monsters didn’t appear to be very intelligent—all they did was stay in the tracks of the larger ones in a massive game of follow-the-leader. Riveria led the members of the expedition who’d stayed behind in a last-ditch effort to halt their advance.

“!”

Seeing her friends in danger, Aiz rushed forward.

Dashing through the still grasses of the plains, she picked an angle that would set her on a collision course with the side of the parade.

She activated her Magic and drew her sword in the same motion while on the run.

“Aiz?!”

The sound of her first slash reverberated through the air as one of the monsters was sliced in half.

Riveria called out to her from the crest of the hill. The other adventurers looked down, seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. They had hope again.

They watched as the girl practically dove into enemy ranks, their limbs and purple acid erupting like fireworks a second later.

“I’m goin’!”

“Right behind you!”

“Sorry, General!”

Bete, Tiona, and Tione followed suit.

The slower Lefiya and Raul tried their best to keep up.

“Finn…”

“There’s no point trying to stop them now. Gareth, protect Lefiya and Raul as best you can.”

“Aye, can do.”

Finn realized that trying to stop the younger members of their group who’d broken formation without orders was futile.

However, at the same time, he didn’t have a problem with it.

Experience was the best teacher when it came to the Dungeon. Precise planning and coordinated movements gave adventurers the largest possibility of returning to the surface alive, except in special circumstances like this one. Trying to rein in their fire at this point would do more harm than good.

The young ones were charging forward on pure emotion. Perhaps by issuing one hundred orders, he could manipulate the battle into something more efficient, more precise, by force.

Of course, he was still worried that the young ones—who had yet to master the art of control—might go overboard.

Finn brought his train of thought to a close as he watched his allies plunge into the enemy line, and he drew a sword.

“A counterattack is in order.”



Aiz’s attack plunged into the parade of monsters like a wedge through a log. The course of battle shifted thanks to her.

Seeing their brethren fall to her blade, monsters farther up the hill turned to

face her. A pale-green wave charged down the hill in an effort to overwhelm the female knight.

Bete and the Amazons rushed to her aid. Another blast of magic from Lefiya fell on the monsters' line, and their group dissolved into chaos.

The monsters would attack anything they didn't recognize. The adventurers were now engaged in an unorganized free-for-all.

Friend mixed with foe; from a distance, the battle looked like a barroom brawl.

"Hey, any weapons left?"

Handily dodging monster attacks with acrobatic spins and jumps, Tiona made it to the crest of the hill and called out to the supporters.

Her allies responded within the span of one breath.

"Y-yes, we do!"

"Then get me a spear, a spear! Make it two!"

"Y-yes ma'am!"

As asked, a supporter drew two weapons from the crates and threw them toward Tiona. The Amazon snatched both spears out of the air with a grin on her face.

Holding one of the three-meder weapons in each hand, Tiona charged into battle with renewed vigor.

"Yoo-hoo! Hey, uglies, over here!"

She ran directly between two of the larger beasts, taunting them the whole way.

The caterpillar monsters took aim at the bizarrely cheerful girl and spat their acid.

"Too slow!"

"—!!"

Handily dodging the purple acid, Tiona watched as the beasts screamed out in

pain. They'd missed her and hit each other by accident.

Monsters were everywhere. Every time one of the beasts spat out the purple liquid, it was far more likely to hit one of its own kind rather than its target.

Very pleased with the results of her little experiment, Tiona grinned as she plunged her spears deep into the bodies of the survivors.

"Here I come—!!"

She put her whole body into the attack.

Both of the weapons quickly pierced the hides of the large monsters, striking with such force that their little legs left the ground.

The backsplash from their wounds couldn't reach her at this distance. Tiona felt a crack at the end of each long haft as the blades of each weapon made contact with the magic stones inside her opponents. Their bodies immediately turned to ash.

"Who's next?" Discarding what was left of the dissolving pieces of wood, Tiona quickly moved on to find her next target.

About twenty of the monsters had fallen.

Landing on the ground with a soft thud, Aiz looked over her corner of the battlefield. Piles of ash and the exploded remains of their green bodies dotted the smoking landscape. Large puddles of their purple acid oozed their way deeper into the ground. *Skid.* A noise came from behind her.

She turned around in time to see Bete come to a stop, his gray tail and fur flowing in his wake.

"Hey, Aiz. Gimme some of that wind."

"…"

Understanding what the werewolf meant without being told, Aiz looked down at his legs.

Metallic boots came up to his knees. However, they were not designed for protection. They were sleek, extremely sharp weapons made from incredibly durable material. A large yellow jewel was embedded in each shin.

Aiz gracefully reached out toward the boots.

“Go, wind.”

The air current shifted on her command and was immediately absorbed by the yellow jewels. They started to glow as a new air current flowed around the silver weapons.

The same kind of fluctuating aura that surrounded Aiz now came from Bete’s legs as well.

A second-tier Superior made by *Hephaistos Familia*: “Frosvirt.”

This Superior had the ability to absorb external magical energy and temporarily use it to enhance the already immense destructive power of the metal boots.

It was all thanks to that legendary metal used to construct them, mythril.

Now that they had absorbed Aiz’s magic, Bete obtained the power of wind.

“Thanks.”

The handsome features of his wild face morphed into a bloodthirsty smile that could rival Tiona’s.

Whoosh! Bete launched himself toward the closest monster with the wind at his back.

“I’ll *kick their freakin’ heads in*!”

Suddenly several meders into the air, the werewolf brought his bladed heel straight down on top of his target.

He tore the monster apart from the center of its eyeless face, and the wind enchantment parted the explosion of acid safely away from him, as it did for Aiz’s sword. The enemy’s secret weapon could be countered.

Bete was already onto the next caterpillar, venting all of his frustration through his powerful legs.

Pieces of the creatures flying everywhere, Bete roared victoriously from the center of the debris.

The last Kukri knife dissolved in a cloud of smoke.

"…"

Dodging the stream of acid, Tione landed safely on the ground and reached behind her back. But there was nothing for her to grab.

Her personal stock of throwing knives was now zero. She was unarmed.

Damn these things…

The Amazon glared at the monsters, frustrated that they could take so much punishment.

Inflicting a fatal wound on one of the beasts required her to sacrifice at least one of her knives. Unfortunately, the blades were not long enough to sever their limbs, making Finn's strategy impossible. The injured monsters chased her, squealing an annoyingly high-pitched scream and spewing purple liquid from their open wounds. Now Tione had no way to shut them up, and that irritated her beyond belief.

She tried outmaneuvering them, spinning out of the way of their acid attacks so that they took one another out. Now she was nauseous on top of her headache from the squeals. She caught a few glimpses of the uncivilized Bete kicking monsters into oblivion with a smile on his face. Aiz knew how to show respect, but the werewolf simply annoyed Tione. What she wouldn't give to bury her foot in his face.

At any rate, she had a decision to make. Arm herself with an unfamiliar weapon and protect the mages or try casting her own magic for once.

"Tsk." She snapped her tongue and let her instincts take over. "Such a pain in the ass!"

Her face morphed as though turning into someone else entirely.

The Amazonian warrior within her had emerged. Tione bull-rushed straight into the closest monster—and thrust her right fist into its chest with a massive uppercut.

Boom! The monster's skin ruptured, the impact reverberating through the air.

Her arm was instantly covered with the purple marble-like liquid inside the monster's body that was squirting out from the wound. Every bit of Tione's

wheat-colored skin started smoking. The piece of fabric that kept her voluptuous chest bound melted almost immediately and fell to the ground.

She couldn't have cared less. Her eyes flashed with rage as she plunged her arm even deeper into the caterpillar monster. Its squeal of pain reached a higher pitch as Tione found the hard spot she was looking for. Grabbing hold, *snap snap snap*, she pulled it out of the monster's body.

Convulsing and screaming in agony, the caterpillar beast turned to ash before her eyes.

The black smoke emerging from her own body getting thicker by the moment, Tione repeated the same technique three more times on her remaining targets.

Personal safety and her own pain were the last things on her mind as she tore the monsters apart with her bare hands.

"Ti-Tione…"

"…Lefiya, any elixirs left?"

Tione looked no better than a walking pile of mud by the time she met up with Lefiya.

The Amazon had taken splash after splash of the acid head-on. Her normally beautiful black hair was in shambles, chunks missing or dripping down her back. What had been healthy, tanned skin just moments ago had turned purple and black, still bubbling from the acid.

The girl's right eye was swollen shut, so she made eye contact with the elf using her left. Lefiya's face was white as a ghost as she hastily took a small vial of elixir out of the pouch at her waist, opened it, and doused Tione with all her might.

"Tione!"

"General…"

Finn ran up to the two girls.

Tione brushed off as much of the acid as she could while the two showered her with enough elixir to bring back her original skin tone. Only after noticing the look of anger in Finn's eyes did she turn away in embarrassment. Her fully

exposed bosom jiggled as she shifted, blushing.

It was rare for Finn to get hot under the collar. Taking a deep breath, he sighed and got his emotions under control.

“Don’t be reckless.”

“Ah…”

Finn undid the knots holding a waistcloth to him and practically shoved it into Tione’s arms.

“Hide them,” he said as he jerked his head toward her chest.

Tione’s face turned even redder as she wrapped the cloth around herself.

“General…”

“We’ll discuss this later. Be prepared for what’s coming.”

“Yes, sir…!”

Tione gazed at him with the intense eyes of an infatuated maiden. Finn turned his back on her, sighing deeply again as he massaged his temple. Lefiya inched away from the Amazon after seeing the full exchange a little too up close and personal.

“How can Miss Tione…How can she still stand after all that juice…?”

“Ya just lack spirit, boy.”

“S-sorry…”

“Ha! Back fer more, I see.”

Gareth and Raul happened to witness the conversation from afar. The human was quick to apologize after uttering his comments in disbelief. Gareth had been protecting him during the fight, wielding a war hammer heavy enough to shake the ground on impact like it was nothing more than a kitchen mallet. Their brief reprieve was over as more of the pale-green monsters approached them. The dwarf’s hammer had been embedded in the floor, handle pointed skyward. Gareth plucked it from the ground and turned to face their attackers.

This weapon had been thrown to him by the supporters on top of the hill. Balancing its enormous weight over his shoulder, the dwarf let his cape flow as

he turned and brought down the hammer.

“NuAHH!!”

He slammed it into the ground at a forward angle. The surface of the plain shattered and the momentum of the impact sent debris into the oncoming monsters.

It was a technique that only physically powerful dwarves could pull off. The larger chunks slammed into the caterpillars, while the smaller ones carved long slices down their bodies.

“Harbinger of the end, white snow. Gust before the twilight.”

The melodies of many spells overlapped above the battlefield.

A group of elves had gathered on the crest of the rock-faced hill overlooking the plains scarred by combat. They were preparing to launch *one massive blast*.

“Fading light, freezing land. Blow with the power of the third harsh winter—My name is Alf!”

Riveria stood at the front, ready to trigger her magic. The mages behind her finished their enchantments one after another. Many magic circles overlapped as Riveria called out to her allies below. “Evacuate immediately.”

Top-class adventurers broke away from battle and ran from the area like baby spiders trying to escape the sun.

“Wynn Fimbulvetr!!”

Waves of fierce magical power stormed down over the plains.

Ice, fire, electricity. Various types of offensive magic mercilessly carved up anything in their way.

The acid-spewing monsters were blown to pieces or burned into nothingness. Explosions filled the land as the magical power reached its zenith.

“How’d you like that!” “Did you see?!” came the voices of young mages as they watched the devastation unfold below. Riveria had a different reaction from her young female allies’: a long sigh of relief.

Their camp had sustained considerable damage only hours before. They had

lost a lot of supplies and energy, but worst of all they had lost most of their weapons and armor to an unstoppable acid attack they were seeing for the first time. They'd saved what they could, but their stocks were almost empty.

If Riveria had not been there to control the situation—or to contribute to the battle herself—there was no doubt the Expedition party wouldn't have stood a chance.

"To think protecting the camp would be so dangerous…" she muttered to herself under her breath.

"In any case, they've all been dealt with…"

She surveyed the battlefield from her spot on the crest of the hill.

Their magic attack had been the final blow. Aiz and the others were quick to dispatch the badly injured survivors. Just like Finn, watching her allies take so many risks in battle made Riveria's head hurt. However, he was in charge. Their actions were his problem, not hers.

Still, what were those beasts…?

Loki Familia's supporters, who had dragged the cargo boxes out of camp under heavy duress and supplied the forward groups with weapons, were happily embracing and celebrating the victory. Riveria was so deep in thought that she didn't notice them.

Judging by how Aiz and the others fought, they, too, had encountered the same monsters on level fifty-one. A new species of monster and an ambush at the relatively secure "safe point"…Riveria felt that *something* major was about to occur…She quickly shook her head. No amount of thinking would solve this problem. She had other priorities at the moment.

The wounded needed to be attended to, and the battlefield needed to be searched for drop items, among other things. Riveria was about to turn on her heel—when her jade eyes suddenly caught something in the distance.

"What is that…?"

Her strong yet feminine lips mouthed those words before she could stop them.



“All done!”

Aiz’s sword pierced the remaining survivor. Only the adventurers were still moving on the devastated plains.

Tiona celebrated the victory by calling out to Aiz and pumping her fist in the air. The blond girl released her enchantment and looked down at the sword in her grasp.

Finn still carried her weapon of choice. The weapon he’d given her as a replacement looked like little more than something pulled out of the scrap heap. The combination of Aiz’s skill with the sword and Airiel had been too much for the blade to take. It would have broken on the next strike had the battle gone on any longer.

That was the only downside to the girl’s fighting style—it was difficult to find weapons and armor that could keep up with her.

Ignoring the twinges of pain and fatigue throughout her body, Aiz went about her business as usual, her expression as aloof as ever.

“Tough little bastards…Think everyone who stayed behind’s okay?”

“Oh? What’s this, Bete? Worried about Riveria and our supporters? That’s a first!”

“Shut it. If they didn’t hold their ground, we can’t get out of here! Don’t go getting the wrong idea!”

Tiona and Bete’s argument finally broke the tension as everyone started to relax.

While Tione stood beside Finn, Raul almost tumbled forward when Gareth smacked him on the shoulder, and Lefiya had a smile on her face. Everyone’s expressions became softer as they basked in the glory of a job well done.

Aiz glanced back at the rocky hill before surveying the area one last time. She was about to turn away.

That’s when it appeared.

“—!”

The thing announced its presence.

It advanced through the ash forest, breaking tree after tree. The echoes were still far away but getting louder.

Everyone's eyes immediately snapped in that direction. The adventurers armed themselves; the relaxed atmosphere disappeared in an instant.

The echoes reached them like the trees were screaming out in pain. However, the creature could be seen only from the crest of the hill. Riveria and the mages stood in stunned silence, watching anxiously as the adventurers on the plains scrambled into formation.

They didn't know how long they waited.

If it had been much longer, they might not have stuck around.

Finally, the adventurers on the plains saw the beast emerge from the tree line.

"…Did that come up from below, too?"

"Destroying everything in its path…Probably?"

"Don't be stupid…"

Everyone but the Amazonian twins was too stunned to speak.

The creature had to be at least six meders tall.

What's more, it was at least twice as big as the largest of the monsters they had been fighting against.

Its body was the same pale, yellowish green with long, flat arm flaps. Most of its body was the same shape as the caterpillar monsters, with the exception of one big difference.

"Is that a person…?"

The caterpillar-like lower body was no different from the others'. However, instead of a mountainous lump of flesh on the front end, there was a distinctly human torso and head leading the charge.

Four arms, two on each side, their shape resembling the bodies of stingrays or perhaps folding fans. They were flatter than flat, as though they had no

thickness at all, and seemed to glide through the air as it moved. Long tendrils as thick as snakes whipped from side to side on the back of its head.

Spots of bright colors covered its body like random splashes of paint. Some looked natural, but most seemed to be the remnants of whatever monsters had been on the receiving end of its poison.

The brightest spot was where eyes would have been on a human face. The curves of its human torso were distinctly female. Had the rest of the body not been a worm from the deepest pits of hell, it might have been attractive. Its belly didn't appear round enough to be pregnant, but the skin around it was pitch-black and pulsing.

"If we slew something that big…"

—An unfathomable amount of purple acid would flood the area.

Raul gawked at the monster large enough to be a floor boss, his eyes locked on the black pouch containing enough of the purple liquid to turn the rest of the plains into a bubbling swamp.

Thinking back to their previous battle, most of the badly injured monsters had exploded before they could be slain. If this monster did the same thing, the explosion might be powerful enough to utterly destroy everything on this floor.

Even if they managed to kill it, everything nearby would be in danger.

Visions of the devastation ran through everyone's heads.

Gareth adjusted his helmet, beady eyes looking out from deep within. "For that big one, I reckon we'll need to hit its magic stone nice an' clean."

"So where do we start stabbing, huh…?" Bete responded to his analysis with obvious sarcasm.

The beast completely emerged from the forest and came to a stop a good distance from the adventurers.

It looked something like an insectoid centaur or some kind of half-human, half-snake lamia monstrosity from the front.

The human head of the huge monster faced *Loki Familia* from across the smoldering plains.

“…”

The female monster made the first move.

Its four arm flaps opened wide, as though it were greeting its long-lost love.

Specks of light filled the air—not just reds and oranges but greens and blues as well.

Spores, or perhaps some kind of pollen. The swarm of color flowed across the plains.

A cold chill instantly shot up their spines.

All of the top-class adventurers immediately jumped backward.

A heartbeat later, millions of tiny explosions went off at once.

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!”

“GUhhh…!”

Lefiya felt the heat of the blast on her face as she screamed at the top of her lungs. Every blade of grass, every pile of ash, every remaining monster corpse went up in flames in an instant.

Those specks weren’t something as ordinary as pollen.

Every single speck of the multicolored cloud was a bomb.

Finn called out to his allies under the cover of the smoke and dirt that filled the air in the aftermath.

“All groups, full retreat!”

He gave the order.

The gazes of everyone else immediately shot to his location. Their leader, however, was focused completely on the female worm.

“Get back to camp; tell the others to take the bare minimum and get out of here.”

“C’mon, Finn! Are ya serious?!”

“Are we just going to ignore that thing?!”

Bete and Tione voiced their objections. Their pride as top-class adventurers and as members of the strongest Dungeon-crawling familia in Orario, *Loki Familia*, would not let them run away from this fight.

It had made its way to this safe point. What was to stop it from going even higher? There was no telling how many casualties other adventurers would suffer if that happened.

“I don’t like this any more than you do. But *we need to slay it* and do damage control at the same time. Easier said than done, I know.”

Finn knew the orders he had to give, but it pained him to do so.

He shook his head slightly before making eye contact with the blond-haired, golden-eyed girl.

“Aiz, take it down.”

The prum squared his shoulders to her and added, “Alone.”

“Think this over, sir!”

Lefiya’s voice shrieked before anyone else could respond.

Tiona and the others were about to argue when suddenly—*BOOM!*

The monster had already released another cloud.

The adventurers could see its shape moving through the smoke, countless legs shifting in tandem with its flat arms open wide.

“…There’s no time. Raul, go to Riveria and tell her to get everyone out of there!”

“Hey, wait, Finn! Why only Aiz?! I’ll go, too!”

“A woman protectin’ my ass? Aw, hell, no!”

“General, there has to be another way. Please reconsider.”

Tiona, Bete, and Tione braced themselves against the next round of explosions while trying to argue their point.

However, Finn silenced them.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. *Go.*”

He might have sounded calm, but his voice was laced with an undeniable power.

No one could go against this short blond prum.

Tiona and the others knew that once Finn flipped that switch, there was no turning back.

With reluctance and resentment on their faces, the young adventurers started to retreat.

“…A-at least allow me to support her!”

Lefiya, on the other hand, stayed behind to plead her case.

Her thin shoulder was grabbed from behind and her body was yanked away from Finn.

“Lefiya…It’s okay.”

“__”

Aiz stepped between them and gently pushed the elf back toward the camp.

It took a firm shove to get her to step back.

Aiz was too strong for her, and Lefiya stumbled.

“…”

She looked at the human girl for a moment, a tear running down her cheek, until finally she turned to follow the rest.

Aiz watched her leave for a few seconds before turning back to face the oncoming monster.

“Sorry, Aiz.”

“It’s fine.”

As the leader, Finn sometimes had to give unpopular orders. However, it was very rare for him to apologize for them.

Most likely, what he was ordering her to do right now conflicted with what he’d told her earlier that day. The disparity was eating away at him inside. That was why he took this opportunity, when the two of them were alone, to offer

an apology. In turn, Aiz understood his situation and shook her head from side to side.

If Finn said this was for the best, it was for the best. Tiona and the others knew it as well.

She was best suited for fighting against that monster.

“I’ll signal you once we’re clear. Buy us as much time as you can.”

“Understood.”

Finn quickly issued his final orders, and Aiz looked forward with vigor, knowing exactly what she had to do.

Taking Desperate back from Finn before charging, she raced across the battle-scarred plains, the only line of defense between the female caterpillar and her friends.

The beast’s many legs carved their way through the dirt. Its arm flaps waved. Stripes of bright colors slashed their way through the thinning smoke.

Aiz rushed toward her enemy with no hesitation and nary a sound.

Her golden eyes flashed. Then she whispered:

“Awaken, Tempest.”

She summoned the wind.

Shimm. Her weapon sang as it emerged from its sheath.

The female figure shook.

All of the monster’s senses locked onto Aiz as if responding to the wind. Its human torso shifted into position, following her movements.

A crack suddenly appeared in the middle of its smooth “face,” opening its jaws as wide as possible.

Its entire body contracted as it launched an incredible stream of liquid from its head with enormous pressure.

In terms of amount and speed, there was no comparison with the other caterpillar monsters. Aiz chose to evade it with a quick sidestep.

The roar of a waterfall overtook her a heartbeat later. The blast was powerful enough to carve a chunk out of the ground where she had been standing, before crashing into the rock hill not too far behind her.

The hill collapsed in on itself, the crest falling into a newly formed pit of the purple liquid. Black smoke rose from the bubbling pile as the hill continue to crumble.

If I don't lead it away…

Her first priority was exactly what Finn had ordered: to buy time for their retreat.

At the same time, she could lure the beast into some more advantageous terrain.

Luckily, the monster was focused on her. If she put some space between them, it should come after her—that was her train of thought.

She was only half right.

"!"

The creature crossed its four arms, making two *X*s in front of its chest before opening them as wide as it could.

Aiz couldn't believe her eyes as the creature released enough of its sparkling spores to block her view of the ceiling above.

"__"

The glinting multicolored cloud fanned out in all directions around her before descending.

Everything within range of the spores would be utterly destroyed. Aiz had been trying to only divert the monster's course up to that point and realized it was too late to completely dodge the cloud. Instead, she called on the wind enveloping her to form a shield.

That's when the spores all exploded at the same time.

The ground shook; more and more sonic booms assaulted her ears, each impact more powerful than the last. Aiz lost her balance for a moment as her

vision spun.

Bracing herself again, the girl felt her skin and light armor seared by the intense heat. She gritted her teeth and rode it out.

The explosions stopped. However, there was movement in the smoke. With a flash of pale green, the monster was coming.

“!”

Flat arms sliced through the air, clearly cutting the last of the smoke out of the way as it streaked toward her head.

A quick twist, duck, and back step allowed her to dodge three of the arms.

However, the monster’s fourth arm—one of the lower set of two—connected.

With the side of her blade, she managed to get into a defensive position at the last possible second. But the impact was so powerful that it sent her flying backward. Were it not for the wind’s protection, that hit could have crushed every bone in her body.

Her body spun once as it flew over the ravaged land. First her hand hit the ground. Bending her arm like a spring, she pushed off the ground and used the wind to land on her feet. She slid to a stop on top of the charred grass and took an offensive stance with Desperate in the same motion.

The beast had already started its next attack, another blast of the liquid. She brought her sword down into it with all of her strength.

The marble-patterned acid and silver blade collided with a bang.

The blade cut through the stream and, with the help of the wind, guided the flow around her.

It was awe-inspiring. One lone adventurer using a single sword to defend against the monster’s cannon-like acid attack.

The caterpillar’s female torso bent forward, trying to overwhelm the human with even more pressure. The girl’s golden eyes narrowed as she dug in her heels, but she didn’t falter.

The first to give up in this reverse tug-of-war was the monster. Cutting off the flow of acid, it roared menacingly at its prey. Aiz flicked her sword as the last of the liquid flew by her. Then she charged.

I can't give it any space!

It was indeed focused on her, but it couldn't be drawn.

The monster could turn the area to a burning wasteland if it were so inclined. It didn't have to chase Aiz to inflict damage.

The only safe place from its spore cloud, somewhere that the creature itself would get caught up in the blast, was right on top of it.

Finn and the others would have to manage on their own; she couldn't help them get any distance.

Therefore, Aiz focused completely on keeping the female caterpillar engaged in combat.

"!"

The creature dove toward the incoming human, its four arms poised and ready to attack.

Her theory was correct; the beast wasn't using its spores. Aiz deflected the creature's left arms with her blade and spun past the right. Her speed and agility allowed her to focus on a new target, the many little legs supporting it on the right side.

But the female caterpillar's reaction was just as fast. Its lower right arm swung down and intercepted her blade before it could hit flesh.

—No…no blind spots?

The creature used its deceptively high agility and long, flat arms to attack or defend from any angle around the front of its body. A great deal of large-category monsters had a weak point that could be exploited. Not this one.

Aiz continued to collect information on this new species while continuing to hack away.

"…!"

Focusing the power of Airiel's wind onto her blade, Aiz deflected another round of swipes from its arms.

The addition of the wind allowed her thin blade to repel the beast's surprisingly strong limbs. With her delicate frame and slender weapon, she would inspire many of the dwarves who fought as part of the wall in battle to faint from anxiety just watching her. But for her, she was using Magic enhancements in tandem with a Durandal. They made up for the obvious gap between her and the monster in terms of physical strength—and as a lone adventurer—to the point that her technique and skill were enough to do much more than just irritate the monster.

Through combat thus far, Aiz deduced that the pale-green front side of the arms had a very high Defense while the brilliantly colored underside was used to deploy spores. Once again, one of its slightly damaged arms blocked Desperate, protecting the softer flesh beneath as another one knocked away the weapon. The arms might have a limited range, but they packed so much punch that she could block only one hit at a time.

The two combatants traded blows over and over in a test of endurance.

The female caterpillar made another move to change the tide of battle.

"?!"

It happened when Aiz tried to get around the main body and strike the torso from behind.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the many tendrils growing out of its head come to life. All of them focused on her before opening wide and spewing more of the corrosive purple liquid.

—Eh, no fair!

A sneak attack from overhead.

The sheer amount of acid raining down on her was too much for the wind to deflect on its own. Slicing upward, she swept it out of the way.

However, she had to step backward to do so. The female caterpillar used this extra space to put its entire weight behind a double-armed swipe at the blond

girl.

The lower arm hit the sword at full speed, knocking Aiz backward and off her feet, while the upper arm rotated outward and released a small cloud of spores.

The area around the girl started to sparkle.

The cloud might have been small, but it was denser than any she'd seen up to that point. The creature was trying to finish her off.

Even the tendrils on top of its head were open, ready to shoot their acid in any direction to prevent her escape. Time seemed to stop.

"Go, wind."

The air currents that had been protecting her body expanded, blowing away the cloud.

The cloud seemed to hover in the air for a moment, a safe distance away from her, before exploding into brilliant red flames. All that reached her was a heat wave and a puff of air strong enough to make her land on the plain.

—The pollen spores explode after three seconds.

She'd seen the attack three times already.

There was a three-second window between the creature's arms flapping and the explosion. Meaning that she could reduce the amount of damage inflicted by blowing away spores within those three seconds. This was her familia's first encounter with this new breed of monster; she wasn't about to neglect her duties to collect information on it.

The wind magic–wielding Aiz was perfectly suited for combating this monster, and quite possibly its only threat.

Its unblockable corrosive acid and wide-range explosive spores were both attacks that would strike fear into the hearts of many adventurers. However, manipulating the wind rendered them both useless. That was why Finn had ordered her to face this monster alone—he'd already seen it in action.

Until finally, there was a pop and a hiss.

Aiz saw a flare travel through the sky, through the cloud of smoke

surrounding her.

The retreat was successful. *She had permission to slay the beast.*

She ignored her body's complaints and intensified the air currents.

Then, she leaned forward before launching herself toward her target.

"—"

The monster couldn't react in time.

Completely bypassing the beast's attempts to shield its right side, she angled her blade at the many little legs on the right side of its body and charged.

"?!"

Every single leg was severed. The female caterpillar fell to that side and tried to use two of its flat arms to stay upright.

Sever a leg and bring them to the ground. It was a popular strategy for taking on large-category monsters and floor bosses.

Aiz didn't stop there. Slamming down her foot, she reversed direction and used her wind to jump onto the monster's caterpillar-like back. Dashing to the torso, she separated the tendrils from its head in one clean slash. Then, using the same momentum, she spun like a top and brought down the sword through the creature's upper shoulder. One of its four flat arms fell to the ground.

Purple acid gushed forth from every wound. All the legs and tendrils instantly turned into deadly geysers of the corrosive liquid.

The severed arm on the ground started convulsing. Its connection to the brain gone, every muscle started firing on its own. That included the trigger mechanism for the spores. The air took on a familiar reddish glimmer.

Three seconds later, detonation.

"—aaaaiiiiiiaaaa?!"

The female caterpillar shrieked as it was enveloped in flames.

Every muscle still connected to the creature's brain contracted in pain.

Thump. Aiz landed a short distance from the beast caught in the center of the

inferno. It was time for her to deliver the final blow.

She jumped and spun high toward the ceiling over and over, carving arcs into the air every time she kicked off the ground as she put some space between her and the monster. She looked like a feather dancing in the wind from a distance. Her skirt fluttered with every movement, thighs flashing.

Finally, she landed on the remains of the rock hill.

Knees bent and feet locked onto a particularly strong boulder, her golden eyes focused on the massive cloud of smoke in the plains.

Blastoff.

Aligning the hurricane-type winds around her body, Aiz held her sword at shoulder level. She was focusing all of her magic onto one spot, becoming divine wind.

"—*Aiz*, come *on*! Yellin' out a skill's name makes it stronger, y'know?!" Loki had been trying to make a joke at the time, but Aiz had taken her seriously.

Quietly, her lips formed the words.

"Lil Rafaga."

Calling out the name of her finishing move, as instructed by her goddess, Aiz became the sharp point of the wind arrow.

"!!"

Air currents spiraled around her as she flashed toward her target faster than the eye could see. Sensing an imminent threat, the caterpillar folded its remaining three arms into a shield over its torso in a last-ditch effort to defend.

However, the silver-bladed tip of the wind arrow would not be stopped.

It pierced right through.

"—"

Shield and body couldn't even slow down the arrow.

A gaping hole in its chest, the monster's body began to pulsate.

The female torso fell to pieces, its remaining limbs crashing to the ground.

Enormous amounts of the corrosive acid mixed with the rising spore cloud for a few moments—a multicolored explosion the likes of which had never been seen before in this world erupted on the fiftieth floor of the Dungeon.



"Miss Aiz?!"

Lefiya screamed at the top of her lungs.

A dome like a mushroom cloud hovered over the ash forest, blocking out the natural lights in the ceiling. Debris riding the shock wave landed at her feet a moment later.

Following Finn's orders, everyone had grabbed only the necessities from camp and put as much space as possible between them and the monster to avoid the inevitable explosion. *Loki Familia* had watched the battle from afar, hoping with all their might that Aiz could pull it off. Every set of eyes was wide open as the heat from the detonation reached their skin.

Everything under the mushroom cloud was cast in red light from the flames.

The center of the blaze was thick and showed no signs of slowing down.

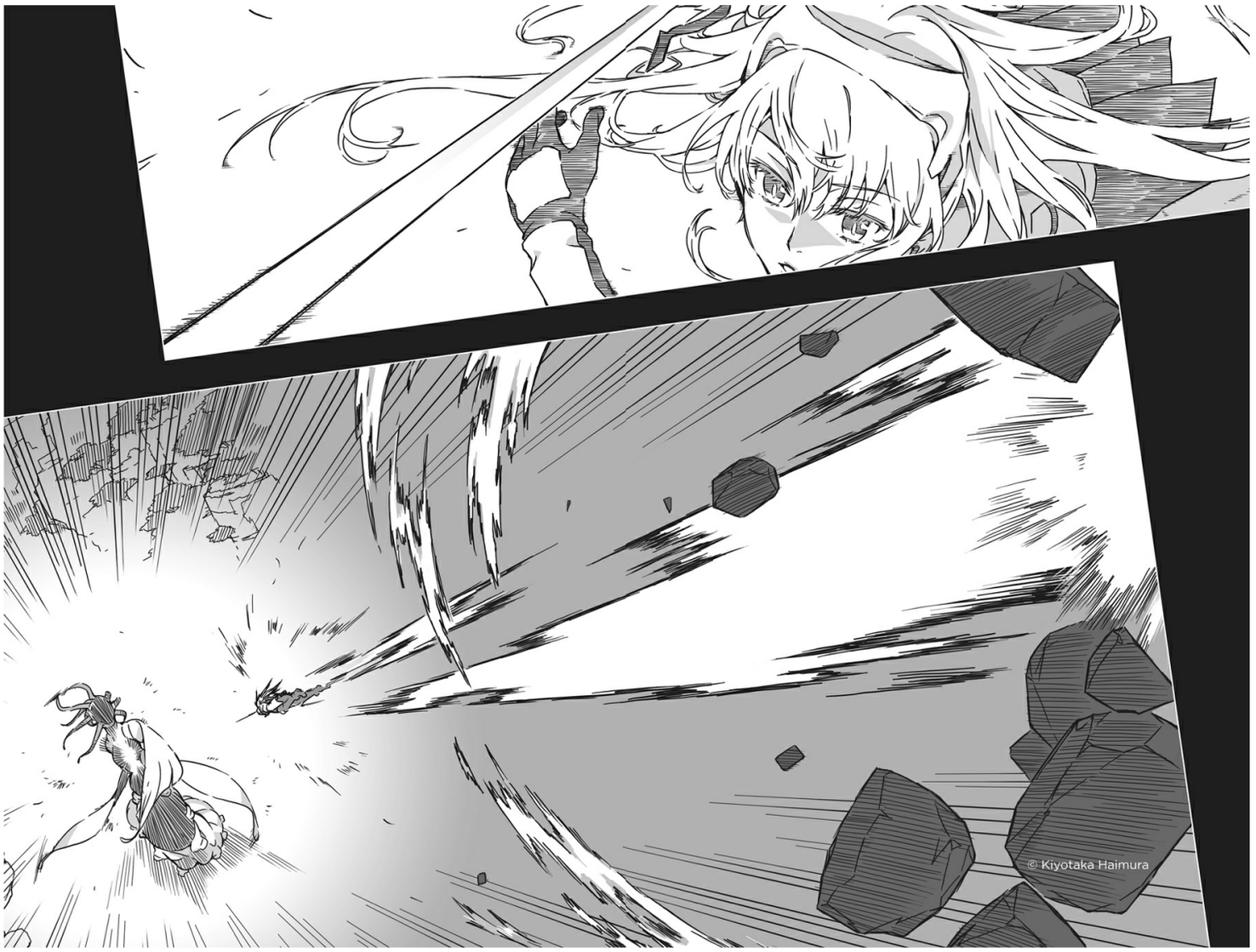
The ash forest caught fire in the blink of an eye. New pyres of flame erupted every second, reaching toward the ceiling like the arms of demons trying to escape hell.

"Aiz…"

Tiona stared out at the burning wasteland, orange and red light dancing on her face.

The next moment, she saw a flicker.

The wall of fire bent, warping outward as if being pushed from the inside. The bright, healthy flames swished from side to side like a candle that refused to go out.


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Then the sea of flames parted. A human figure emerged. A feminine form with heavily damaged armor and a silver sword glimmering at her side.

The blond, golden-eyed girl slowly and steadily made her way out of the flames.

There was a round of joyful cheers.

CHAPTER 3 White Rabbit



Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

белы Трус

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CHAPTER 3

WHITE RABBIT

The Dungeon layout changed dramatically on certain floors.

The standard design started on level one and then became steadily more complex with new topography including forests, ponds, deserts, and many other areas. It was hard for anyone to believe that such landscapes existed so far underground as they traveled farther and wider. The environments became more remarkable in the Dungeon's Deep Levels.

The terrain that *Loki Familia* was currently making their way through was a cave-like tunnel. Rocks jutted from the walls that were filled with large holes leading to other passageways. What's more, there were holes in the ground to watch out for. If a person had just woken up in here, they would think they were trapped in a cave rather than in the Dungeon. Their only clue would be the small lights flickering like candles on the distant ceiling. The lights were just strong enough to illuminate the edges of the walls, casting everything else in shadow.

They had traveled from the Deep Levels all the way to the middle levels, the seventeenth floor.

"We could have pressed on. There was still so much *fun* to be had."

"Enough already. You're testing my patience."

"But to call it quits at floor fifty—"

Loki Familia decided to give up their expedition's original goal and return to the surface after the battle on the fiftieth floor. To put it simply, their mission had ended in failure.

Tione scolded her sister for the repetitive complaints. Tiona hadn't stopped voicing her opinion the entire way up.

“How many times did the general explain it to you? Those monsters destroyed almost all of our weapons and food. There wasn’t enough to continue.”

“But there’s food everywhere down here. We could’ve figured it out…”

“Without weapons or items? They don’t grow down here. Especially weapons—all we have left are pieces of junk.”

Tione continued her small rant, adding that Tiona didn’t have anything left at all.

Everyone was forced to wear badly damaged armor and carry weapons that could break at any moment. The edges had become dull without any smiths or artisans around to sharpen them—their armor had holes or large gashes in the plating, drastically reducing their Defense; one big hit and everything could fall apart. With the exception of a few Superiors, all equipment, no matter how well made, was doomed to this fate during long missions like this one.

An adventurer’s individual strengths made no difference if their equipment couldn’t hold up against monsters in battle.

“Uwahhh! This sucks. Just getting to floor fifty was so hard…”

Six days had already passed since Finn gave the order to return to the surface.

Tiona walked with her arms crossed behind her head. No matter how many times she heard the explanation, it didn’t sit well with her. Indeed, she had no weapons or armor on her body at all. She glanced over at Aiz with a hint of jealousy in her eyes.

Even the sheath of her sword glinted in the dim light. The blond girl noticed Tiona’s gaze and tilted her head in confusion.

“All because of that monster…So what was it, exactly?”

A few moments passed before an annoyed Tione answered with, “How should I know?”

“All we can say is it was an undiscovered species…But it was strange.”

Tione brought her hand up to her chest as she spoke. Wedging her fingers between her shapely bosom, she pulled out a monster’s magic stone.

Tiona looked down at her own flat chest before looking back at her sister, mouth twitching with envy.

“Hang on, is that one of their magic stones? Tione, how did you get one of those?”

“I ripped it out of one of them with my hands.”

All of the caterpillar monsters spewed the purple acid out of their wounds, causing their own bodies to dissolve or explode. No magic stones had survived. Despite fighting against more of those creatures than they could count, the rest of *Loki Familia* hadn’t found a single magic stone.

Only Tione had been reckless enough to not care about the acid, and had managed to retrieve one with her barbaric methods.

“Wait, what’s with that color?”

“Yeah…It’s a little different from the usual ones.”

The magic stones hidden within monsters came in many different shapes and sizes, but if they all had one thing in common, it was their dark purple color.

The stone in Tione’s hand, however, had a brilliantly colored core surrounded by a dark purple layer and an extremely unusual shiny covering.

Tione held it up to the light, with her sister peering over her shoulder. The two of them squinted as it reflected the light like a glinting jewel back into their faces.

Their group arrived at a wide room.

The passageways up here were much narrower than in the Deep Levels, so *Loki Familia* had split into two groups before arriving on level seventeen. It was much more difficult to coordinate a large group in close quarters should they get swarmed by monsters. Riveria was at the helm of the forward group. Including the Amazonian twins and Aiz, there were almost twenty adventurers traveling together. Finn and Gareth were with the second group.

They were on their way home and everyone was tired, but none more so than the lower-level supporters who had been tasked with carrying the surviving baggage.

“…Linne, want some help?”

“Huh? N-no no. I’m fine?!”

Aiz approached another human girl and offered her assistance. The supporter rejected the offer immediately. She couldn’t allow a top-class adventurer to do something as mundane as carrying the bags.

Aiz’s strength and reputation were very well known already—not to mention her detached mannerisms—so many members of the familia were at a loss as to how to interact with her.

“Don’t bother with ’em, Aiz. The runts ain’t worth it.”

An animal person, the werewolf Bete, had witnessed their brief conversation.

Standing over 180 celch tall, Bete had long, muscular legs and a blue lightning-bolt tattoo on the left side of his face. A wild aura emanated from him, making his very presence intimidating.

He kicked the supporter lightly on the side of her hip as a way to shoo her away before coming up next to Aiz.

“Even as strong as ya are, ya don’t know squat, yeah? Just talkin’ with weaklings is a waste’a time, much less helpin’ them out.”

“…”

“Look down on ’em. It’s yer right as someone who’s strong.”

Aiz listened quietly as Bete cocked his head back and laughed drily through his nose.

Bete Loga.

One of *Loki Familia*’s top-class adventurers, he was just as strong as would be expected —perhaps even more—for someone with that title. That being said, he did acknowledge the female knight Aiz to be slightly superior to himself.

He was not a bad person…or at least Aiz seemed to think so.

Riveria, who often had a difference of opinion with the werewolf, had described him ironically as a “man who wanted to be misunderstood.”

His arguments with Tiona were almost a daily occurrence. A lone wolf by

nature, perhaps his instincts interfered with his social skills.

“No, Aiz, don’t listen to a word Bete says. That’s the real waste of time!”

“Go to hell, woman. *You* should be helpin’ the runts! Yet there ya are, empty-handed! Move yer ass!”

“Shut *up* already!”

Throwing even more verbal jabs, the werewolf and the Amazon glared at each other. A heartbeat later…

Their argument didn’t matter.

“—UoOOoo!”

An anxious air filled the room as far-off howls started to echo. It wasn’t long before the unmistakable grunts of heavy breathing joined them.

This particular room might have had many exits, but monsters were being born just outside each one of them.

“UUOooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

Roars that were strong enough to shake the rock under their feet.

There was enough power behind the howls to make the average adventurer run out of their boots in fright. The monsters started to appear. First, their incredibly thick arms and meaty shoulders were illuminated by the lights far above. Then, sturdy, hoofed feet emerged from under their own shadows, cracking the ground as they came closer.

Rusty brown fur–covered bodies built like brick walls.

It was a herd of Minotaurs: massive man-shaped beasts with bull-like heads that embodied the term *monster*.

“See, Bete! These Minotaurs came here to shut you up!”

“Yeah, right, dimwit! Tsk, sure are a lot of ’em, though…”

More Minotaurs kept coming into the room from each of the exits every second and formed a ring around the group of adventurers.

Their bloodshot eyes flicked from person to person, chests heaving with

excitement as they chose their targets.

“Riveria, there’s a lot of them, so can we join in?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Raul, take command for this battle. Finn believes you are ready to gain some experience.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

These monsters were rated by the Guild as the strongest and most dangerous of the Dungeon’s middle levels. However, *Loki Familia*’s top-class adventurers didn’t bat an eye. They had been fighting monsters from more than thirty floors lower only a few days ago. There was a tremendous gap in power between Minotaurs and the fearsome beasts the adventurers had slain.

Therefore, these relatively shallow floors were reserved for the lower-level adventurers to gain excelia. People like Aiz normally just sat and watched. The other members of their group might have been weaker than the top class, but they were still members of the strongest Dungeon-crawling familia. Monsters from the Middle-Level floors weren’t as serious a threat to them as they were to members of other familias.

This time, though, the numbers were overwhelmingly against them.

The top-class adventurers grabbed their weapons at Tione’s suggestion.

“UooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Then, the flow of battle turned in a direction that no one could have predicted.

“UooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO?!”

It happened when almost half the Minotaur herd lay dead on the floor.

One Minotaur must have noticed the unfathomable difference in power between themselves and their supposedly “prey” and turned its back to the battle.

That caused a chain reaction as every other beast turned away from the adventurers and took off in all directions at the same time.

The great escape had begun.

“Huh?!”

“Heey! Ya call yerselves monsters?!”

The thunderous retreat caught Tiona and Bete off guard.

More and more of the beasts were disappearing from the room, running for their lives.

Aiz’s golden eyes widened as she watched in disbelief.

“After them, all of you!”

Riveria’s shrill voice cut through the chaos.

Top-class adventurers were frozen in place for only a moment before launching themselves in pursuit of the Minotaurs.

“And we were almost home…!”

“Um, I’m not good with hand-to-hand combat!”

“Whack ’em really hard with that stick ya got! Do it!”

“S-sure…!”

Tione clenched her fist as she took off. Bete snapped at Lefiya. There wasn’t a calm face among them.

It went without saying that there were other adventurers in the Dungeon. Most crawling the Middle Levels were nowhere near as strong as *Loki Familia*’s top-class adventurers. Seeing a stampede of Minotaurs would be their worst nightmare. Should even one adventurer be unable to return home due to the Minotaurs that they let escape, the Guild and other familias would be quick to find out and levy the penalties against them. At the very least, they would lose a lot of sleep from the guilt.

“Wait, that’s…?”

A large group of Minotaurs hurtled down the passageway leading up to the sixteenth floor. By the time Tiona noticed, they were disappearing up the stairwell.

“This is gonna be one hell of a pain in the ass!”

Following the chorus of footsteps and howls, the top-class adventurers bounded their way to the next floor.

Aiz led the charge as they caught up to the panicked Minotaurs.

One floor up, another floor up, and another floor up.

The giant bull monsters broke down any obstacle standing in the way of their panicked stampede. The pack ran to the closest corner, turning right and left randomly in a desperate attempt to elude their pursuers. Individuals would occasionally peel away from the other Minotaurs in a desperate attempt to save themselves. Whenever that happened, one of *Loki Familia*'s adventurers had to chase it. What was extremely unlucky for the pursuers was that the monsters kept finding the passageways that connected to upper floors. Bete had hit the nail right on the head.

The herd steadily got smaller the higher they went, but also the group of pursuers had to split up to finish off the ones that broke away. Out of the Middle Levels and into the Upper Levels—the name given to the first twelve Dungeon floors. What was left of the herd arrived on the sixth floor. Aiz and Bete were hot on their tails, but the rest of their allies were gone.

"Holy shit!"

"Outta the way!"

A Minotaur was one second away from smashing its fist into an unlucky adventurer when Bete slammed his bladed foot into the creature's head, bringing it down in one blow.

The Upper Levels were the closest floors to the surface. The monsters in this area were low level and physically weak. Therefore, these floors were filled with lower-level adventurers learning how to fight and gaining excelia. Should any one of them come face-to-face with the Minotaur, they wouldn't stand a chance.

Casualties could start piling up at any moment.

It's gone…!

Aiz had been pursuing the last two beasts and managed to take one down.

However, the other one disappeared from her line of sight in the process.

Unfortunately, they were in a hallway that split into many different paths. Her gaze shot from opening to opening. Her face still wore the same aloof expression; only a bead of sweat rolling down her cheek revealed the dread that was overtaking her. Someone would surely die if she went the wrong way.

“Over here, Aiz!”

Bete followed his nose with no hesitation. Animal people were known for having a stronger sense of smell than humans. There was no doubt that a werewolf could follow the trail of a beast as large as the Minotaur.

Racing forward at full speed, at last they saw the beast’s muscular rusty-brown shoulders come into view. The last survivor of the herd, of course it was the fastest. What’s more, it disappeared up a set of stairs.

“…!”

The fifth floor.

The staircase opened into a wide room. The walls looked light green in the light coming down from above. However, the Dungeon was silent as the calm before a storm. Each wall of the square room had an exit, four in all. The Minotaur was gone.

The two of them spun around, listening for any trace of the beast.

“UuuOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

“AaaIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE?!”

They heard something.

A roar and a human scream.

“!”

They took off at once.

Aiz was closer to the sound and was running toward it a second before Bete could react.

She found the Minotaur and a human almost immediately.

His hair was as white as a snowcapped mountain, and his ruby-red eyes were filled with tears. At first glance, this male teenager looked more like a rabbit than an adventurer.

The massive bull was chasing him down the passageway, swatting at him like a cat chasing a mouse.

“What’s a greenhorn doin’ down here?!”

One look at his pathetic armor was enough to know it had been issued by the Guild. The boy’s running style was erratic, wasting so much movement that it was obvious he had next to no experience.

The newest of newbies.

From the Minotaur’s perspective, this adventurer wasn’t prey, more like an afternoon snack.

The two top-class adventurers focused more power into their legs, desperately trying to close the distance.

Aiz sped after the rabbit.

“Uughunnnnnn!!”

“Daaahhh?!”

The Minotaur slammed down its hoof.

All the boy could do was brace his thin body for impact—no, he barely dodged it at the last moment but lost his footing when the ground shook.

Tumbling forward, the boy rolled all the way up to the Dungeon wall.

“__”

Aiz became a blur.

Leaving Bete behind, she shot forward like a silent arrow toward the massacre that was about to unfold.

The Minotaur had the boy cornered at the back of the room. The creature’s lips turned upward, baring its teeth in a hideous smile.

White hair filled with dirt, tears rolling down from his red eyes, all that was

left for this little rabbit to do was to wait for the jaws of the beast to come crashing down.

Filled with a strong feeling of déjà vu, Aiz launched herself at the beast, a silver streak leading the way.

“Huh?”

“Uoohhhh?”

The boy sounded just as surprised as the Minotaur.

The first slash reverberating in her ears, Aiz didn’t hold anything back as a silver streak cut through the Minotaur over and over.

The sword gleamed after one last cut through its chest.

“Guu…?! Gu, uoOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO—?!”

The Minotaur stood there completely intact for a moment before falling apart as if its body suddenly realized what had just happened. The creature roared out in pain for a moment before collapsing to the ground in pieces.

The creature’s blood shot out in all directions, like a fountain breaking apart from too much water pressure.

Then, their eyes met.

Ruby-red eyes in shock. Sparkling yet distant golden eyes.

The boy emerged from the other side of the monster’s remains, a chance meeting.

He was just sitting there as if frozen in time. Aiz decided to break the silence.

“Are you…okay?”

The girl leaned down over him, but the boy didn’t even flinch.

He just looked up at her as if he’d forgotten how to speak.

Aiz didn’t know how to react. So she tried asking again.

“Umm…Are you sure you’re okay?”

No reaction.

Once again, the girl's emotionless expression hid inner turmoil. She could only blink a few times and make eye contact with him.

The boy had been caught in the explosion of Minotaur blood and was currently soaked in it. She felt pity for him. Tears started flooding his eyes once again. All of his exposed skin blushed pink, like he was running a fever, as he looked directly at Aiz.

Aiz was starting to feel genuinely concerned for the boy. Wiping the remaining blood off her sword, she returned it to its sheath and extended her hand to him.

"Can you stand?"

The boy was about to say something, but the blond girl accidentally interrupted him. His lips were still frozen in the middle of the word.

His line of sight fell to her outstretched hand before jumping back up to her face.

His ears, neck, and everything else were turning redder by the second.

"Da—"

"Da?"

She didn't even have time to tilt her head as the boy suddenly woke up from his trance.

Without warning.

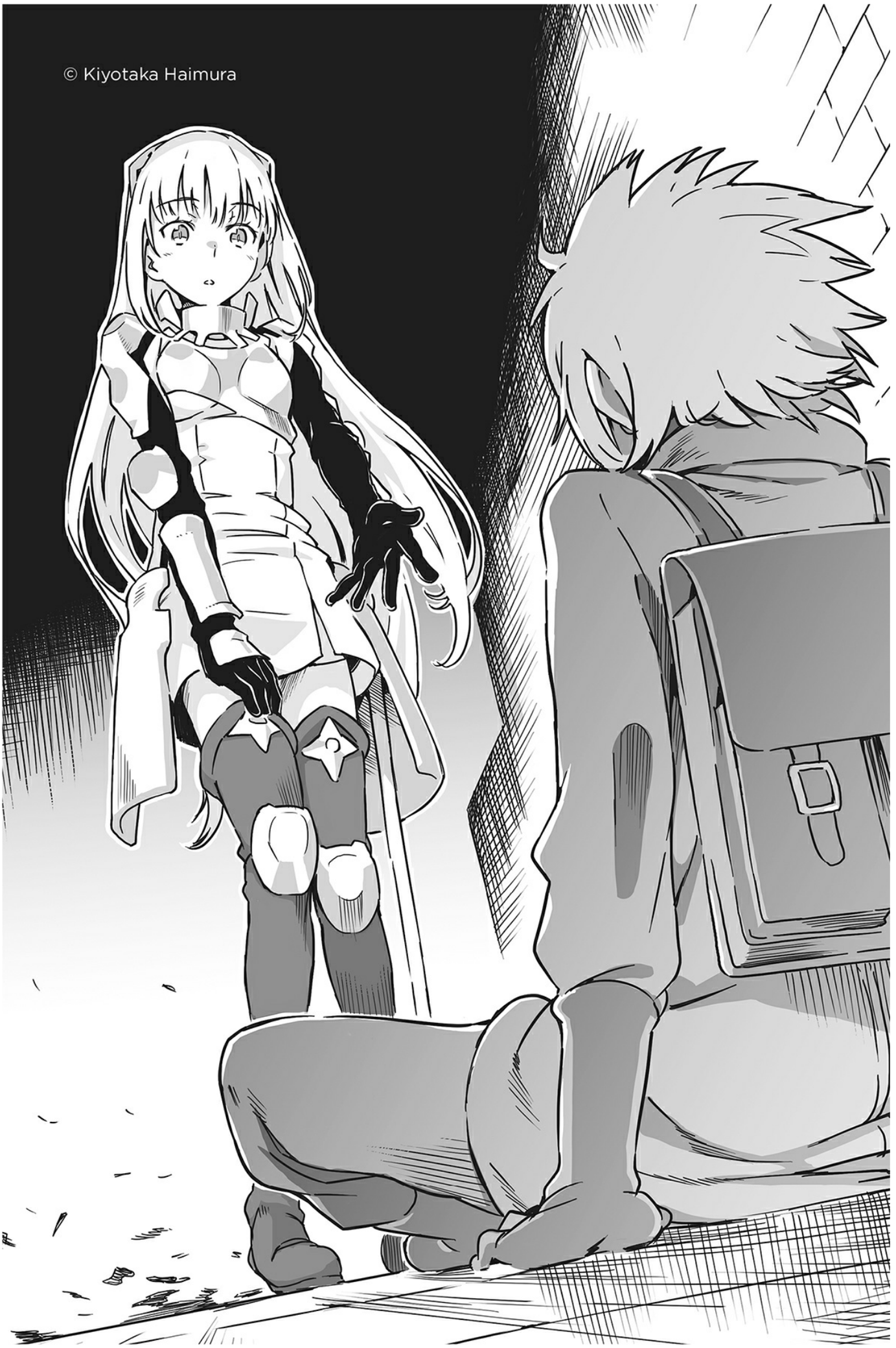
"DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

He ran away from Aiz as fast as his legs could carry him.

She was stunned. Her eyes flew open as she watched him disappear into the distance.

The echoes of his screams dying off, Aiz's face morphed into an expression no one had seen before: at a loss for words.

"…kh…hh…kahah!"


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She turned around to see Bete, his whole body shaking as he tried to stifle the laughter trying to escape his mouth.

Bending over and clutching his ribs—“Haaah, haaah!”—he took deep, ragged breaths.

“…”

Aiz’s face turned pink, blushing like that of a girl her age.

The werewolf could only stare at her.

It hadn’t been an easy journey.

Loki Familia’s long expedition had finally come to an end.



The Labyrinth City, Orario.

The large city was surrounded by a sturdy, circular wall.

Judging by its appearance, the looming structure would have been able to repel enemy attacks from the outside. However, its true purpose was to contain the monsters that emerged from a giant breach in the ground. Built in the Ancient Times, it was proof of how hard people fought to keep contained the monsters that emerged from it. It remained a solid reminder to the present day.

The stone barrier enclosed buildings of all shapes and sizes. Standing at the center of it all was an enormous white structure.

It was built directly over the entrance and served as a lid: Babel Tower.

With Babel as its symbol, the city built above the Dungeon had become a thriving metropolis.

A great deal of the city’s population was made up of adventurers, people who made their living inside the Dungeon. It went without saying that many restaurants and bars were built to help them celebrate their successes and let off some steam. Humans and demi-humans gathered at their favorite watering holes, drinking and living it up side by side. Occasionally, some deities would get carried away and join them with jugs of liquor or ale in their hands. These were places where divisions of races and allegiances did not exist, where people

laughed and enjoyed one another's company. Just one little pocket of the city—of this world.

Many lights illuminated the city night. These magic-stone lamps kept the city alive with activity at all times, day or night.

"Finally home…"

In the city's northern district, just off the main road…

One long, tall building stood above the rest.

It was composed of a line of dark red towers that stood like spears above the city. The structure looked like flames when the sunlight hit it just right. The flag of the Trickster flew majestically from the top of the highest tower, its red color matching the towers.

Loki Familia's home, Twilight Manor.

"Ahhh, so tired. Forget a steak, I'll take the entire cow."

"I want a shower. As soon as possible."

"Ah-ha-ha…"

Lefiya laughed awkwardly at the Amazonian twins' conversation.

The expedition party had emerged from the Dungeon and returned to their home. Most of the thirty adventurers were carrying large bags, or dragging them, all the way up to the front gate.

Two guards, a man and a woman, saluted them as they approached.

"We're home. Please open the gate."

They nodded at Finn and pulled open the iron fence–like doors.

The plot of land available for their home was long but very thin when construction started. The solution: build up instead of out. This also meant that the front lawn was rather narrow. Members of the familia used the space as efficiently as possible to grow a wide array of flowers and plants. A light breeze passed through, making the flowers appear to bow to the arriving adventurers.

Finn led his allies through the gate.

When suddenly…

“—Welcome hoooome!” A figure rushed out of the building to greet the adventurers as if it had been waiting for them.

Short vermilion hair shaking from side to side, a slightly masculine-looking woman charged headlong toward the spot where Aiz and the other girls were chatting.

“Y’all make it back okay? Gaah—was too quiet here without ya!”

She practically threw herself at them with her arms open wide. Step, step, step, Aiz, Tiona, and Tione easily dodged the oncoming hug.

Lefiya didn’t realize what was happening until, “Huh, wha? Eeeek!” She was trapped in the embrace and fell to the ground.

“Loki, we suffered no casualties on this expedition. But we didn’t explore any lower floors. I’d like to sit down and explain the details.”

“Nnnn…Okay, then. Welcome back, Finn.”

“Thank you, Loki.”

The woman pulled her head away from the elf girl beneath her and flashed a smile at the prum.

Her vermilion hair resembled the evening sky at dusk. Her eyes were clever, narrow lines in the middle of her head. But at this moment, her perfectly symmetrical face was grinning. Those narrow eyes opening slightly, this tomboyish woman was, in fact, a being—a goddess—who enjoyed listening to the trials and tribulations of the lower world from people like Finn.

She was one of the deities who had descended from Tenkai out of boredom and come to live with the children for pure entertainment.

Completely different from humans or monsters, a deusdea.

She was, in fact, the leader of the group that bound together Aiz and the others: Loki.

“Loki, could you get off Lefiya? She’s exhausted, and you’re giving her a heart attack.”

“Oh, my, my. My bad, Lefiya. Kinda got caught up in the moment.”

“I-it’s okay…”

“Oh, and by the way…Geh-heh-heh, didn’t your boobs get a lil’ bigger?”

“N-no! Not at all!”

Lefiya’s face turned beet red as she looked at the perverted smile on her goddess’s lips.

The aura that surrounded the deity, making her seem like a trustworthy parent figure, instantly disappeared. It was at times like this that a being who looked perfect by default became ugly enough that humans had to avert their eyes.

Loki might have been a goddess, but she had a rather particular taste in women.

She had personally scouted every member of her familia, so every single one of them met her approval. Ignoring the male members, every female had the same kind of cute elegance about her that their goddess was very fond of.

“Hold on a sec, Tione, what’s that wrapped around your…That’s Finn’s waistcloth! Say it ain’t so! Don’t tell me you exposed yourself for the whole Dungeon to see! How do ya plead?”

“Stop embarrassing yourself. And keep your distance; it’s too hot out.”

Tione held out her hand to keep the whimpering deity from hugging her. The rest of the adventurers walked around them to go inside. Loki might be respected, but she wasn’t worshipped with absolute reverence and esteem.

Despite her all-powerful, all-knowing abilities being sealed, Loki never aged no matter how long she stayed on Earth. Rather than being treated like a supreme entity, she was more like the head of a family who treated all her children well and received their love in return.

The last of the tension finally left the adventurers’ shoulders as they were finally back inside the familiar walls of home.

“Aiz! Welcome home!”

“I’m back, Loki…”

The eyes of the goddess fell on Aiz, who responded to her greeting right away.

Loki seemed really happy to see her—at first. Then the goddess’s narrow eyes opened a little bit wider. “Ah, you’re in quite a bit of pain there. Gotta get your rest, don’t ya know?”

“…”

The blond girl’s magic had taken its toll on her body. Her joints groaned with every step. Even Loki could see that it was best for Aiz to take it slow.

The goddess’s eyes, the same color as her hair, regarded the girl as though they could see right through her. Loki smiled at Aiz without saying another word, turned away from her, and went to go greet the other members.

“Aiz, what’s wrong? Loki try to feel you up again?”

“No…It’s nothing.”

The blond girl responded to Tiona, but she was watching a very irritated Riveria trying her best to tolerate Loki just in front of the gate. Then she turned to go inside.

Members of *Loki Familia* who hadn’t joined the expedition came out of the manor to help bring inside the bags. “Welcome home.” “Good to see you.” They said their hellos to their returning comrades as they passed by.

There was no entrance hall, but some of the tower walls had been removed to create an open common space. Indeed, it was very welcoming. On the other hand, rooms and passageways within the towers were quite narrow. As for Aiz, she had no complaints.

Anyone using the shower room was ordered to finish before Aiz, Tiona, and the others finished unpacking. The returnees took priority. There were others waiting, but it was common sense to give up their place in line. The girls felt a little bad jumping to the front, but they weren’t about to turn down a hot shower.

Dropping their remaining weapons and armor in their personal rooms, they

made their way to the shower room at the top of the tower.

“…You wear some real flashy clothes, Aiz.”

“Loki said she’d bite off my tongue if I didn’t.”

Aiz started to disrobe as she responded to Tiona’s comment, eyebrows sinking.

Her undershirt was completely open in the back, revealing all the curves from her shoulders to her lower back and even the base of her breasts. There was nothing to conceal the girl’s smooth skin. Tiona thought it was strange for someone with Aiz’s personality to wear something that revealing. “…Oh, that makes sense.” But all her questions disappeared upon hearing Aiz’s explanation.

Every member of a familia had to put up with their god’s or goddess’s more interesting personality traits.

“Lefiya, strip already. The others are waiting.”

“Ah, yes…”

Compared to the already naked Tiona, Lefiya was much more reserved when it came to her body. The Amazon had thrown her clothing to the floor the moment she came in, but the elf took her time, slowly disrobing at her own pace.

This showed a major difference between the two different races. Amazons had absolutely no reservations when it came to showing skin, while elves were very reluctant to bare any of it. With many different races living under the same roof, these differences were a daily occurrence.

Aiz quickly slipped her panties down her legs while she listened to the two of them. Placing her clothes neatly in a basket, she went inside the shower room.

A row of ten showerheads jutted out from one side of the wall. There was a small tub at the end of the line in the corner of the room, but it could fit only two or three people at most.

“Aiz, is something bothering you?”

“…?”

“It’s just…after the Minotaur roundup, you seemed a bit…I don’t know… dark?”

Aiz was genuinely surprised by Tiona’s observation. Was it that obvious?

…Because, actually, she was a little depressed.

Sure, the incident had ended with Bete laughing up a storm, but this was the first time that anyone she had saved from a monster ran away from her in terror. On the other hand, she could count the number of times that a defeated opponent had done the same thing…

Was the sight of her turning a Minotaur into cold cuts that frightening?—A piece of her, a very small piece, was sad.

She saw that rabbit-like boy—more specifically, the look of horror on his face moments before he ran—every time she closed her eyes.

Aiz sighed under her breath, quietly enough not to be overheard by the other girls. Standing in front of a showerhead, her skin turned a light shade of pink as the powerful jet of hot water ran down her body. Streams of water worked their way around her curves, tracing the hourglass shape of her hips and dripping down her thighs.

No one said anything for a while. The room started to fog up with four showerheads on full blast.

“…Grrrr.”

“What are you growling at?”

Tiona ignored her older sister’s voice as she looked down the line, specifically at their chests.

Big, average, and small.

She clenched her fists as her eyes jumped from Tione on the far right and Aiz standing next to her. An unmistakably irritated groan worked its way out from between her clenched teeth. *Swish.* Glancing to the left, she watched the form of Lefiya’s sizable breasts shift as the elf washed her arms and face.

“Lefiya, you traitor…”

“Whaa?!”

“Ignore her, Lefiya.”

The tone of Tiona’s groan turned to jealousy, eyes jumping between her own flat figure and Lefiya’s feminine form.

Gashaaa! The door to the shower room slid open, revealing a beastly silhouette on the other side.

“Oh, ho-ho…Don’cha worry ’bout a thing, Tiona! I’ll massage ’em until they’re nice an’ plump!”

“I wonder what’s for dinner tonight…”

Tiona very casually dodged the “attack” from behind and tripped her would-be assailant on the way past.

The attacker fell to the floor faster than the other girls could see, crashing headfirst onto the tile floor.

“Ugaaah…Y-ya gotten pretty good, Tiona.”

“Loki, you’re in the way.”

“Kuuuuh! So harsh—Lefiya, comfort meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

“Huh, wha—KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

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Aiz and the Amazons left the shower room behind as if this sort of thing had happened many times before.

They could sense the danger from the moment they realized their goddess hadn't taken the time to remove her own clothes, and they offered their ally as a sacrifice to make a clean escape.

Ignoring the high-pitched pleas for help coming from the other side of the shower room door, the three girls put on their clothes and left her behind.

"That was so cruel…"

"Sorry, sorry. We just weren't in the mood to put up with Loki."

The group had arrived at the dining room of their home. Several long tables were lined up inside.

Visiting their own rooms after their shower, they came down to enjoy dinner with the entire familia.

"We live together, we eat together." Loki had always encouraged them to eat as a group. Now that the expedition was over, only the lookouts on patrol were absent from the feast unfolding inside Twilight Manor. It went without saying that the narrow hall was very crowded. Even Aiz had difficulty squeezing between chair and wall on her way to an open seat.

While the returnees didn't have enough energy to be the life of the party, they were more than happy to recount the events of their expedition over burgeoning plates of food and glasses of delicious wine. Those who stayed behind were eager to hear stories about the courageous acts and incredible bravery of their allies.

At long last, the exhausted adventurers felt the last of the tension leave their shoulders.

"Tione, is there a meeting after dinner?"

"The general said to take it easy tonight. We'll take care of it in the morning."

"That's our Finn!"

Members of the familia who'd finished eating cleaned up their plates and

started disappearing from the dining hall one by one.

Loki was halfway through another glass of wine when she suddenly jumped to her feet as though she'd remembered something important.

"Almost forgot. Anyone wantin' a Status update today should come ta my room. Doin' everybody one after another tomorrow would take a lot out of me. So how 'bout ten of ya tonight?"

Just like a whimsical deity, Loki didn't have much of a plan. However, her followers were used to this and didn't complain.

"What are everyone's intentions?"

"I'm calling it a night. My bed's calling out to me…"

"Good question. There's nothing in particular for me to do, but I don't think I got enough excelia for my Status to change all that much…Huh. I'll go if I feel like it. What about you, Lefiya?"

"Today's a little…"

"Aiz…do I even have to ask?"

"I'm going."

Tione glanced across the table at the blond-haired girl. She gave a quick nod.

Leaving the others seated at the table, Aiz stood up. Seeing that Loki had disappeared, she left the dining hall.

Loki Familia's home was made from a row of towers. They were all connected at the base and by several stone bridges higher up. There was no difficulty traveling from tower to tower.

Aiz traveled across one of these bridges, looking down at the gardens as she went. She raised her gaze. The sun had completely set, making the night sky a dark blue blanket filled with thousands of twinkling stars and a golden moon high above. As for the city, it was filled with just as many twinkling lights coming from each of the buildings. At the same time, she could hear the lively melodies of stringed instruments accompanied by joyful voices rising from the streets below. She stopped for a moment to take in the view before continuing on her way.

Loki's quarters were located on the highest floor of the middle tower. Aiz walked up the spiral staircase, all the way to the top, and knocked on the wooden door.

"Come on in."

She opened it and stepped inside.

Loki was in the middle of cleaning up. "Sorry 'bout this. Hang on a sec," she said with a stool in her arms and a smile on her face.

Her quarters were more like an assemblage of random items rather than a living space. Bottles of many types of wine and liquor were all over the place. The bottles themselves came in many sizes and shapes, as well as colors. It was impossible not to see five or six of them in each corner of the room, some of which were open.

An expensive-looking pen and the crystal reflecting seven colors of light sat on top of her desk. A bizarre assortment of old shoes and hats decorated her walls. Spots and shelves not occupied by wine bottles held thick books or small blades like daggers and knives. Loki must've been in the middle of reorganizing because her bed was absently covered with pieces of literature and weapons. It wouldn't be surprising if one or two extremely rare items were lurking in the pile.

"That's good enough. Let's do this." Just as she'd promised, Loki put everything down and turned to face Aiz.

The girl had found a place to sit at the corner of her bed. Loki patted the stool a few times to indicate Aiz should have a seat.

"Aiz, you're such a go-getter. No one wants ta cut in front of ya in line."

"I wonder if that's true."

"Ask 'round if you're curious. Ya know, communication and all that. Now, off with the shirt."

Aiz turned her back to Loki and did what she was told.

Pulling her shirt off over her head, she gathered her long blond hair and guided it over her shoulder. She bore no scars; only smooth white skin covered

her delicate frame.

“Heh-heh-heh. Took quite a nip from that last bottle. I’m feelin’ a bit tipsy. My hands might slip once or twice…!”

The goddess’s fingers reached forward, twitching excitedly as her eyes traced Aiz’s body line.

Sensing the imminent threat, Aiz drew a small dagger in her boot halfway from its sheath, making sure that Loki could hear the sharp blade sliding against the steel case.

“Ah, totally sober. No problem.”

“Please get on with it.”

“Ah, right away.”

The pupils of Loki’s eyes were nothing more than needle points as she broke out in a cold sweat. The deity set to work.

Taking one of the weapons off her bed, Loki pricked her pointer finger on the tip of the blade.

Then the goddess placed her finger just below Aiz’s neck as soon as the first few drops of blood came out.

Then she traced a series of movements on the girl’s back with a steady hand, almost as if she were writing her signature. Her blood flowed out, forming straight lines and intricate patterns before: “Hoi!”

The key had been turned.

There had been nothing on Aiz’s back a moment ago. But now a series of letters and characters that looked like an epitaph appeared right between her shoulders.

“I’m pretty good at keepin’ it locked up, but it sounds like there are other ways to pick it than usin’ god’s blood. So don’t go showin’ yer back to no one. I know I’ve said it too many times already, but it’s important.”

“Yes.”

“Then again, probably worried ’bout nothin’ with *you*.”

The characters ran in horizontal lines across the girl's back.

The intricate lines looked like something that would've been carved into a stone monument. But in fact, this was the thing that bound this "family" together—Loki's Blessing, a Status.

Gods and goddesses wrote these hieroglyphs in their own blood, allowing the "ichor" within it to unlock the limitless possibilities of their mortal followers. Every person who had received a Blessing had their Status engraved on their back. Since this was the livelihood of a familia, the deities liked to keep their children's Statuses a secret.

"Some of us who just came to Gekai don't know how ta lock. Poor kids, their secrets out in the open like that. Aizuu, be grateful I found ya first!"

"I don't think many people can read hieroglyphs…"

"Ah, good point there."

Loki started a conversation so that Aiz wouldn't get bored as she continued with the Status update.

The ichor rippled through the epitaph, creating a wave that expanded from Aiz's back—her Status was exposed. Loki looked through the series of hieroglyphs to find any faded characters or numbers and wrote new ones over them.

Adventurers like Aiz gained excelia through experience. Then their god or goddess would bring it to life with their own hands. The hieroglyphs recorded their deeds and accomplishments, forming the foundation on which their Status was based.

Adventurers went to their deity for a Status update, adding new excelia to the existing foundation. However, this could be done only one at a time. Large groups like *Loki Familia* had to find a way to create a pecking order, allowing adventurers at all levels to receive Status updates, while still giving more motivated members the ability to grow as fast as possible.

"'Kay, all done. Sit tight while I jot this down."

Loki reversed the process, the red light fading before she locked the Status

again, hiding it from view. Then she grabbed her feather pen from the desk and a spare sheet of paper. It took only a moment to write down the important details of Aiz's Status.

It was almost impossible for a person to read their Status looking over their shoulder into a mirror. What's more, only a handful of people on Gekai could read hieroglyphs, so the gods used a universal language called Koine to convey the information.

Aiz slipped her shirt on over her head and turned around. Loki was standing there, holding out the sheet of paper and smiling.

"Here."

Aiz took the paper from her and had a *look*.

Aiz Wallenstein

Level 5

Strength: D 549->555 Defense: D540-> 547
Dexterity: A 823 -> 825 Agility: A 821-> 822 Magic: A 899

Hunter: G Immunity: G Knight:I

Each Ability's level was expressed using ten letters: S, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I.

For Basic Abilities, 0–99 was an *I* rank, 100–199 was *H*, and so on. The higher the number, the more powerful the ability. Excelia was directly expressed in these numbers. For example, an adventurer received Defense Excelia every time they survived a hit. For Magic, their spells would increase in power and range the more they used them in battle.

However, every fight didn't necessarily result in excelia. Should their opponent be at their level or stronger, excelia came in bunches and said adventurer would grow quickly. However, defeating thousands of weaker monsters would have no effect on their Status.

Additionally, adventurers could learn Advanced Abilities—in Aiz's case, Hunter, Immunity, and Knight—along with Skills and Magic when they raised their Level.

"…"

Aiz fought back disappointment as she looked at her new Status.

This was far too low.

She had slain hundreds of the strong monsters that lurked in the Deep Levels of the Dungeon over the last two weeks. And yet, her Status went up only a few points in each area.

At this rate, she could kill thousands of the things and barely see a difference.

Have I hit a wall…?

The limit for each Basic capability was 999. It became more difficult to gain excelia the closer each Ability got to *S*, but she had encountered another barrier

judging by these results.

Aiz couldn't grow anymore as she was now.

Her Status had grown as much as it could. It didn't matter how strong or fast she was, this was her limit.

Three years had passed since she became Level 5.

An invisible barrier loomed before her, preventing her advance.

"…"

Aiz was stuck.

Level up. Improving the excelia "container." That was her way through the barrier, overcoming this limit.

Stronger. Even stronger. She craved strength almost to the point of greed.

More power, more speed. To reach a new level, to travel to new heights.

To make her wish a reality.

Her expressionless, doll-like face concealed the desire burning within her.

"Aiz…"

Loki watched her from the side, seeing her face in profile. Cautiously, she opened her mouth to speak.

The blond girl turned to face her goddess, and the deity quietly advised her follower.

"Those who push while runnin' full-out will always trip. I've told ya before, an' I'll say it as many times as it takes. So don't forget."

"…"

"You can go. Nighty-night."

Aiz broke off eye contact with the grinning goddess and turned toward the door.

She paused for a moment in front of the giant block of wood and said, "Good night," before exiting the room.

Loki waved at her, the same grin on her face.

“…”

The human girl descended the spiral staircase.

Light and noises from the city outside passed by every time she stepped in front of a window. Aiz walked through the dim hallways alone. Walking past all other doors, she arrived at her own room and went inside.

It was very simple. The only things inside her room were a desk, a bed, and a curtain over the window. With only a few personal possessions, Aiz’s room was the exact opposite of Loki’s personal quarters. The moonlight that managed to come in between the curtains cast the room in a dark blue hue.

She walked directly to her bed and collapsed into the sheets. Feeling their warmth around her, she looked sideways at her sword, propped up against the wall beneath her window.

The weapon seemed to have a cool aura emanating from its sheath in a moonlit spotlight.

“…”

Aiz silently closed her eyelids.

Consciousness fading, her mind fell into darkness.



A young girl.

An intelligent young girl full of emotion.

Laughing, taken by surprise, able to feel the sting of sadness and uplifting joy.

Her face changed effortlessly to match each emotion, an innocent smile between her rosy cheeks.

A book opened in front of her eyes, the story unfolding in her head.

Comfortably snuggled into a white blanket, the girl nagged until the story continued.

An unsteady voice filled with love started reading again.

Should the girl look up from the pages, she would see the beautiful smile of a blond woman above her. Just like the innocent toddler in her lap, everything was peaceful, calm. The two of them seemed to fit together, like sisters. The little girl smiled again.

The story came to an end.

There was a princess deep in a forest who was trapped in eternal sleep.

Until one day she was woken by a young man.

He melted her heart, took her hand, and the two lived happily ever after.

The princess was saved.

“Do you like this story?” The toddler nodded.

“What about Mommy?” The woman nodded back.

“Me, too, because I’m living happily ever after because of him.” The woman smiled as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

The toddler’s eyes filled with envy and admiration. She looked down at the book for a moment before looking back up at the woman’s face.

The woman smiled again.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if you met someone who does the same for you?”

The toddler smiled like a flower opening to the morning sun.

The white was gone; this was a different place.

Looking around, everything was shrouded in an ominous black.

The growls of a hideous monster echoed.

The echoes didn’t go away, coming in from every angle. No escape.

No sky above, the air humid and thick. A long series of complex tunnels. At the end of a thin one, tall, cold walls all around.

The girl was surrounded by scary monsters in an underground labyrinth.

Eyes shivering in terror, the tears wouldn’t stop flowing. Her soft skin was covered with bloody scratches and bruises, clothes torn and caked with mud. She lay in the corner of the room like a string-less puppet, unable to escape.

The dark shadows reflected in her eyes grew larger. Sobbing screams escaped her mouth as the creatures drew closer.

Claws and fangs glinted in front of the helpless girl.

Suddenly, a flash of silver.

A line appeared across the chest of the monster above her. Shaking, she watched the beast fall and a young man emerge from behind it.

A high black collar hid his mouth. He wore minimal light armor and carried a long silver sword. The girl's eyes widened before she jumped toward him.

She embraced him, face pressed into his stomach. The man smiled, his hand on her head.

He gently ruffled her hair, relief flooding through her veins. She looked up at him, tears flowing as strong as ever down her dirty face. The man grinned contently.

Her vision became blurry. In her eyes, the man before her became the young man from the story. She tightened her embrace.

The man knelt down, looked her in the eyes, and said:

"I can't be a hero.

"Because you already have your mother," he added with his eyes half open.

"I hope that, someday, you find a hero—your hero."

Those were the last words.

The scene faded.



"…"

Her consciousness came back to the surface.

Her groggy eyes no longer saw the dream, only the very familiar walls of her own room.

Aiz managed to get her eyelids all the way open before blinking two or three

times at her own pace.

A few moments later, she slowly pulled back the sheet and sat up on her bed.

Still not fully awake, she took a look around the room.

The dim chamber was gone; her room was bright.

The white curtains couldn't hold back the sunlight bursting through the creases.

It was morning.

…It's been a while.

Her gaze fell on the sword under the window before she wiped her eyes.

She hadn't had that dream in years.

She'd almost forgotten the memories it came from.

Aiz wondered why now of all times they would resurface, but she quickly found an answer. Most likely, it was because of the boy she'd saved yesterday.

She'd seen a piece of herself in the boy with white hair.

"…"

His ruby-red eyes had made quite an impression.

The resemblance to a rabbit was uncanny. Maybe it was just because it was the last event of a particularly rough expedition, but his face was still with her.

Perhaps this rabbit had brought the dream to her. Aiz didn't realize it, but her usual stoic expression softened.

"Aiz? You up? The sun sure is."

Tiona's voice came from the other side of her door.

The blond human had overslept. It was very rare for her to experience a deep sleep.

Was it because of the expedition, or was it thanks to her memories?

Whatever the cause, she felt a strange calm that had been absent last night. Aiz responded to Tiona and started preparing for the day.



Aiz and the other expedition party members had many errands to run after breakfast.

At the top of their list was exchanging the items they'd brought back from the Dungeon for money. However, they needed to replace most of their weapons and restock their supply of items. The list went on and on. It would take a great deal of teamwork to finish everything quickly.

Splitting up into groups in front of the main gate, everyone was ready to go.

"I'm taking y'all out on the town tonight! No stragglin' now!"

Loki saw them off. It wasn't long before the group of adventurers arrived on Northwest Main Street.

There were eight main streets in Orario. All of them started in the center of the circular city and expanded due north, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west, and northwest. An aerial view of the metropolis would look like a cake cut into eight slices.

Northwest Main, the street that *Loki Familia* was walking on, was known as Adventurers Way because the Guild headquarters was located here, along with many weapon and item shops. It was no coincidence that many bars were located here, too. The street was lined with virtually everything an adventurer needed. If one ventured off the main path, there were several shady establishments in older buildings in the backstreets.

It was just past nine o'clock in the morning. The street was filled with adventurers making their final preparations to go into the Dungeon. An animal person with a greatsword over his shoulder disappeared into a weapon shop; a group of prum mages talked excitedly among themselves as they emerged from an item shop; supporters equipped with large backpacks accompanied adventurers up and down the street.

Despite all the activity, there wasn't a single person who didn't notice *Loki Familia*'s presence. Everyone knew exactly who they were and their powerful reputation. Some of the onlookers were filled with envy but most were just awestruck. Every single one of them got out of the way as the group passed.

A path opened up right in front of Aiz.

“You know, this just doesn’t feel right. Bete would be so happy right now, too.”

“Bete ain’t that vulgar, Tiona. The laddie do have his own way of showin’ pride.”

“Ehhh. Gareth, why’d you have to take his side? That can’t be true.”

“The laddie do see a difference between lookin’ down on folks and hatin’ them.”

“I don’t understand.”

The werewolf had been assigned to a group that stayed at home. The Amazonian twins and the dwarf were engaged in lighthearted conversation as the group arrived in front of the Guild.

Built from white marble with the front lined with a series of large pillars, this building was called the Pantheon, temple of the gods. Several monuments stood on the front lawn, greeting the adventurers traveling through the front doors.

The Guild was the engine that made the city prosper because it was in complete control of the economic benefits of the Dungeon. All adventurers were registered in their database as a way to protect them and average citizens at the same time. In return, its employees advised adventurers and provided them with information on the obstacles they would encounter in the Dungeon. The better prepared the adventurers were, the more money they would make, and the more the city would thrive.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the Guild’s support was indispensable for every adventurer.

“Riveria, Gareth, and I will take the magic stones to the Exchange. Everyone else, stick to the plan and take care of your individual tasks. And please make sure that all the money is accounted for? Isn’t that right, Raul?”

“That was a fluke, sir! Won’t happen again!!”

“Ha-ha. Well, then, let’s get to it.”

Items collected in the Dungeon could be sold to the Guild or to individual familias.

However, the only group legally allowed to buy the magic stones recovered from monsters was the Guild. Therefore, every adventurer came here to exchange them for money.

Magic stones were used to make a variety of items, including the magic-stone lamps that illuminated the city at night. They could also be used to create heaters, coolers, and other things necessary for daily life. Magic stones were always in demand all over the world.

The Dungeon spawned an unlimited number of monsters and Orario's adventurers could collect an infinite supply of the stones. That's why only the Guild was allowed to purchase them. Magic stones had become the lifeblood of the world economy. The Guild used that money to create the grand city standing today.

As the only producer of magic-stone products in existence, the Dungeon had blessed Orario with an incredible business opportunity—and made it the true center of the world.

"Well, we should get moving, too. Don't let anyone try to steal our drop items on the way."

"Surely no one is stupid enough to pick a fight with *Loki Familia*…"

"Caution. Caution, Lefiya."

Finn and the other leaders went straight into the Guild and to the Exchange counter, while everyone else broke off into their groups. Tione led Aiz, Tiona, and Lefiya to their destination.

Drop items were used to create weapons and armor. Although the Guild would be more than happy to buy them, it would never be at the best price. While the Guild could be trusted to always pay up, many adventurers sold their loot directly to familias to get as much money as possible.

There was always a risk of being ripped off, but if the adventurers were confident in their bargaining skills, selling to familias could result in a big payday. For those less-experienced adventurers, selling to the Guild was the

only way to guarantee getting paid for their hard work.

“Raul is so amazing, wheeling and dealing like that. I’m sure I’d end up falling for some trick.”

“He’s been burned once or twice, that’s why he knows what to do and what to say. The general is forcing him into these situations. But you, on the other hand, don’t even try to learn.”

In truth, being part of *Loki Familia* and famous made bargaining much easier. They were capable of bringing back extremely rare and valuable items from the Deep Levels. It was in the best interests of other familias and merchants to stay on their good side.

Each member of *Loki Familia* had their favorite shops and knew what kind of drop items the owners were looking for. Tione’s group carried boxes and bags of different shapes and sizes down the middle of Northwest Main, en route to the first stop on their list. It wasn’t long before the four girls arrived in front of a large building.

It was constructed out of shiny white stone, with a large banner bearing the symbol of *Dian Cecht Familia*—sparkling gems on top of medicinal leaves—hanging above the doorway.

“Welcome, *Loki Familia*.”

“Amid! Long time, no see!”

Tiona happily waved at the girl who came out to greet them.

The girl was human but so petite that she looked like a doll come to life. Standing at only 150 celch, it wasn’t hard to picture her as part of some large collection.

Incredibly straight, silver hair hung down around her thin face. Large eyes lined with long eyelashes gave her a delicate expression. She wore a plain white robe that was similar to a nurse’s, her familia’s uniform.

Amid Teasanare.

A member of *Dian Cecht Familia* and an acquaintance of the girls.

“Am I right in assuming that your visit today is related to the quest?”

“That it is. Is now a good time?”

“Yes. Right this way.”

The first order of business was to report their success and receive their compensation from their client. Amid led them farther into the building.

Dian Cecht Familia earned money by producing various types of medicine and items. Its members brewed and sold many kinds of potions, as well as filled custom orders for stronger formulas or unique items.

This particular familia’s merchandise was of extremely high quality. For example, they sold a serum that was so powerful it could restore sight to a blind man. Other familias sold healing items, but this group prided itself on quality so much that it limited its customers to those who could pay for it.

The inside of the building was broken into many small rooms used for selling items, treating patients, and meetings. Aiz looked into room after room, walking through the busy maze. Amid guided them to a counter.

“I apologize. There are no private rooms available at this time. Is this location acceptable?”

“It’ll do. Straight to the point, here’s the spring water you requested. It should be enough to fulfill your order. Have a look.”

Tione placed a large glass bottle on the counter.

Amid picked it up with both hands and examined it closely.

“This is genuine…Thank you for filling our request. On behalf of the *Dian Cecht Familia*, please allow me to convey our gratitude. Here is your payment. Please confirm it meets your expectations.”

The young girl pulled a box out from under the counter and opened the lid. It contained twenty elixirs. The most expensive healing potion in *Dian Cecht Familia*’s inventory, each bottle sold for no less than 500,000 valis. Tione leaned in, her jaw sagging as Lefiya looked on from behind her.

Lights from the magic-stone lamps above reflected off the crystal bottles, covering the Amazon’s face in many colorful sparkles. Even Aiz was impressed with the beauty and attention to detail put into the casing.

“Amid, we happened to come across a rare item in the Deep Levels. Could you make me an offer? I can sell it to you right here if we can reach an agreement.”

“Understood. Let’s make a deal.”

“Aiz, if you please.”

Prompted by Tione, Aiz walked up to the counter.

She then placed a long box onto it and opened the top to reveal a drop item carefully wrapped in a protective cloth. Slowly undoing the wrapping, Aiz held it out to Amid.

“…This is…”

“Cadmus Hide. Picked it up while working on your quest.”

Amid stood in stunned silence.

The girl quickly drew two gloves from her pockets before closely inspecting an item that almost never came up for sale in any marketplace.

Cadmus Hide could be used to create nearly unbreakable armor, but it was also known to be a key ingredient for potent healing items. Considering its rarity and many uses, it was an item that mercantile familias would be willing to give their left arms to acquire as much as possible.

“…It appears authentic and in pristine condition.”

“It is. Well, then, what’s your offer?”

“I would be willing to purchase this for seven million valis.”

“Fifteen.”

—Tione’s time to shine had arrived.

Lefiya’s and Tiona’s eyes shot open in surprise. Even the aloof Aiz Wallenstein was slightly taken aback. Tione’s lips curled up in a grin, revealing the tips of her teeth on one side.

Amid’s doll-like face remained stoic, but a shiver in her shoulders revealed her true feelings.

“You must be joking. I’ll pay up to eight million.”

“Amid. You said it yourself, this hide is in pristine condition. Just look at it—it’s gotta be one of the best ones you’ve ever seen. Fourteen.”

A different kind of fierce battle had begun.

The two “combatants” appeared to be calm, but the heat and intensity radiating from the two of them caused the other three girls to take a step back.

“Wha—what are you doing, Tione?”

“We’re under strict orders from our commander to ‘get as much money as possible.’ I’m not going to settle for anything less than decent.”

“He said no such thing!”

Tione was on a mission—to be complimented on her bargaining skills—and wasn’t about to back down.

Her instincts as an Amazon set her spirit on fire from within. Not even the voices of her sister or an elf could reach her now. Aiz remained silent, calmly watching the events unfold.

Amid didn’t break eye contact with her opponent even as Tione leaned forward and placed her elbows on the counter.

“Eight and a half, nothing more.”

“We nearly died trying to kill that dragon. We’d really appreciate you showing some appreciation for our dance with death. Thirteen fifty.”

This was getting embarrassing…

Tiona and the others knew the true story behind the Cadmus Hide and looked at the girl with varying degrees of distress.

“…This is getting beyond me. Please be patient for a moment. I will consult with Lord Dian Cecht.”

“Oh, then perhaps we should call this off? I don’t have much time and I can’t just wait around. So I think I’ll test the market, see what other familias have to say.”

Amid froze in place. That reaction was exactly what the grinning Tione wanted to see.

Aiz and the other girls appeared ready to abandon their ally to her fate. But it was the doll-like girl who sighed first. She had given up.

“Would you be willing to accept…twelve million?”

“Thanks so much, Amid. Where would we be without friends?”

Tione grinned again, sounding as happy as a kid in a candy store. Amid sighed again.

The short girl called two members of her familia over to the counter to help her prepare the amount owed.

Lefiya looked absolutely terrified as Amid handed her a large sack filled with jingling gold coins.

“Sorry, Amid…”

“Think nothing of it. It was our quest that led to the situation in the first place.”

Aiz inadvertently apologized to the short girl after the transaction had taken place. Amid grimaced but waved it off. “Both sides shall share in the pain,” she continued.

Amid was both wise and kind. As a member of this familia, she had the job of healing adventurers. She was able to look past their differences and forgive Tione for the damage she had done to *Dian Cecht Familia*’s savings. She trusted *Loki Familia*.

Aiz was unsure how to proceed; it would be difficult for her to purchase her own high potions and other items after what had just transpired. Eventually she worked up enough courage to ask. Tiona and Lefiya were right behind her, wanting to buy their own potions next.

The doll-like girl saw the group out. She bowed deeply as the young ladies left the building.

“Ahhh, it’s going to be really hard to talk to Amid next time…You went too far, Tione.”

“Anything less and we wouldn’t have gotten what that hide was worth. Amid knows that.”

“Another bothersome quest might be issued behind Miss Amid’s back sometime soon…”

“Yeah, I bet! Their god’s way of getting back at us!”

Carrying a large amount of money and their hefty reward, Tione’s group made their way farther down Northwest Main.

It was still well before noon, but the number of adventurers on the main street had dramatically decreased. The morning rush to the Dungeon was over. Only townspeople and adventurers taking the day off were left. Even without their armor, it was easy to tell adventurers apart from merchants or artisans by how they carried themselves. Actually, most of them appeared to be enjoying a day of shopping.

Many kinds of shops lined both sides of the wide street. Aiz listened to the Amazons’ spirited conversation—Lefiya could hardly get a word in edgewise—and took a look into each of the shop windows as they went by. Then the group turned off the main road.

“We should get these home quickly. It’s scary walking around with this much money.”

“…Tione, sorry but may I go to my weapons shop?”

“Ah! *Goibniu Familia*’s place? I’ll go, too! I can’t use Urga as she is!”

Tiona jumped in the moment that Aiz quietly asked for permission to go off on her own.

Spares for expeditions were one-size-fits-all, off-the-shelf blades purchased by the familia. However, each adventurer had their own preferences when it came to what weapons they carried and paid for them themselves. After all, no one wanted to be using someone else’s blade when their life was on the line.

Tione shrugged, knowing it was impossible to stop them.

“Lefiya and I will take these back home. We get enough attention as it is. Let’s go, Lefiya.”

“Ah, yes. Miss Aiz, Miss Tiona, until we meet again.”

Tione carried the box of elixirs over her shoulder and Lefiya had to carry the

bag of gold coins in both arms as the two girls split off from the group.

“Shall we?” Tiona grinned at Aiz, who nodded back to her.

Many types of familias resided in the world.

Since Orario was known as the Labyrinth City, over half of the familias that called it home made their living in the Dungeon. However, groups like *Dian Cecht Familia* weren’t uncommon. There were even familias outside of Orario that had created kingdoms and empires of their own.

The one thing each familia had in common was a constant desire to become stronger and more influential. Living on Gekai was a game to the gods, so it went without saying they were very competitive. Their arguments could result in full-scale wars. Their followers needed to be strong enough to either defend their territory or to discourage outbreaks altogether.

Each familia’s activities reflected the interests and personalities of their gods.

“It’s always so dark around here. That wouldn’t be so bad if it wasn’t so hot and humid.”

“Ah, um…”

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry, sorry. After you.”

The two girls had arrived at a long, narrow stone building. Tiona opened the door for Aiz.

They’d walked all the way to a district between North Main and Northwest Main streets. The roads were much narrower back here, small houses and random buildings crammed in as tightly as possible. It wasn’t exactly the liveliest place in the city. It perfectly suited the purposes of its residents, but most citizens of Orario shared Tiona’s opinion.

Goibniu Familia.

A familia composed of artisans and smiths specializing in weapons and armor.

Despite being nowhere near as well known as their rival *Hephaistos Familia*, they could hold their own in terms of quality. The blacksmiths of *Goibniu Familia* prided themselves on simplicity and fortitude. Focusing almost exclusively on custom orders, they had developed a strong fan base among all

levels of adventurers.

The *Goibniu Familia*'s emblem, three hammers, was engraved into the door.

"Anybody hooome?"

"Home…"

Tiona announced their presence as she closed the door behind her. Aiz echoed her, unsure of how to follow that. The entrance opened up to a wide workshop.

The workshop was just as dim as the streets outside, the only light coming from the forge at the back of the room. Many tools designed for metalwork hung neatly from the stone walls. Several smiths were hard at work at their stations, the sounds of their hammers accompanied by the roaring of the flames behind them.

"Welcome to…HUH?! AMAZON THE SLASHER?!"

"Tiona Hyrute?!"

"Um, could you not scream my title like it's the coming of the Apocalypse every time…?"

Every set of eyes in the room snapped up in horror as if a Dungeon monster had just come into their workshop. Tiona stared back at them, more annoyed than startled.

The blacksmiths of *Goibniu Familia* dropped their tools and started rushing around in a panic.

"Boss! The store crusher came back!"

"Dammit, what are you here for this time?!"

"I'd like to place an order for a new weapon."

"S-seriously?! What happened to Urga?! I had to work for days on end and used enough adamantite to break a horse's back to finish it for you! A custom beauty!"

"It melted."

"NOOOOooooooooo!"

Ignoring the other blacksmiths' screams of terror and cries for their boss, Aiz walked in the other direction and into a side room next to the workshop.

An elderly divine being was inside.

Nose high on his thin face, the short yet robust deity looked like a hawk. White hair hung down just below his ears, and his dignified silver beard was thick enough to hide his mouth. Physically, he resembled a dwarf more than a human.

He, Goibniu, was hard at work polishing a dagger in his hands. Sensing the girl's presence, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and said, "What is it?"

"I came to ask for repairs."

All orders from Aiz went directly through the deity himself.

Whether Goibniu had taken an interest in her, she didn't know. In any case, he gave her strict instructions to always come to him first.

"…At it again, I see."

Aiz handed the god Desperate. Slowly drawing the blade from its sheath, he didn't take his eyes off the blade as he spoke.

A Durandal, the blade would never break. It did, however, need to be sharpened to avoid loss in cutting power.

Under normal circumstances, this kind of weapon wouldn't need any serious maintenance. Unfortunately for the sword, Aiz Wallenstein wasn't a "normal" adventurer.

"The blade has taken serious damage. What did it cut?"

"Monsters that spewed a corrosive purple acid—many of them…"

The God of the Forge spoke slowly, carefully as he examined Desperate, but he said nothing else. Aiz wasn't the type to carry on a conversation, either, so both stood there in silence.

Goibniu finished the diagnostic on the lackluster blade and looked up to face Aiz.

“Restoring the cutting edge will take time. I’ll provide a replacement until then; use it.”

Goibniu’s declaration caught Aiz off guard. She had fully expected to be told to prepare her own substitute.

He sensed the confusion in her eyes.

“Most blades wouldn’t last a week in your hands. Accept my offer.”

“…”

Unable to refuse, Aiz gave in to his forceful suggestion.

Goibniu got up from his stool and disappeared into another room. A long rapier was in his hands when he returned. The blade was thin and had almost no decorations apart from a knuckle guard attached to the hilt.

Aiz took the weapon from the deity’s outstretched hands and drew it from its sheath.

Marveling at the detail in her reflection coming off the blade, Aiz could tell that many hours had gone into crafting this work of art.

Most likely, it could inflict even more damage than Desperate.

“I’ll set ’em to work right away. Return in five days.”

“I understand…Thank you.”

With his Arcanum power sealed, Goibniu was no different from an average man, with the exception of his skill as a blacksmith. He needed his followers to complete this task. Aiz made a short bow before leaving the room. The god returned to working on the dagger even before she disappeared through the open door.

This was how their interactions always went—always to the point. Aiz returned to the workshop with the rapier in her hands. The blacksmiths were still talking with Tiona, each of them on the verge of tears. The Amazon turned to face the human girl, smiled, and the two of them left the workshop.

Attaching the sheath to her waist, Aiz felt that the new weapon was just a little bit heavier than her favorite saber.

It had become a *Loki Familia* tradition to celebrate after expeditions at the bars around town.

It was Loki's way of showing her appreciation to her followers; most of them shared her appreciation for a stiff drink. It was one of the few times that the adventurers could really let their hair down.

The sun had already set by the time *Loki Familia* was finished with their errands. The eastern sky was completely dark when the adventurers who took part in the expedition left home. Those who hadn't ventured into the Dungeon with them watched with envious eyes as the group of about thirty walked out the front gate toward West Main Street.

The major difference between the Northwest District and the West District was the number of average people who called it home.

Since Orario was the world's only source of magic stones, it needed to have a strong workforce to produce magic-stone products. The Guild had gone to great lengths to lure as many people as possible to the city to fill those jobs. Most had settled in the Northwest District.

Everything that they needed to raise a family and live out their lives comfortably without joining any familia was located here.

It went without saying that they needed a place to blow off steam just as much as the adventurers. Bars and hotels lined the main street. Many men came all the way here for a chance to meet a simple, girl-next-door type of young lady.

"I don't come up here often, but it's kind of nice. Calm, stable. I could get used to this."

"Yeah, Northwest Main Street has so many adventurers. This is much better."

The Amazonian twins chatted between themselves as the rest of the group felt a little out of place, since no one was wearing any armor or carrying weapons.

Hardworking artisans enjoyed many delicious types of alcoholic drinks, and young women called out to the crowd on the street to draw in potential

customers. A fearless-looking adventurer made a pass at one of them. She rejected him right away and the two started snapping at each other. A few men from inside the bar came out to see what the commotion was…and challenged the young adventurer to a drinking contest. Holding jugs of ale in both hands, the men downed their drinks as fast as possible as more people gathered around to watch. Soon, all were drinking, laughing, and enjoying the night.

The streets were illuminated by magic-stone lamps lighting up what just transpired as well. Tiona and Lefiya smiled at each other as the adventurer and the three men went into the bar, drunkenly laughing like brothers.

“Mama Mia! We’re here!”

Evening had turned to night as Loki led her followers to one of her favorite watering holes. A group of waitresses rushed out to greet them as soon as the deity called out the owner’s name.

They had arrived at The Benevolent Mistress, the largest bar on West Main Street. Every employee at this bar was female, all wearing the same waitress uniform. Aiz and the others knew this was the reason that Loki liked this place so much.

“We have tables prepared for you inside and on the terrace. We apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Ahh, not a problem. Thanks.”

The Benevolent Mistress had a café terrace.

Loki had made reservations, but a group this large wouldn’t all fit inside the bar. A very polite elf explained the situation and the group separated into two, one going to the terrace and one going inside the bar.

Aiz joined the group being led inside.

“Hello there!”

Every seat was full. The table they’d reserved seemed like an unnatural hole in the middle of this mass of humanity. Other customers had the same idea as Loki. Several young men looked at the young waitresses with distant eyes, wishing they had the courage to approach them.

They had good reason to be cautious. These waitresses were cut from a completely different cloth from the girls outside. Any kind of physical advance was met with swift retribution. Loki's cheek was already red from a catgirl's slap.

The decor was mostly wood. It was much easier for customers to relax in here than in most other bars.

Magic-stone chandeliers hung overhead. The owner preferred a fancy, modern style.

"The food here is so good. I accidentally eat too much every time."

"More like ya eat everything in sight…"

Suddenly every set of eyes in the room was on *Loki Familia*. Other adventurers sat in awe, the color draining from their faces. None of the top-class adventurers cared as they made their way to their seats.

Aiz could feel the pressure of all the eye contact on her face, but her expression didn't change.

She was used to being the center of attention.

"…?"

One of the stares felt different to her.

She couldn't put it into words…It just felt like it was directed *straight at her*. But it was harmless.

She wanted to figure out where it was coming from, but Tiona and the others were starting to get excited. Aiz decided to ignore the strange feeling and sat down at the table.

"Yes-sa! Great job in the Dungeon, people! Time to cut loose! Drink up!"

Loki stood up from her chair, hoisting her first mug high into the air. Everyone else followed suit before clinking their glasses together and taking the first drink. Aiz held up her own glass, joining everyone else, but with a little less enthusiasm.

Their table was in the corner of the main room. They could see out to the café

terrace through a window right next to their table. A door was right there as well; they could go outside at any time. Food and more drinks started arriving; everything looked and smelled absolutely fantastic. Hands started flying everywhere, trying to grab as much as possible before it was too late. The grilled chicken and fruity wine were particularly sought after.

“General, I’ll pour you another drink.”

“Ah, my thanks, Tione. But you know, this is the third time already. I’m not used to drinking this fast. Is this some kind of plan, getting me drunk?”

“Fu-fu, nothing at all. Now, try this one.”

“That damn Amazon never changes…”

“Ah-HA! Gareth! I’m gonna drink ya under the table!”

“’At right? Right, then, I’ll drink ya under the floor!”

“I do declare that the winner gets ta have playtime with Riveria’s bosom!”

“I-I’ll join in!”

“Me tooooo!” “I’m in!” “Hiccup!—Then I’ll join, too.”

“General?!”

“L-Lady Riveria…”

“Allow me some say in this…”

Aiz stayed out of this ruckus, watching the show. However, it wasn’t long before she was drawn into their flames. Normally, the weaker and younger adventurers were very reserved around her. Now that they were drunk and felt invincible, a few saw their chance and tried to get Aiz to sample the wine. The blond girl didn’t know how to react to all the glasses being shoved in her face.

“Cut it out, idiots. Don’t make her drink.”

“…What? You don’t drink wine, Miss Aiz?”

The adventurers immediately withdrew their glasses after Riveria’s sharp warning. Lefiya, who was sitting on the girl’s left, turned to her and asked a question.

Aiz sat there in silence, but Tiona was quick to react. Tearing the last of the meat off the bone in her hand and downing the rest of the wine in her own glass, she leaned forward to respond to the elf.

“Nngahh…Haaa. Bad things happen when Aiz drinks, yeah?”

“…”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“You could say that things get messy, that she can’t hold the alcohol…that she nearly killed Loki…”

“Tiona, please…Stop.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Aiz, you’re so red!”

Tiona leaned in close to Aiz to examine the rare look of embarrassment on the girl’s face. Lefiya started looking around the table in a panic. Tiona noticed that, too, and laughed so hard she had to put both hands on the table to stay upright. Aiz looked away from her, grimacing.

Both groups of *Loki Familia* were hitting a high note, laughing and enjoying one another’s company. The waitresses worked quickly and efficiently to bring out more food and drinks the moment the first ones disappeared from sight.

Laughs in loud voices came from other customers at the bar as well. Time passed quickly, but the night was still young.

“Oh yeah, Aiz! Tell that one story!”

Loki had been enjoying everyone’s take on different events in the expedition when Bete jumped in.

He was looking directly at the girl across the table, several empty glasses in front of him. The werewolf had been riding high on everyone’s good mood and made that request.

Aiz didn’t understand what he meant and tilted her head to the side.

“You know the one! About those Minotaurs that ran away on the way back! Remember, ya finished off the last one on the fifth floor? And then, ya know, Tomato Boy!”

—At last, she knew.

The white-haired boy she had saved.

“Minotaurs? Are you talking about the ones that attacked us on the seventeenth floor but all turned tail right away?”

“That, that! By some miracle, they all just kept going up an’ we had to haul ass just ta catch up! All after two weeks in the Dungeon, too!”

Bete slammed his mug down onto the table and nodded vigorously when Tione asked for confirmation.

There was a different tone to his voice, and it was making Aiz nervous.

Loki and the other adventurers listened to Bete retell the whole story until he finally got to his point.

“Yeah, and there! That ‘adventurer’! Damn newbie kid!”

—Stop.

Aiz’s heart whispered.

“Got himself cornered like a lil’ bunny! Shakin’ like one, too! Almost couldn’t bear to watch!”

“Oh? What happened to the boy? Was he okay?”

“Aiz carved up that Mino at the last second, ain’t that right?”

Aiz had no idea what her face looked like at this very moment.

She didn’t recognize the strange feeling that was building in her heart. Why was it getting stronger every time Bete brought up the boy who had been in the back of her mind since yesterday?

The werewolf looked almost childish to her, laughing at the top of his lungs. Aiz asked herself many questions, including about last night’s precious dreams.

“That kid took the full blast of that stinky cow’s blood, got soaked! Looked like a bright-red tomato sitting in the Dungeon! So, Tomato Boy! Gya-ha-ha-ha—Ow, my ribs…!”

“Whoa…”

Tiona scrunched up her face.

Even something that simple made Aiz's heart weep.

"Aiz, please tell me you were trying to do that! You were, right? Please, I'm begging you…!"

"…No, I wasn't."

Bete was laughing hard enough to squeeze tears out of his eyes. It took everything the blond girl had to force those words out of her throat.

Other customers had overheard the story and were joining in the laughter. It made her cringe.

"And get this! Tomato Boy, he ran away, screaming his head off!…Geeh! Our princess rescues a boy, and he just buggers off!"

"…Keh."

"GYA-HA-HA-HA-HA! Absolutely priceless! Aizee scares away a newbie!! You are soooo awesome!!"

"Ha-ha-ha…S-sorry, Aiz. I can't take it…!"

Waves of laughter swirled around the table.

Lefiya, Loki, Tione, everyone's shoulders were jumping. Tiona was facedown on the table, pounding her fists up and down.

Aiz was the only exception, a massive hole in the laughter.

She was in a completely different world, distant.

"Ehhhh? Don't make those scary eyes. They're ruining your pretty face!"

Tiona looked up from the table and leaned in.

Aiz had no clue.

What eyes was she making for the boy who triggered her memories?

"Been a long time since I've seen somethin' that pathetic, thought I was gonna puke! Makin' me cry just thinkin' about it!"

"…Hmmm."

“The hell was he doing anyway? If yer gonna cry like a little baby, ya shouldn’t be down there in the first place! Ain’t that right, Aiz?”

Aiz’s hands clenched into fists beneath the table.

She felt a gaze and turned to see Riveria with one eye closed and the other looking at her.

In an instant, Aiz could tell that out of all the people at the table, only Riveria could tell that there was a storm brewing behind her aloof expression.

“It’s weak ‘adventurers’ like him who make us look bad. Just give it up already.”

“That’s quite enough, Bete! It was our fault that the Minotaurs escaped in the first place! That boy did nothing wrong! You have no right to make light of his trauma over ale!! Learn some respect!”

Riveria was now glaring at Bete, eyebrows arching into a sharp frown.

Tiona and the others now recognized the true meaning of the shiver in Aiz’s shoulders, the flames growing in her eyes. However, the werewolf did not stop.

“Oh-oh! You elves and yer pride! But yeah, what’s the purpose of protectin’ a piece of work like that? Sayin’ it’s our fault, you’re just tryin’ to protect yer ego ’cause you feel guilty. Trash is trash! What’s wrong with callin’ it what it is?”

“Hey, hey, enough with this. Bete, Riveria, you’re killin’ the mood.”

Even Loki stepping in wasn’t enough to convince the werewolf to quiet down.

Taking Riveria’s outburst as a challenge, Bete’s instincts took over. He didn’t attempt to hide his laughter, fangs glistening in the magic-stone lamps’ light as he looked back at Aiz.

“Huh, Aiz! What did ya think about him, that pathetic piece ’a crap shaking in front of you? Does he deserve to stand at our level as adventurers?”

“…I don’t blame him for his reaction, under those circumstances.”

“Why ya actin’ all goody-two-shoes?…Fine, then, I’m changin’ the question. Him or me—who’s a better man?”

Even Finn was taken aback.

“…Bete, are you drunk?”

“Shut it! Now, Aiz! Choose! As a female, which of us wags your tail? Which male makes ya all stirred up?”

For the first time in her life, Aiz felt clear anger at Bete.

She would take the boy over the vile man in front of her any day.

“…I have no reason to answer that question. Especially to you.”

“How absurd.”

“Quiet, hag!…Well, then, if that kid came right now and said he liked ya, would ya take him?”

The flames of anger burning within her were suddenly quelled.

No, that wasn’t possible.

Not happening.

Aiz had no time to be weighed down by those weaker than herself.

She couldn’t stop her progress for someone so far below her.

Her eyes were locked on a higher level, on progress.

She had a dream that must become reality.

Aiz would never return to the weakling she once was.

“See, of course ya wouldn’t! Why would a tiny kid so weak, feeble, and all-around nauseating be allowed to stand next to you? Most of all, *you wouldn’t let him.*”

He took in a big breath before adding:

“A tiny kid could never land Aiz Wallenstein.”

She couldn’t deny it.

A heartbeat later…

Someone in the corner of the room stood up.

“Bell?!”

One of the waitresses called after a young boy as he tore through the crowd

and dashed out the door.

For just a second, Aiz clearly saw the boy's face. The waitress wasn't far behind.

…

Her mind went blank and she stood up.

It happened so fast that no one knew what happened. The girl left everyone to their confusion and went outside.

That boy…

Hair as white as the winter mountains. Ruby-red eyes glistening with tears.

He'd heard everything.

The boy she'd saved.

Walking out the front door, Aiz looked up and down the street. She caught a glimpse of the waitress running to her right, heading toward the Dungeon entrance at the center of the city. But Aiz couldn't bring herself to take another step.

She couldn't chase him.

—Bell.

The name the waitress yelled inside echoed around in her head.

It was the name of the boy she saved yesterday. It was also the name of the boy she hurt today.

The white rabbit had brought her those precious dreams, revived memories within her long forgotten.

"…"

Several familiar voices called out to her as she stood in the street.

There was no doubt in her mind that her younger self would have given chase.

She would've caught that boy who was making his way to the large hole in the ground, the Dungeon.

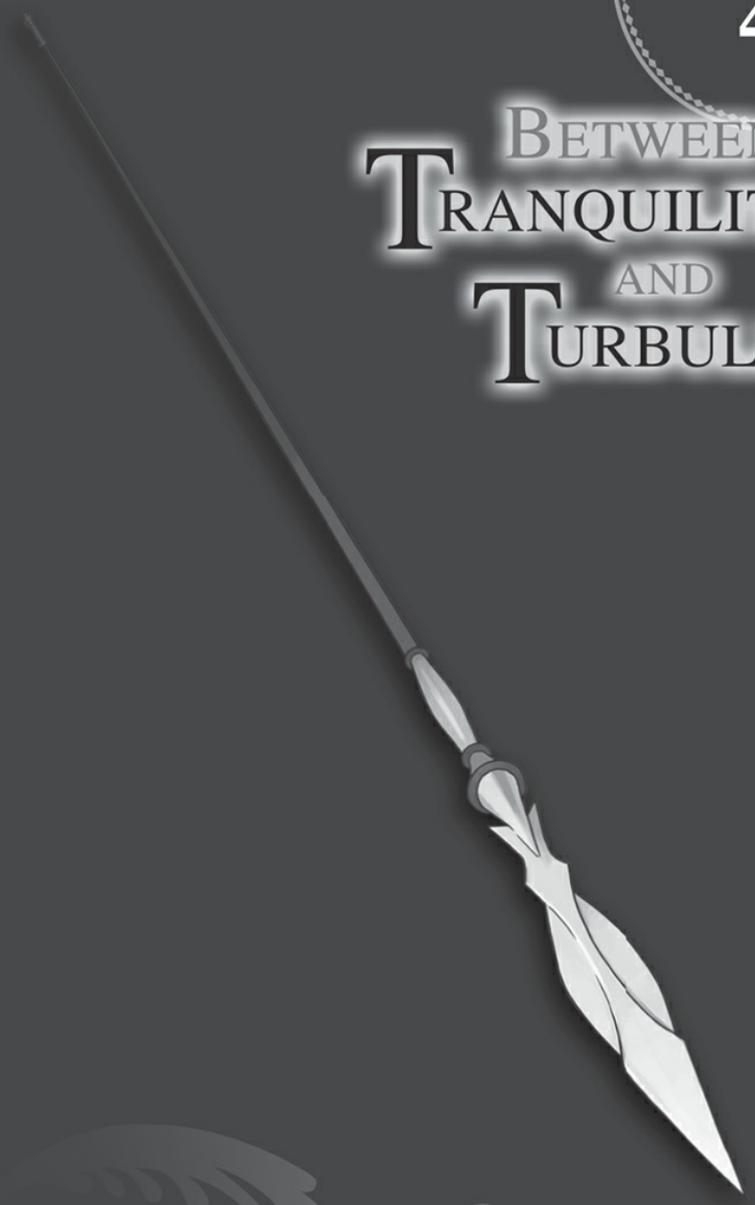
But today, she could not.

As she was now, Aiz could not chase the rabbit.

CHAPTER

4

Between Tranquility and Turbulence



Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

Яна знаходзіцца паміж
запалам, што яна спакойная.

© Kiyotaka Haimura

CHAPTER 4

BETWEEN TRANQUILITY AND TURBULENCE

The sun emerged from the eastern horizon, lighting up the landscape.

The first of the sun's rays cleared Orario's high city wall.

A cool air hovered over the metropolis.

"Aizuu…still not herself again today…"

Said Loki quietly as she leaned over the railing.

She was standing on a bridge connecting two of the towers. The stone bridge overlooked a garden far below.

Loki, however, was looking at the blond-haired girl sitting in a chair beneath one of the many trees on the narrow lawn.

"She was down in the dumps all of yesterday…"

"Aiz wasting time in this manner is beyond unusual; it's strange."

"Ya got that right…"

Another person, a demi-human, stood on the bridge next to Loki with her eyes on the girl below.

Her hair was like a constantly flowing river of jade, with eyes to match. Her feminine frame was long, thin, and absolutely radiating elvish beauty. Even her silky white skin was flawless.

Riveria stood on the bridge with an air of brilliant elegance. There was a stark contrast between her and the goddess with her elbows on the railing.

"Usually, it don't matter if it's after an expedition or whatever, she's always headed ta the Dungeon…On the bright side, I don't have ta worry as much when I can see her."

"I am very much in agreement. So, then."

Riveria turned her back to the railing. Her refined facial features, usually symmetrical enough to rival the gods', twisted into a grimace.

In fact, she and Aiz possessed enough beauty to pass as goddesses themselves. A few of the divine women had made this mistake and become jealous in the past.

In Riveria's case, it was because royal blood flowed through her veins. She was a high elf.

By and large, elves tended to avoid interacting with gods and humans, choosing to spend their lives in their forest homelands. Riveria had followed a different path and eventually ended up in the Labyrinth City.

However, other elves, including Lefiya, could instantly recognize her lineage and treated her with the utmost respect. While she tolerated it, the special treatment made her uncomfortable.

"The cause of her depression must be the incident at the bar."

"I don't blame her, Bete harassin' her like that. For what it's worth, Bete's hurtin' real bad, too."

"Not my problem. He's getting what he deserves."

Two days had passed since the night at the bar.

Tiona led the charge to capture Bete after Aiz had run outside. Believing that he was the reason she left the table, they took it upon themselves to punish him. It took no time at all to tie him up and hang him by his ankles outside the bar. Riveria had taken part—he'd called her a hag, after all—by pinning his head to the ground with her foot as the Amazons prepared the rope.

The werewolf had no memory of this incident the morning after. He became extremely depressed after hearing the details. Tiona and Tione had taken it upon themselves to keep him out of Aiz's sight.

Riveria sighed, hoping that the werewolf would learn from his mistakes.

"Then again, Aiz ain't the type of girl ta get worked up over somethin' like that…"

"Then there must be another cause?"

“Most likely. But that’s somethin’ only Aiz knows.”

Riveria tilted her head and glanced down at the garden.

The only other events from the other night that she could remember were the waitress who ran outside and the mysterious customer who dashed out before her. Everything happened so fast that Riveria didn’t know the full story, but she assumed that something Aiz couldn’t ignore transpired before the incident.

What’s more, it was just as Loki said. Only Aiz knew what the problem was; they had nothing to go on.

“What shall we do? Give her some space?”

“That’s the thing, ain’t it? If we fix her problem an’ she roars back to life, there’ll be no stoppin’ her from goin’ to the Dungeon.

“Ehh…” Loki groaned for a moment, letting her voice trail off until, “AH!” She spun to face Riveria.

“I’m leavin’ it to you!”

“…What?”

“I’m trusting ya, Riveria. Rather than me doin’ this and that, you’d be much better.”

Loki walked closer to the elf.

“You never planned on leavin’ her alone, even with the whole ‘shall we give her some space’—No need for that. You wanna ask her what’s wrong as much as I do, don’cha?”

Loki mimicked Riveria’s words—poorly—with a grin on her face.

The elf fought back an annoyed twitch but was still impressed by her goddess’s ability to see her true feelings. Her face relaxed.

“Go do your thing, Mama.”

Loki walked past Riveria, patting her on the shoulder before making her way to the open tower door. The elf silently watched as her goddess put her hands behind her head and disappeared from sight.

Riveria Ljos Alf had been a member of *Loki Familia* for longer than most could remember.

She had known Aiz for longer than anyone, with the exception of Loki herself. The two had developed a strong bond over the years.

“…Mama?”

Despite her verbal confusion, she couldn’t reject the idea.

Sighing quietly to herself, Riveria walked to the central tower.



“Aiz.”

The central tower was surrounded by a garden at its base.

The other towers blocked light for most of the day, but the efforts of other members of the familia were paying off. All of the plants were green and lush under the light of magic-stone lamp ornaments shaped like orbs.

Riveria emerged from the central tower’s wooden door and walked across the lawn toward Aiz.

“Riveria…”

“Up early, as usual. But for some reason your weapon is still.”

Aiz was sitting in a long chair in the shade of a tree.

The rapier, rather than her weapon of choice, was propped up against the roots. Riveria deduced that Aiz more than likely came down here with the intention of practicing but wasn’t in the mood.

The two made eye contact for a moment, but Aiz’s golden gaze fell to the grass at Riveria’s feet.

“…”

“…”

Silence, but for only a second or two.

Riveria thought about how to bring up the issue at hand but quickly realized that it wasn’t necessary.

She didn’t have to beat around the bush.

The two of them could get straight to the point.

“What happened?”

Aiz looked up but couldn’t make eye contact.

The girl’s expression was still normal, but Riveria could tell that a conflict was storming inside.

At long last, Aiz started to speak.

“About the Minotaur…When we were at the bar.”

“Yes.”

“I…That boy…I saved that adventurer, but…”

Riveria listened intently to Aiz’s story, feeling increasingly sick to her stomach as she came to understand Aiz’s dilemma.

She learned what really happened two nights ago. Regret that she hadn’t put a stop to it sooner surged through her veins.

For now, Riveria looked at the girl’s face with a new understanding. Aiz appeared just as aloof as normal but somber at the same time. The elf thought she sensed a hint of dejection.

While Aiz hadn’t physically harmed the boy, she had inflicted a different kind of scar.

Part of her was happy that something other than training in the Dungeon was making Aiz feel emotion. Now she had to make sure it went in a positive direction.

“What action would you like to take?”

The blond girl looked back at the ground. Riveria said nothing else.

The elf waited patiently for the girl to come up with her own answer.

“…I don’t know, but…”

The answer came.

“I should apologize, I think…”

Her voice was quiet, uneven.

“I see…”

“…”

The conversation ended. A gentle breeze surrounded them until the sound of a deep bell echoed from one of the towers.

It was to let them know breakfast was served.

“Continue your search until you have confidence in your answer. Should you ask, I will lend you my ear and advice.”

“Okay…”

“Time to eat. Let’s go.”

The two of them glanced toward the ringing tower. Riveria said her piece before turning away.

She had given the girl direction.

It was not her place to say anything more. While it pained her to watch the girl suffer through this dilemma, Aiz would grow. That’s what Riveria wanted.

It made her proud, like a parent, to watch Aiz mature in front of her eyes.

“Riveria…”

“?”

“…Thank you.”

Riveria looked at her over her shoulder and noticed a hint of warmth in the blond girl’s eyes. The elf’s expression softened as she walked out of the garden and into the tower.

The young girl’s face was still cloudy.

Giving encouragement wasn’t Riveria’s strong suit, so she would be overjoyed if their conversation helped the girl recover in any way.

I would hate to borrow Loki’s words, but…

Her goddess had hit the nail right on the head.

The other girls would be better at cheering her up than she would.



“Gahh—”

Tiona crossed her arms and growled under her breath.

“Miss Tiona…?”

“What’s with that sound?”

Lefiya and Tione looked up from their empty breakfast plates. Tiona appeared to be deep in thought on the other side of the table.

“Aiz, something’s still bugging her.”

The blond girl had sat next to her while they ate, but she was already gone.

The four of them had eaten together, as usual. And as usual, whenever a topic came up, Aiz stayed relatively silent and answered any questions that came her way in a few short words. Everything seems completely normal.

Except.

Tiona knew.

She didn’t think that Aiz was depressed, but something seemed off about the blond-haired girl.

“She’s still angry at the mutt, don’t you think? We can just leave her alone.”

“No, I don’t think Bete had much to do with it at all. Well, I’m not saying he’s innocent, just that Aiz doesn’t really care about him one way or another.”

“After all you did to Bete at the bar, that’s what you *think*…?”

“Something else is getting her down.”

Thinking wasn’t Tiona’s specialty.

She could tell that Aiz had a problem, but it was highly unlikely that she would be able to offer any useful advice. In fact, she’d probably make things worse if she tried to get involved.

Tiona’s only option was to make Aiz have fun and to be her carefree self, in order to force a smile out of the blond girl.

“Lefiya, Tione. You have any plans today?”

“No, can’t say I do.”

“I was going to help the general…”

“Good, you’re free. Join me for the day!”

“Weren’t you listening?”

Tiona ignored her sister.

The young Amazon couldn’t stand to see Aiz’s dreary face much longer.

She wanted to see the smile that was as delicate as white flowers on a distant mountaintop being pulled apart by the wind.

Tiona considered herself Aiz’s best friend. It was time for her to take action. She jumped up from the table, her chair sliding against the wall in the process.

“I’ll go find Aiz!”

She tore out of the dining hall with the same vigor as entering a Dungeon cave.

Stubborn as a wild boar, there was no stopping her once Tiona decided to do something. She flew through the hallways like a bird that just learned how to spread its wings.

Rooms, rooftops, storage areas, the common room. She opened every door within reach on her way up the main tower. She was greeted by the startled eyes of other *Loki Familia* members every time hinges shrieked. The Amazon made it all the way up to Loki’s private quarters, but the goddess wasn’t there. In fact, only the stench of alcohol occupied the room. “Ugh,” she grunted as she pinched her nose. Closing the door once again, she took off down the spiral stairs.

She zigzagged through each of the towers in turn.

“…Oi.”

“Uwahhh?!”

It happened as she turned a corner.

A thin leg blocked off the narrow hallway like a fallen log. Tiona came to a screeching halt and glared at the one blocking her progress: Bete.

“What’s the big idea? You’re in the way, Bete! Move!”

Tiona had become much more direct when speaking to him after the incident at the bar.

The werewolf didn’t seem perturbed by her anger. Instead, he jerked his chin toward the window across from him.

“If yer lookin’ fer Aiz, go ta the garden.”

“Huh…?”

Bete looked at the stunned expression on Tiona’s face before moving his leg out of her way.

Lips pressed together, the gray-furred werewolf scratched the back of his head and walked away in the opposite direction, sulking.

Tiona watched him leave for a moment before squinting and sticking her tongue out at his back.

She did, however, go to the garden.

“!”

Aiz was there, just like Bete said.

She was sitting in a long chair next to a tree, looking at the sky.

Tiona’s face lit up as she dashed across the lawn.

“AIZZZZZ!”

“…Tiona?”

The blond girl’s golden eyes blinked a few times as the Amazon jumped into view.

Tiona grabbed ahold of the girl’s thin arms and pulled her out of the chair.

“Let’s go shopping!”



The two girls joined up with Lefiya and Tione before heading out into the city.

Tiona led them to a shopping district relatively close to their home on the northern edge of Orario, North Main Street. This area was inhabited by many Guild employees and wealthy merchants. Each house was well decorated and luxurious, while each store was bright and colorful.

North Main was wide enough that several young merchants set up kiosks in the middle of the road. The four girls weaved their way through throngs of humans and demi-humans on their way down the street.

“I can hardly believe this, forcing me all the way out here…”

“It’s good to get out, you know? You said it yourself not too long ago, how nice it would be to have a full day of shopping!”

“Um, Miss Tiona, what exactly are we shopping for?”

“Clothes! Lots and lots of clothes! That sound good, Aiz?”

“S-sure…”

Tiona grabbed hold of Aiz’s hand and practically dragged her forward.

North Main Street was known as a fashion district.

Many races that called Orario home had a variety of tastes and needs when it came to clothes. Short and thin prums couldn’t shop at the same places that short yet robust dwarves would go. Each race had its favorite types of fabric and designs as well. In fact, their preferences were so different that clothing stores had to be careful to tailor to only their target customers. Otherwise, squabbles between races would never end.

That’s where the merchants came in.

They built their shops to cater to one specific race and then built up a relationship of trust with individual customers. Several deities had taken note of this and built their familias around the industry. So much so that many people considered Orario to be the trendsetter of the fashion world.

And it was here, on North Main Street, that fashion giants catering to all races had shops running up and down both sides of the street.

“Miss Tiona, wouldn’t it be better to explore the smaller shops in the backstreets? They’re cheaper and a lot less crowded.”

“Of course! The place that Tione and I really like is just around the corner!”

“Huh, a place that you and your sister like? Wouldn’t that mean…?”

Lefiya’s words trailed off as a sense of impending dread overtook her. Tiona giddily led Aiz by the hand, paying no attention to the elf. The crowd thinned out almost immediately as they turned the corner and found that shop right away.

“Th-this is…”

The pupils of Lefiya’s eyes shrank as she looked up at a large sign that used a vibrant purple color scheme.

Her gaze fell to the white open doors. It was just as she feared. This shop was for Amazons.

“It’s been ages! Perhaps this might be fun after all.”

“Come on, Aiz, let’s go!!”

“Huh, um…”

The twins ushered Aiz inside. Lefiya hesitated, a bead of sweat running down her face. Clenching her eyes shut, she followed the other girls inside.

The shop’s inventory was hell on earth—for anyone other than an Amazon, at least.

All of the clothing on display at the other end of the counter would make anyone with a shred of shame want to avert their eyes. Since all Amazons were female, the bright and colorful fabric was sold in two-piece sets that didn’t cover much more skin than the outfits dancers wore in a red-light district. The traditional patterns had a unique flair to make the wearer stand out from the crowd. Even the clerk, also an Amazon, wore an outfit that most would describe as underwear.

Tiona and Tione ran into the shop, grabbing the first garments that got their attention and talking with the clerk. A blushing Aiz and a beet-red Lefiya looked at each other, not knowing what to do.

“Aiz, want to try this? You have a sleek body, so this should look amazing on you.”

“Wh-why are you making Aiz try on clothes at a place like this?!”

“What’s the problem? We’re already here anyway. I found a good one for you, too, Lefiya!”

“I-I refuse!”

The elf violently shook her head side to side as Tiona held up a short skirt with high slits in the sides. Meanwhile, Aiz was desperately trying to avoid eye contact while quietly shuffling her feet backward.

It might be the influence of the gods and goddesses on earth, but the fashion world was starting to break down traditional barriers between the fashions of each race.

While many chose to wear only what they were accustomed to, people who wore clothes of other races from time to time out of sheer curiosity did exist.

“Aiz, how about this? It matches mine…”

“E-ehh…”

Tiona held up a pareo-style skirt and a piece of sturdy fabric of the same color to wrap around her chest.

Aiz glanced from the clothes to Tiona’s outfit, blushing so hard that her face almost matched the clothing.

“No—I won’t allow it!!”

Lefiya had reached her limit. Nervousness had overpowered her shame. Shoulders shaking up and down, she stepped in front of Aiz to protect her.

“I won’t allow you to force Miss Aiz to wear this…this obscene combination of so-called ‘clothing’! She deserves something…something more modest, more elegant! Yes, something like we elves would wear!”

Thud! Lefiya slapped both of her hands onto her chest, desperate for an example of acceptable garments. The surface of her cheeks radiated so much heat Tiona had to take a step back.

Despite the rage of the elf, Tiona decided to try a different approach.

“But wouldn’t you like to see Aiz in this?”

Lefiya froze.

Slowly but surely, the elf’s dark-blue eyes fell to Tiona’s chest and pareo.

“Wh-why would I?”

“But you were thinking it?”

Lefiya denied it over and over, her cheeks close to maroon at this point, until she grabbed hold of Aiz’s hand.

“Miss Aiz, I shall introduce you to an elf store! As unworthy to be your guide as I am, you will see the best we have to offer!”

“L-Lefiya…”

A very confused Aiz was pulled back out onto the street. If the elf had been more conscious of her actions, she would have been extremely embarrassed.

Tiona and Tione looked at each other. They wore exactly the same grin, one mirroring the other, as they watched the events unfold. Returning to the clerk the clothes they’d picked out, the twins followed the other girls out the door.

Aiz was pushed, pulled, dragged, and led to store after store the rest of the morning.

“““OHHH!”””

Three voices gave their approval.

Aiz had just pulled back the curtain to a fitting room. She stood there like a shy doll as the three girls looked at her with approving eyes.

She wore a white, sleeveless top paired with a miniskirt. A beautiful floral pattern was sewn into the shirt just above the hem as an accent. It was a very simple combination, but the blond hair and feminine figure of the wearer made the garments come to life.

“Y-you look amazing, Miss Aiz!”

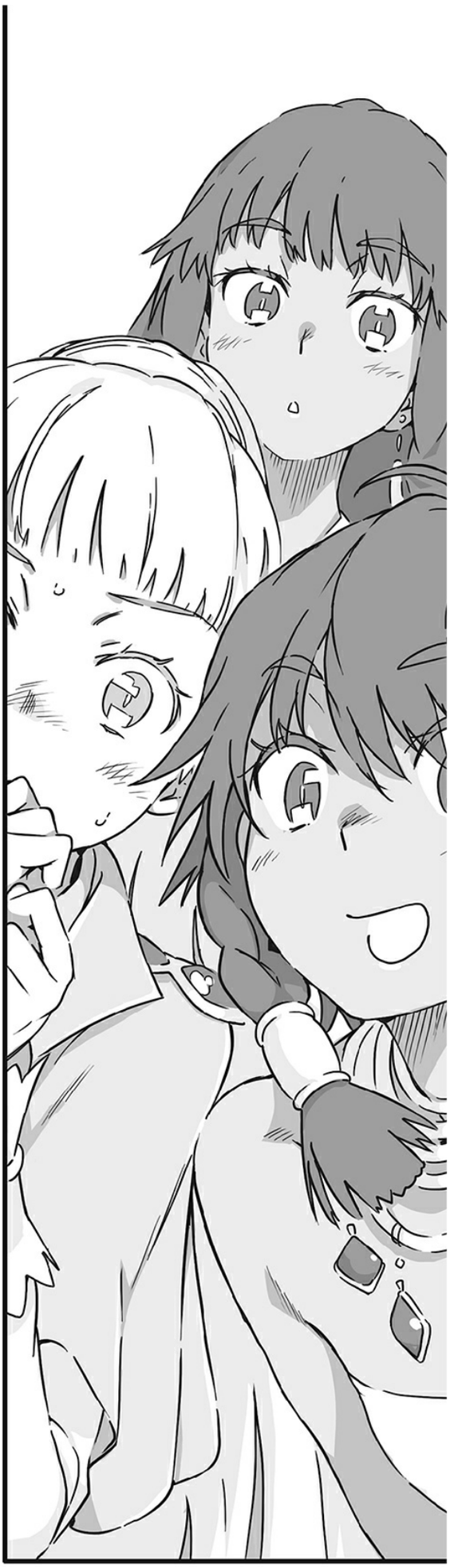
“Really, really amazing! Loki’d be all over you if she were here!”

“Your skin is so clear and these clothes show off your body…Well, I’m a bit jealous, actually.”

Aiz was surrounded by compliments.

The armor she wanted to be wearing and weapon that should be at her side were nowhere to be seen. She asked them if it was strange for a knight like her to be so vulnerable, but the other girls quickly waved off her objections. The blond girl looked at the floor, cheeks turning bright pink.





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Tiona and the others couldn’t help but smile after seeing Aiz react like a fish out of water.

“Aiz, let’s go with these!”

“O-okay…”

“All that running around, and we wind up at a human store anyway.”

“Well, it’s the easiest. Miss Aiz doesn’t have any strange tastes, so a place like this makes the most sense.”

Tiona was in an extremely good mood, while Tione and Lefiya looked around the store with curious eyes.

They’d lost count of how many places they’d visited. After bouncing from store to store, they finally settled on a human shop to find clothes for Aiz.

“Tiona, how much…?”

“Don’t worry about it! This is a present from me! Wear them to your heart’s content!”

Tiona didn’t allow Aiz to object. The blond girl simply nodded and let the Amazon pay at the front counter. The transaction complete, the four girls left the shop together.

It was almost noon at this point. The sun’s rays poured into the city, making the brick buildings and stone pavement sparkle around them. The four girls made their way through dozens of clothing stores, all bursting with different colors, surrounded by the noise of the lively backstreets.

Aiz kept wearing her new clothes. The ones she had been wearing before were wrapped in a cloth and in a bag hanging from her shoulder. She would never have chosen to wear anything as cute as this on her own; she felt exposed and out of place. The others couldn’t help but giggle as the blond girl acted more and more awkward.

“Should we get some lunch? I’m pretty hungry.”

“It might be a little early, but why not? Lefiya, know of any good cafés around here?”

“Let me think. If I remember right, there should be a good one just a little ahead of here…”

The three girls were talking among themselves when Tiona suddenly felt a set of eyes looking at her.

The Amazon looked over her shoulder and saw Aiz hunched over and looking back at her.

“What’s wrong, Aiz?”

“Tiona…”

She was about to say something when suddenly—*SMACK!*—something ran headlong into her.

“Ahh!” Tiona yelped in surprise.

“Whoa there. Sorry, Amazon! I’m in a rush!”

The young girl who ran into Tiona by accident made a hasty apology before rushing off on her way.

Judging by the way she talked despite her diminutive size gave the girls a clue as to her identity.

“That cute girl just now…She’s a goddess, isn’t she?”

“Looks like it. She seems really busy, though…What’s with you, Tiona?”

“Her boobs, they’re huge…but she’s so tiny.”

“…”

The other girls rolled their eyes at Tiona’s suddenly dreary tone.

The gods and goddesses never aged, but they came in many forms. From old, wizened men to young, cute girls, it wasn’t strange to encounter a deity with unusual features. In this case, it might at first seem that such a little girl couldn’t possibly have such an imbalanced *physique*, but if she was a goddess, that wouldn’t be strange at all.

Tiona watched the young goddess’s twin jet-black ponytails bounce from side to side as she ran as fast as her legs could carry her.

“Now that you mention it, aren’t there a lot of goddesses out on the street today…?” Lefiya said to no one in particular while looking up and down the street.

The other girls took a look around and, sure enough, quite a few divine women stood out from the crowd.

“Come on, fix this for me! I know I bought it here!”

“B-b-but my lady, we do only sales at this location…”

“Don’t be so stingy! The Banquet is tonight. It doesn’t have to be perfect, just make it look presentable!”

The young goddess from earlier was doing her best to convince the clerk at a nearby shop to mend a dress. “Ah!” Their conversation reminded Tione of something and the sound escaped her lips.

“Loki was talking about that. That there’s a ‘Banquet of the Gods’ coming up. She didn’t sound too interested in going, though.”

“‘Banquet of the Gods’…If I remember correctly, that’s a party that one god hosts for the others?”

“Yep. I hear it’s really formal, so maybe these goddesses are picking up their dresses for the big night?”

“Yes, that makes sense.”

From the look on Lefiya’s face, Tione’s explanation apparently satisfied Lefiya. Taking another look, the elf saw several of the divine ladies carrying long bags designed for dresses in their arms.

Soon after, the girls found the café and sat down at a round table.

“Hey, let’s go to South Main Street next!”

“The shopping center, huh…I’m fine with it.”

“Yes, I can go as well.”

“Come with us, Aiz! Even if it isn’t nighttime, that place is really lively and fun!”

Tiona smiled at the girl sitting next to her, but Aiz just kept silently staring at

the table.

Her expression seemed guilty somehow. “Aiz?” Tiona called out to her to get her attention.

She slowly opened her mouth to speak.

“Sorry, Tiona…”

“…”

Her golden eyes didn’t budge. Instead, she worked up the courage to finish what she had been trying to say earlier.

She’d figured out that everything that had transpired today was Tiona’s way of trying to cheer her up. Aiz felt guilty about having so much done for her and tried to make herself smaller, not even trying to look up.

Tione and Lefiya didn’t know what to say. The girls were quiet, their table enveloped by the lively sounds of the restaurant around them.

Tiona, who had been staring at Aiz, abruptly moved.

She made a loose fist and lightly punched Aiz’s cheek.

“…?”

The blond girl looked up in surprise. Tiona’s eyes were half open, one eyebrow cocked high.

“You know, I didn’t buy you a present because I wanted an apology.”

Another light smack, a third.

Tiona batted at Aiz’s face like a cat playing with a feather.

The girl closed her eyes just before each hit.

Tiona finally put down her hand and locked eyes with Aiz.

They stared at each other for a few moments before the muscles in Aiz’s face relaxed.

“…Thanks, Tiona.”

A small curve in her lips, a tiny smile.

At last, Tiona got what she wanted. Overcome with a surge of happiness, she jumped out of her chair and drew the human girl into a hug.

“M-Miss Tiona, there is no need to hold her in public…”

“What’s this, Lefiya? Are you jealous?”

“I-it’s not that…!”

“Too bad. I’m not giving up my spot next to Aiz!”

“…?!”

“Ho-ho, there’s no need to deny your feelings, Lefiya!”

Tione snuck up behind the elf and grabbed both her shoulders before pushing her toward Aiz. The two girls’ faces brushed against each other.

Aiz closed one of her eyes as her cheek rubbed against the elf’s, but she didn’t pull back or try to resist.

Lefiya’s body trembled while Tione enjoyed herself as she watched over them.

Tiona and Aiz looked at each other once again before sharing a laugh.



The sky turned an orangish red, sun hovering in the west.

Tiona led the group through the long shadows on their way north toward the city wall, toward home.

“Ahhh, that was fun!”

A smile was still on Aiz’s lips, letting Tiona know it had been worth forcing her to go shopping. She was quite proud of herself. Even after cheering Aiz up, she and her sister thoroughly enjoyed teasing Lefiya the rest of the afternoon. It had been a long day and the girls were out of energy.

They were still talking among themselves when they turned the last corner before home.

“Huh?”

“A carriage…?”

Tiona and Lefiya stared at the fancy contraption that was strapped to a horse in front of Twilight Manor.

As they got closer, they saw Loki, clad in a black dress, open a door between the wheels of the carriage and step inside.

“Wha? Loki, is that you?! Your clothes, your hair?!”

“Eh? Ohhh! Y’all are back from a day on the town? Hee-hee, how do I look?”

“You look very nice…Are you going somewhere tonight?”

“Meh. Thought I’d go pay that stupid party a visit.”

“But you told me you weren’t interested in the Banquet of the Gods, right, Loki?”

“—Fu-hee-hee. Happened ta hear something interestin’. Poor-as-rags Itty-Bitty’s gonna be there, so I’m gonna have some fun.”

The girls tilted their heads in confusion.

However, all of them recognized the look on Loki’s face. It was *that* grin. It couldn’t be anything good, that was for sure.

It was strange to see Loki with her hair tied back into a bun as she took a seat inside the carriage and closed the door. Most likely a rental provided by a wealthy merchant, the horse-drawn cart had a roof, windows, and was very luxurious. It could comfortably seat several people. Sitting at the front of the carriage, the reins in his hand, was Raul. “Why me…?” he moaned in self-pity.

All four girls felt a stab of sympathy for the unfortunate young man. *NEIGHHH!* The horse shifted its hooves, getting impatient.

“I’m off! Plenty’a food in the kitchen, so help yerselves ta anythin’!”

WHI-CHA! Raul snapped the reins and the carriage moved forward.

They watched as Loki leaned out the open window, waving to the girls, and slowly disappeared down the road.



Night had enveloped the city. Magic-stone lamps lit up the streets like

thousands of stars in the sky.

Bars and restaurants were alive with the sounds of happy customers. Horse-drawn carriages of many shapes and sizes gathered in one area of the city. Many extraordinarily beautiful men and women were gathering.

They were deities, and they were all headed to one particular building.

Specifically, a massive statue of a man wearing an elephant mask.

It was a building that made people with common sense doubt their eyes. It looked like a monster at first glance, but the attention to detail and overall feel of the structure were strangely endearing. It stuck out like a sore thumb from the other buildings in the vicinity, but the gods and goddesses didn't seem perturbed by the elephant man sitting cross-legged in the middle of the city.

"Still as strange as ever…"

Loki arrived at the location of tonight's Banquet of the Gods, *Ganesha Familia*'s home. Raul opened the carriage door for her and offered his hand as she stepped out.

An expansive white fence encircled the lawn that surrounded the structure. Spotlights were set on top of several of the fence posts, lighting up the elephant man in all its glory. Loki and Raul stood side by side, taking it all in.

"I must say, Raul, you've become a mighty fine escort."

"Ah, yes…Thank you."

"Sorry ta ask ya, but could ya wait up a bit with the carriage? Could be a late night, but I'll pay ya for yer time!"

Raul resigned himself to his fate and nodded. Loki said a brief thank-you and took off with a swish of her dress. Unfortunately, she was not used to walking in high heels and stumbled a few times on her way across the lawn and up into the structure.

A Banquet of the Gods was exactly how it sounded: Only gods were allowed to participate.

It was up to the deity hosting the event to decide when it began and if it would come to an official end. These parties almost never had a purpose other

than to have a good time—purely for entertainment. For some, it was a way to overcome homesickness by drinking and laughing with other beings from Tenkai.

Several gods and goddesses in attendance would talk about their familias or exchange information in an attempt to maintain good relationships. Living in this world was nothing more than a game, but these Banquets were the best places to recruit powerful allies for the more competitive deities.

"I am Ganesha!"

"YAY!!"

Loki emerged from the long front hallway into a wide-open ballroom. A muscular male deity wearing a mask that matched the building stood on top of a stage at the opposite end of the room. Known throughout the city for his elephant mask and overenthusiasm, this god was none other than the host for the evening, Ganesha. The deities around the stage met his unbelievably loud voice with cheers.

Each Banquet varied in terms of location and style, depending on the host's tastes and their familia's economic status. *Ganesha Familia* was one of Orario's most powerful groups in terms of sheer numbers, which meant that they wielded considerable influence inside the city. The decor of the ballroom reflected their financial prowess with expensive ornaments and absolutely gorgeous color schemes.

An expansive yet intricate magic-stone chandelier hung from the ceiling. Long tables were covered in exotic cuisine collected from distant mountains and oceans. A few tables even had food prepared with ingredients from the Dungeon, like mruit. Members of *Ganesha Familia* walked among the royally dressed deities, serving drinks and replacing food as necessary.

"Now *this* is the high life."

Ker-tap ker-tap. Loki's high heels echoed off the floor as she had a look around inside. The overall atmosphere was quiet but brimming with energy.

Other gods and goddesses were very quick to notice a face that almost never appeared at a Banquet. Loki left a trail of conversations in her wake.

“Rats, Loki’s here…”

“The downer goddess has arrived…”

“Hey, hey, no making fun of Lolo!”

“She’ll kill you guys, seriously.”

“But look, Loki is in a…a dress…?!”

“Hell must’ve frozen over.”

“Still, I think she’s got the boobs to pull it off.”

“No, she’s got nothing.”

“You’re telling me! I’ve never seen a rack more depressing than that one!”

“Moron, what’s wrong with smaller tits?”

All right, I’ve committed it to memory…

When I go home, you’re all dead.

Loki happened to overhear a group of gods snickering among themselves. A quick glance over her shoulder and they all immediately fell silent before running out of the ballroom in such a panic that they tripped over their shoes on the way out. “Keh.” Loki spat in their direction before snagging a glass of wine from a passing waiter and jamming it to her lips.

In general, gods and goddesses were unpredictable. Their actions didn’t make much sense.

They came to this world for entertainment. Acting completely on whims and impulses, they didn’t take much seriously. Most of them were considered insane by the mortals on Earth. The ones who were so quick to pick a fight were also the ones who knew how to run fast.

“Don’t see Itty-Bitty anywhere…She chicken out?”

Loki hadn’t been planning on coming to this Banquet, but she’d changed her mind.

The reason: She’d heard that a certain bottom-of-the-barrel deity she couldn’t stand was making preparations to attend the party.

If she wasn't here, then oh, well. But if she *was* here, Loki would torment the moneyless goddess, her sad excuse for a "dress," and laugh to her heart's content.

An evil grin started to grow on her face as her eyes scanned the room like a hawk's.

"Oh, if it isn't Loki!"

"Hnn?"

A voice called out to her as she made her way through the groups of deities.

A slender god with thin eyes was smiling at her when she turned to look.

He was the spitting image of a young prince from some far-off country.

He wore an innocent smile and had luscious golden locks of hair smooth enough to make goddesses jealous. His frame was delicate, with long arms and legs.

The youthful god was dressed just as formally as everyone else. But unlike them, he had no qualms with walking right up to Loki and saying, "Shall we have a chat?"

"Yo, Dionysus. You're here, too."

"Indeed. I thought this Banquet would be a good chance to catch up on everyone's news. Without a familia as strong as yours, Loki, I cannot afford to pick and choose."

The god named Dionysus smiled again as he answered.

His body language and choice of words mirrored that of the royal families and upper class of human societies on Earth. Even among the gods and goddesses playing dress-up, he stood out from the crowd like the genuine article.

The man had an air of calm about him that matched his persona perfectly. But above all else, there was a power behind his glass-like eyes, as though he could see to the very core of any being.

Loki couldn't stand him.

"My, my, Loki, it's been too long. Have you been well?"

“Ohh……Demeter. Didn’t see ya there.”

“Yes, we were engaged in conversation just a moment ago.”

A ridiculously curvy goddess emerged from the crowd carrying two glasses of wine.

She had curly hair the color of honey flowing down her back. Her soft, gentle eyes gave her a pleasant, friendly aura.

The long, billowy dress around her body was wide open in the front. Even now, her breasts could burst free from their insufficient restraints at any moment. Confronted with a kind of pride she would never know, Loki leaned back out of reflex, lips twitching at the sight.

Demeter had a big heart, which needed an even bigger chest to contain her generosity. Loki couldn’t embrace even a shred of animosity toward her.

“Loki, how is your familia coming along? I have heard so much about the deeds of your children. I do hope you’re not pushing them too hard?”

“Yeah, they’re a bunch’a go-getters. Some, a little bit too much, so they make me worry all the time…How ’bout yours, Demeter?”

“My beloved children have a lot of enthusiasm for my work. I am so grateful. This year’s harvest was absolutely spectacular. I will share some of our bounty with yours, Loki.”

“Why, thank you!”

Demeter Familia specialized in agriculture, growing a wide range of fruits and vegetables to sell within Orario.

Their farms outside the city walls provided most of the ingredients used by bars and restaurants.

“The grapes used in tonight’s wine were grown on your farm, if I’m not mistaken? I am very particular when it comes to grape wine, and this is absolutely superb.”

“Fu-fu, thank you kindly, Dionysus.”

“Huh! No kiddin’!”

Loki accepted a glass of wine from Demeter as she listened to the two deities' conversation. She grew bored of their banter and took a sip.

The inside of her mouth came alive the moment the wine hit her taste buds. The rich fragrance of the grapes wafted through her nose as the sweet taste of the alcohol danced its way down her throat. Loki had tried many different types of wine in her day and she had to admit this was one of the best.

"So, what 'bout yours, Dionysus? Haven't heard anything special."

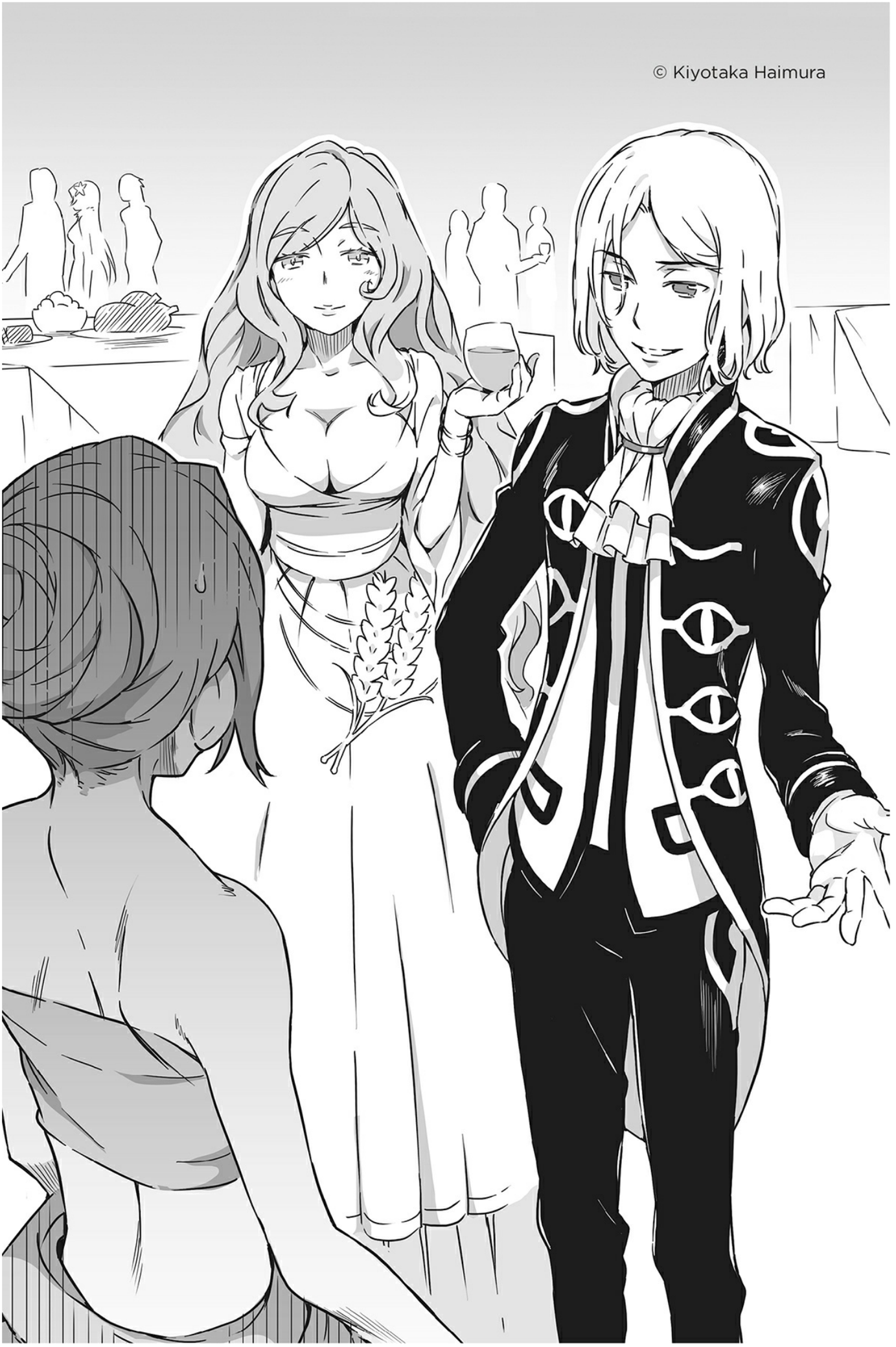
"My familia? We've tried our hands at this and that. I try to encourage my children to work at their own pace but remain nearby to provide motivation."

"Ehh? What kinda answer is that? Play fair, Dionysus."

According to the Guild's records, *Dionysus Familia* was in the middle of the pack in terms of strength within the Labyrinth City. Quite a few of his adventurers were upper-class, third tier—Level 2—but none of them had accomplished any notable achievements. Just as Loki said, there was nothing particularly good or bad about the group, nothing special.

"Your children just returned from an expedition, yes? Care to regale us with stories of their exploits in the Deep Levels?"

"You give me jack squat an' expect a gem in return? Keep dreamin'."


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The golden-haired deity raised his glass as a way of saying, *Touché*. Loki cocked an eyebrow in response, but their conversation picked up soon after.

It wasn't long before a group of musicians made their way into the hall. Ganesha must have planned a dance for his guests. Melodies were filling the ballroom within a matter of minutes and the more adventurous gods and goddesses were showing off their best moves onstage. Their host was still onstage, making the same declaration between more serious announcements, but no one was paying any attention.

"Ganesha's Banquets always have such an elegant touch. That must be why most of us in Orario come to these get-togethers."

"In his case, Ganesha has done a lot to ensure that the Monsterphilia festival goes smoothly. It's difficult to turn a blind eye to his invitations. They have come to make certain that their own familias won't be bothered during the festivities."

"Monsterphilia, huh? Ganesha sure listens to the Guild a lot more than I do."

A yearly event would start a few days from now.

Under the sharp eyes of the Guild regulations, *Ganesha Familia* would use all of its resources to put on a show for the citizens of Orario. Brave tamers would attempt to bend dangerous monsters from the Dungeon to their will at the city's Coliseum.

"While we're on the subject, Loki…"

"Oh?"

Dionysus wore the same innocent smile as he glanced in Loki's direction.

"Do you plan on attending the Monsterphilia yourself?"

"Hnnn…"

It's only once a year, she thought to herself.

It might be a good opportunity to take one of her cute children to watch the tamers in action…She had her answer for Dionysus.

"Was considerin' it, but why ya wanna know?"

“Oh no, are you serious? Are you going to cause a ruckus again?”

“Hey, what’s that mean?”

“Please, hear me out! You’ve never shown any interest in the Monsterphilia before, Loki. I know some of the havoc you wrought while in Tenkai, so I may have gotten the wrong idea. I apologize if I stepped over a line.”

“Ya tryin’a piss me off…?”

Loki didn’t try to deny anything that Dionysus said, despite her anger.

It was true that, while in Tenkai, Loki was a prankster who enjoyed causing confusion whenever possible. She’d changed quite a bit after starting her own familia, but Dionysus’s reaction was understandable.

There was a twinge of sadness in Loki’s gaze as her vermilion eyes looked upon the blond god.

“What about yerself? Ya goin’?”

“…Good question. I don’t think I shall attend. My schedule for that day is already quite full, you see.”

Dionysus maintained the same innocent smile as he spoke.

“’Kay, then,” said a disinterested Loki. She broke off eye contact and started looking for another waiter with the tray of wineglasses to sample, when she caught a glimpse of something interesting. “Oohh?”

A crimson-haired goddess was standing next to a silver-haired goddess, and between them was a black-haired deity with twin ponytails.

Her lips curled up. Loki chugged the last few gulps of wine in her glass before quickly wiping her mouth on her bare arm.

“Well, then, Dionysus, Demeter. Thanks for chattin’. Later!”

“Sure, I bid you farewell.”

“Fu-fu, until next time, Loki.”

Turning her back to them, Loki took off toward her target.

“Hey! Fei-Fei! Freya! Itty-Bitty!!”

“…”

Dionysus watched in silence as Loki disappeared as into the crowd.

He didn’t take his eyes off her until the goddess had disappeared behind another group of deities.

“Planning a ruckus again?”

Came a female voice from beside him.

Demeter was smirking. Dionysus turned his shoulders to face her. The innocent smile was gone, replaced by something a little more forced.

“You seem to have gotten the wrong idea, Demeter. When have I ever caused problems?”

His words only served to deepen Demeter’s grin.

“Oh really? Something always happens when you smile like that, Dionysus.”



“—GAAA!”

A powerful strike split a gun liberla in half.

The large dragonfly monster was slain with a rapier. Even as her foe dissolved into ash, Aiz had already plunged the sword into her next two targets using one hand.

She was confronting a swarm of gun liberla. She’d aimed for their magic stones with strikes so precise she could’ve threaded a needle. Two more clouds of ash fell to the ground.

Aiz pressed forward.

Bursting through clouds of ash, she charged the remaining monsters.

“AaAAAAAOOOOOOOOO!”

A bugbear was waiting for her, thick arms opened wide as it howled. The beast’s thick fur rippled as it took a swing at Aiz’s head.

The human girl didn’t try to dodge the sharp claws—her sword was faster. The rapier flashed, moving at almost triple the speed of the bugbear’s attack.

Suddenly, the entire arm spun into the air without its body.

Aiz moved in to deliver the final blow before the beast could recover from the shock. Her blade seemed to dance through the air before plunging straight in.

“__”

The rapier pierced the beast through the chest, the tip of the blade penetrating through to the other side.

The bugbear instantly turned pale. It couldn’t even let out a dying roar of pain before collapsing to the ground in a pile of ash.

Aiz whipped the blade around her body a few times before letting the cutting edge rest on the ground. The swarm of monsters was nowhere to be seen; only piles of ash lay at her feet.

She was on the twentieth floor.

It looked like an incredibly dense forest. The texture of the ceiling and walls resembled tree bark, and they were covered in random patches of greenish “moss.” Aiz was alone in this huge overgrown treelike labyrinth.

Almost four days had passed since the night at the bar. Aiz had realized how much time she’d wasted before Tiona and the others cheered her up, and she was desperate to make up for it.

It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that spending her free time in the Dungeon was her hobby. She was used to roaming the Middle Levels as a solo adventurer.

Satisfied with her jaunt through the Dungeon, she was on her way home.

…Still not used to it.

Aiz brought the replacement rapier up to eye level.

There was no denying its high quality. However, the blade was shorter and heavier than her favorite saber, Desperate. Aiz was used to a long, thin blade that required precision in battle. This weapon required more arm movements to be used effectively.

“Broaden your horizons.” She could hear Goibniu’s gruff voice in the back of her mind.

…It should be ready.

Returning the still-shiny rapier to its sheath, Aiz set to work collecting the drop items scattered on the ground.

After she'd spent a full day in the Dungeon, the pouch tied to her waist was already bursting at the seams with magic stones. Even the backpack she brought with her was almost full. She'd collected so much loot that she started aiming for magic stones while in battle so that she wouldn't have to collect them later.

Leaving extra items scattered on the ground was generally frowned upon. Adventurers wanted to earn their loot rather than leech off others. Also, uncollected items on the ground served as a warning—something bad happened here, bad enough the items couldn't be collected. Aiz retrieved her backpack from behind a fallen log and did her best to find enough space to put in a bugbear claw.

It was times like this when Aiz truly appreciated her supporters. She might be used to these solo adventures, but the extra weight on her shoulder always reminded her of how hard the supporters worked.

"…"

The twentieth floor was so quiet that her footsteps seemed to echo endlessly.

Monsters were one thing, but encountering other adventurers in the Middle Levels was much rarer than the Upper Levels. For the most part, adventurers needed to be Level 2 at least to make it below the thirteenth floor. That meant that more than half of Orario's adventurers, lower-class adventurers, couldn't make it this far down. As a solo adventurer, the only company she had was the far-off howls of lurking monsters. It was extremely rare for her to hear a clash of metal that wasn't her own.

Aiz traveled through the narrow hallway, luminescent moss lighting the way.

"…?"

She spotted something new after defeating several more swarms of monsters.

A party of adventurers emerged from a different path a little ways in front of her.

Each and every one of them wore full body armor as they dragged a large cargo box on wheels through the Dungeon hall. Aiz could tell they were strong just by looking at their equipment.

Ganesha Familia…

An elephant emblem was engraved into their armor, which also hinted at the contents of the cargo.

The Monsterphilia was tomorrow. They had come here to capture monsters to be tamed.

Everything was going to happen at the Coliseum. Once a year, *Ganesha Familia*'s tamers would face a monster brought out of the Dungeon. However, they weren't going to slay it—the beast's destiny was now to become a spectacle for the masses.

There were many who doubted the Guild's wisdom in setting up this event. They were bringing live, dangerous monsters from deep within the Dungeon directly into the city. Some people scoffed at the whole idea, believing this was the Guild's strategy to increase its popularity.

Aiz didn't have any strong feelings toward the Monsterphilia one way or the other.

She recognized there was a danger that ordinary citizens would be exposed to monsters. On the other hand, she knew that many people looked forward to this event and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Adventurers didn't have the best reputation. In fact, most were considered to be bloodthirsty bar brawlers at best. Therefore, this kind of bloodless entertainment—taming—was good for their image among the people. The Guild was forced to cover for adventurers when they caused problems on the surface, in order to continue reaping the benefits of the Dungeon. It was in their best interest to make adventurers look good whenever possible.

Whether Ganesha was just a fan of the event or he truly wanted to make the "children" happy, his familia offered their full support in organizing the

Monsterphilia. The festival had become famous enough for people around the world to travel to Orario just to see it.

Sure, there were a few problems, but as an adventurer, Aiz thought it was a little too hasty to say it was all bad—not without doing more research.

"…"

RATTLE-RATTLE. The cargo box violently shook back and forth.

Aiz decided to take another route back to the surface, to avoid getting in the way.



It was already late at night by the time Aiz returned home.

She gave a quick nod to the guards as she went through the gate and into the front tower.

Everyone had finished eating a long time ago. Paying careful attention to her surroundings—the same way she would in the Dungeon—Aiz stayed clear of the other *Loki Familia* members as she made her way through the building.

Careful not to make a sound, she changed course the moment she sensed someone's presence. Narrowly dodging a slightly confused Lefiya, the blond girl made her way up the tower toward her own room.

"Aiz."

A shiver ran down her spine.

Sure enough, Riveria was standing there, as if she'd been expecting Aiz to pass this way. The girl slowly turned around and met the elf's perturbed gaze.

"I would ask where you have been…but I think that's obvious."

"…"

Her jade eyes locked onto Aiz's battle armor and the weapon strapped to her waist.

Aiz considered making a break for it but thought better of it. What would happen next was horrifying.

Riveria followed Aiz's train of thought by the expression on her face and sighed.

"I won't tell you not to venture into the Dungeon. However, our expedition has only just concluded. All of us need to rest, including you."

"…Okay."

"I'm glad you're feeling better, but this is too much."

"…Sorry."

Aiz was a little shocked by her tone.

Riveria sounded like a mother scolding her daughter for staying out past curfew. Aiz pulled in her shoulders out of reflex, making her body as small as possible.

It was easy to see who was in charge.

"Uuu-*hic*…Wass iss? Aizuu an' Riveria, wha'cha up ta……uugh-*hic*."

Loki happened to wander into the hallway while Riveria was giving Aiz a chance to reflect on her actions.

Her steps were as uneven as a seasick sailor's, and her face didn't look much better. Even worse, a cloud of alcoholic vapor hovered around her, stinking to high heaven.

Riveria, who treated herself to wine only on special occasions, looked at her goddess with a mix of disappointment and confusion.

"I could ask you the very same thing—Wait, don't come near me. Stay over there!"

"Juss came—*hic*—ta get some water…Aaaa, my head!……Inside voices, 'kay? Nice an' quiet…"

Loki had been like this ever since she came back from the Banquet of the Gods.

Completely ignoring the protests of Finn and other members of the familia, she had been drowning her sorrows nonstop for three days. Apparently, she had been outdone by the very goddess she had gone there to torment. Crawling

inside a bottle was the only way she knew to hide from the shame.

Aiz did her best to avoid the vapor cloud as Loki looked up at Riveria.

“So, what’s up?”

“…Aiz entered the Dungeon today, returning home at this late hour.”

“Ahhh…*hic*……I see wass goin’ on.”

The goddess nearly lost her balance as she shifted her attention to the blond girl.

Vermilion and gold eyes stared at each other for a moment before Loki showed a familiar grin.

“Allll right then, Aizuu da troublemaker. I’m sentencin’ ya to join me tomorrow as punishment for makin’ everybody worry!”

“…?”

“Monsterphilia. We’re goin’ on a date!”

Loki grinned again, her body swaying back and forth as she spoke.

Aiz blinked over and over, trying to figure out how to avoid this fate. “Ah-ah-ah, no refusin’!” Loki saw right through her and put an end to that train of thought.

“Good chance ta relax, rest up a bit. I was gonna go anyway. *Hic.* Works out perfectly! Wanna join us, Riveria?”

“…I must respectfully decline. The energy in the air at these kinds of events makes me unwell.”

“That’s too bad. Was lookin’ forward to havin’ a beautiful flower on each arm…Ow-ow-OW, my head.”

Suddenly remembering why she was there, Loki rubbed her temple and started walking forward again. Aiz looked to Riveria, but the look in the elf’s eyes said to do as she was told for now.

She had been planning to retrieve Desperate from Goibniu in the morning… but that wasn’t an option anymore. At the same time, she was beginning to understand everything her fellow familia members were doing for her. She

couldn’t go off on her own so soon after Riveria’s warning.

Truly feeling sorry for her actions, she agreed to Loki’s “punishment.”

“Meet ya in the mornin’, Aizuu. No playin’ hookie, now!”

“Understood.”

“I will take my leave now as well…Aiz, allow me to say this at least one more time: pace yourself.”

“Okay…”

The three ladies said good night and went their separate ways.



“Ehhh, you’re going with Loki, Aiz?”

Next morning.

Tiona visited Aiz’s room to invite her to the Monsterphilia, only to be completely caught off guard when the blond girl declined.

“Sorry, Tiona…”

“Oh well, can’t be helped. She beat me to the punch, got no one to blame but myself. Ahh, to think I’d lose to Loki…”

The weather was absolutely perfect for a festival. Birds were chirping outside her window, enjoying the warm light of the sun and the morning breeze.

Tiona quickly recovered from the agony of defeat and flashed a grin.

“The rest of us are about to leave and go to East Main. Meet up with us if you can!”

“Mm-hmm.”

The two shared a brief smile before going downstairs to the cafeteria together.

Loki was nowhere to be found once they arrived. The girls figured she was still recovering from last night. Aiz saw the group off as Tiona and the others left.

Aiz, still in pajamas, went back upstairs to change.

“…”

She picked out a sleeveless white top and miniskirt, the clothes that Tiona had bought for her.

She shyly glanced at herself in the mirror. Aiz didn’t have many occasions to wear clothes like this, so she didn’t want this chance to go to waste.

Then she strapped her rapier to her belt, just in case of emergencies.

The weapon looked as out of place as she felt, but it was her duty to carry it. Loki might have been calling this punishment a “date,” but that didn’t change the fact that she’d be Loki’s only line of defense should something go wrong.

Aiz slipped her feet inside a pair of boots, went down to the front entrance hall, and waited for Loki.

“Mornin’, Aiz. Sorry ta keep ya waitin’.”

“It’s fine.”

Aiz stood up from her chair as Loki stumbled to the entrance hall.

Despite her wobbly gait, Loki’s face looked considerably better than it had last night.

“Hnn? Oooh, those clothes…very nice!! Really cute! Never thought I’d see you wearin’ anything this charmin’!”

“…Thank you.”

“Ya all dolled up just for li’l old me?! YaWHOO! Those look so good on ya I gotta get a closer look!”

Loki dove at Aiz with her arms wide open and a ravenous twinkle in her eye. However, the blond girl ducked out of the way and pushed Loki past her with incredible speed. *THUD.* The goddess slammed headfirst into the wall behind her. A quiet squeaking sound could be heard throughout the entrance hall as she slid to the floor.

Loki pulled her head off the floor with both hands, cracked her neck a few times, and popped up to her feet as if nothing had happened.

“Yep, everything’s good under yer skirt, too. We’re good to go.”

“…You looked?”

“Huh? Nope, I ain’t looked at nothin’. Didn’t see yer new white panties or anything! Noooooothin’ at all!”

A slap echoed through the entrance hall, followed by silence.

Finally, a dizzy Loki led Aiz out of Twilight Manor, on the way to the Monsterphilia.

“Aiz, sorry ta ask ya, but I got a place ta go first. Could ya come with?”

“Yes…Is it breakfast?”

“Hnn, there’s that, too.”

Traveling south down North Main, the two emerged into Central Park before going east.

East Main was already filled with people. Many vendors had set up booths along the street to take advantage of the festivalgoers. Unfortunately, there were so many people that the booths were getting in the way.

Humans, elves, dwarves, animal people, prums, and Amazons. Seeing so many men and women of all ages and races together at one place was overwhelming and inspiring at the same time. One solid block of people that wasn’t moving at all turned out to be the end of the line for the Coliseum. The circular building was still a tiny dot in the distance.

“Ah, found it.”

Loki and Aiz worked their way into the mass of humanity. Every single one of them was excited for the festival, their energy infectious. The two ladies weaved their way through the crowded street to the doorstep of a café.

A small bell announced their arrival the moment Loki stepped inside. The staff greeted them right on cue. A few words from Loki and soon they were being led up to the second floor.

Aiz couldn’t shake the feeling that time stopped the moment she entered the café.

All of the guests seemed to be nothing more than empty shells. Mouths half

open and silverware leaning against their hands, all of them were looking in the same direction.

Aiz followed their lines of sight to a person in a navy-blue cloak sitting next to the window.

“Yo! Sorry to keep ya waitin’!”

“Not at all. I just got here myself.”

Loki walked straight up to this cloaked figure with no hesitation and said hello.

The mysterious woman’s smiling lips were visible underneath her hood.

“Haven’t had breaky yet. Mind if I grab a bite?”

“Do as you please.”

The woman—a goddess, in fact—had been expecting Loki. The two must have set up this morning meeting in advance.

Loki pulled up a chair directly across from the mysterious woman and the two began to talk like old friends. It was apparent these two had known each other before descending to Earth.

Aiz stepped behind Loki to not get in the way, while also taking up a guard position. She happened to catch a glimpse of silver hair coming out from beneath the hood. That was all she needed to figure out the identity of this mysterious woman.

“So when are you going to introduce that girl standing behind you?”

“Huh? Ya need introductions?”

“This is the first time we’ve met face-to-face.”

The hooded goddess turned her silver eyes toward the human girl. Aiz felt her senses being blurred by some kind of illusion the moment she made eye contact.

This goddess was the leader of what some people in Orario considered to be the strongest of all familias, one that was on equal footing with *Loki Familia*.

A goddess who was both stunningly beautiful and yet scary enough to be

referred to as “the Witch.”

The Goddess Freya.

“’Kay, then, this is my Aiz. That enough for ya? Aiz, this is a goddess—ya should at least say hello.”

“…Nice to meet you.”

Aiz had never met a being more beautiful than the elf Riveria. However, the goddess sitting in the chair by the window was so perfect that her looks were superior to a high elf’s.

Freya was a diamond among diamonds. She was so alluring that no mortal could resist her charms. Even other deities couldn’t help but be attracted to her. That was why every other customer in the café sat transfixed. The cloak covering her body made almost no difference.

Since gods didn’t age, her intimidating good looks would last for eternity whether she liked it or not. A “Goddess of Beauty.”

Freya wasn’t the only one, but she stood out from the rest of them.

“She is very cute. And also…Yes. I can see why you’ve taken a liking to this one.”

Receiving permission from Loki, Aiz took a seat at the table. Freya watched the two of them with a small smile on her lips.

Of course Aiz had heard the rumors about what happened to people when they met this goddess in person. They weren’t exaggerating. The woman’s perfectly symmetrical face and seductive proportions, barely recognizable beneath the cloak, were enough to make Aiz’s heart race. Freya’s beauty transcended gender, causing all who laid eyes on her to become enamored. Her allure was spellbinding.

Freya’s silver gaze and Aiz’s golden eyes intertwined.

Fear crept up within the girl for the first time in years. Her face remained expressionless as she lowered her head.

Aiz was looking at the table, but she knew Freya was grinning. She could feel it.

“Can I ask why you brought the Kenki here with you?”

“He-he-he-he-heeee…! It’s the fair, yeah? What better time for a date with my Aizuu?”

Loki had gone into her own little world, completely ignoring the presence of Freya and Aiz. She was back to her old self.

She reached out to her human follower.

“…Well, that, and she’s finally back from an expedition. If I leave her alone, she’ll be back in the Dungeon in no time. That’s just who she is.”

“…”

“Someone’s gotta tell her to relax, don’t they?”

Aiz couldn’t say anything in response.

Caught completely off guard by Loki’s kind words, she looked at her goddess for a moment before letting her gaze fall to the floor. *Pat-pat.* Loki lightly petted the back of Aiz’s head. She didn’t try to resist.

A slightly broken smile grew on the luscious lips visible beneath the hood.

Then the atmosphere surrounding the two deities became heavy. Their conversation was about to become much more serious.

Loki asked Freya to explain why she’d invited her to this café. She’d had enough small talk and wanted to get right to the point. She could tell something was strange about Freya and it was making her nervous. Her first indication was the Banquet a few days ago. Freya hadn’t attended one in eons. Why the sudden change?

Loki Familia and *Freya Familia*.

There was a lot of competition in the Labyrinth City, and those two groups currently held the most prestige and influence in a never-ending power struggle.

Should one of them show weakness, the other would jump at the first opportunity to gain an advantage. The two goddesses had a relatively good relationship, but that also meant they couldn’t afford to ignore each other. Loki

was here to make sure that Freya knew there would be consequences should she try to stir up trouble.

The second floor of the café was suddenly empty. The aura emanating from the two deities had become ominously overwhelming and the patrons wanted to avoid the oncoming storm. The only mortal left was Aiz. She calmly watched the two goddesses from her side of the table, her aloof expression still intact.

The only sound that could be heard was the commotion coming in from the street outside.

“Ah man, isn’t it…?”

Finally, Loki realized what was going on.

The tension in the room suddenly lifted as Freya smiled from ear to ear. Loki just sighed and massaged her temple.

“So…Ya got an eye for a child already in another familia, I take it?”

Loki mumbled a few things under her breath—how pointless this was, a few other things. The realization hit Aiz a second later.

She didn’t have much to go on, but it appeared that Freya had fallen in love with a mortal already following a different god. That meant that she’d attended the Banquet to collect more information on him.

Aiz glanced over in Freya’s direction, replaying the conversation in her mind. The Goddess of Beauty didn’t say if Loki was right or wrong, only giggled to herself as if enjoying Loki’s confusion.

“Geez, woman, is that all ya think about? Ya go after anyone, young or old?”

“How rude. I do have standards.”

“Leavin’ out all the bumblin’ idiots from Tenkai you pull fast ones on?”

“They have their uses. It’s so easy to get money out of them.”

The two goddesses paused, the air thick once again.

Loki grinned.

“And?”

“…?”

“Who’s the guy? What child are ya after now? When’d ya find ’im?”

“…”

“I came all the way out here, changed my plans, got worked up for no reason. I have the right ta know.”

Freya just glanced out the window as Loki went on a short rant.

One lock of her silver hair tumbled out from under the hood.

“…He’s not that strong. Weak, if you compare him to the children in our familias. Easily upset, he starts bawling at the simplest of problems…That kind of child.

“But he’s beautiful, pure. I’ve never seen anything like him. Took my breath away, and I couldn’t help but fall for him…”

Freya’s voice sounded like that of a mother bragging about her beloved son, but Aiz could sense an incredible passion burning within her.

The silver-haired goddess kept talking, her gaze never once leaving the scene outside the window.

“I found him by accident. He just happened to walk across my line of sight…It was just like this…”

—That’s when it happened.

Freya’s silver eyes saw something in the mass of humans and demi-humans on the street below. She forgot to breathe.

Aiz took a look outside, curious.

Sure enough, there was a white head of hair making its way through the crowd, its owner bounding like a rabbit making its way through a field. Freya wasn’t even blinking.

“—”

The deity’s mind went blank.

Aiz followed the boy’s path and looked up toward where he was going.

“I apologize. Something has come up.”

“Ehh?”

“Let’s do this again soon.”

Freya stood up from her chair. Loki sounded irritated, but Aiz didn’t notice. She was too busy watching the white rabbit disappear into the crowd.

It didn’t take Loki long to notice.

“What’s up, Aiz? Somethin’ wrong?”

“…No.”

She answered, but her eyes were still trained toward the window.

She could be wrong. There was no way to know for sure. But he might be here, at the Monsterphilia.

The white rabbit had disappeared from sight, but Aiz noticed something about herself in that moment. She hoped that he was.

There was a chance to meet him.

“Seriously, Aiz. Somebody outside? You’re scarin’ me.”

“…I’m sorry. It’s nothing.”

Aiz finally looked away from the window, only to see Loki looking at her with the utmost suspicion. The goddess was silent, but her message came across loud and clear: *No hidin’ anythin’!* Loki let it sink in. A few moments of silence passed before the food they’d ordered arrived at their table.

She kept an eye on her follower but started to eat the bread, soup, and salad anyway.

After they finished eating, Loki paid the bill and led Aiz back outside.

“All right, then, if ya insist on bein’ close-lipped, that’s fine. But in exchange, I’m gonna take us all around the fair until I’m satisfied, Aizuu!”

“Understood.”

“Hee-hee, let’s get goin’!”

The two walked down East Main Street, riding the waves of humanity along

the way.

The street was so full that it was difficult to move forward. However, the abundance of beautiful fresh flowers and other decorations not normally seen on the buildings made it worth the hassle. Long ropes ran from rooftop to rooftop across the street above everyone's heads. Flags bearing the official logo of the Monsterphilia and the elephant mask of *Ganesha Familia* hung down from them in such abundance that they cast shadows over the crowd while dancing in the breeze.

The food stalls in the middle of the road drew in many lines of customers with an appetizing mix of amazing smells and the sound of searing meat. Juicy fried chicken and fresh beef came off the flames of grills at a record pace, the vendors trying to keep up with the ravenous fairgoers.

The Monsterphilia was in full swing. There wasn't a frowning face to be seen.

"Aizuu, Jyaga Marukun is first on our list!"

"…!"

Loki guided Aiz to a food stall that was serving fried potato puffs. This food was actually one of Aiz's secret guilty pleasures. Even the name Jyaga Marukun made her eyes go wide with anticipation.

"Hmmm, one original Jyaga and…"

"Azuki sweet cream, please."

Loki walked up to the counter and placed her order. The cashier handed her two of the freshly fried puffs a moment later. The one that she handed to Aiz was the original recipe with a delicious filling.

Loki asked her how it was, but the girl couldn't respond. Enjoying every second of the flavor flooding her mouth, Aiz only nodded to her goddess before taking another bite of her treat.

"Aizuu! Aizuu!"

"?"

The blond girl looked up at Loki, a piece of the potato puff's flaky crust on her lip. *Chomp!* The goddess's teeth dove straight into her own Jyaga Marukun.

Loki started chewing with her mouth open, brazenly licking her lips before smiling at Aiz. Then she thrust out the rest of the potato pastry in front of the girl's face.

"Say 'ahh'!"

"No."

Rejected.

"Why the hell not?! I told ya, ya gotta satisfy me!"

"No."

"Come on, I've been dreamin' 'bout this for years! Please?"

"No."

Loki kept trying to convince Aiz to take a bite.

But all her attempts were immediately shot down. Even her goddess's tears couldn't sway Aiz's iron will.

"Okay then, Aizu. *I'll* say, 'ahh'! Can't refuse that, now can ya?"

"…"

"One bite, one bite's enough!"

Aiz looked down at her Jyaga Marukun and then up at her desperate goddess. Loki had no problem making a scene, and this would be better than her "hands-on approach" in public. So the girl slowly extended the half-eaten pastry toward the goddess.

One heartbeat later—*chomp!*

Loki's jaws closed like a guillotine around the pastry in Aiz's hands. Then the deity looked up like an extremely satisfied squirrel, savoring every second of the flavor before dramatically swallowing.

"Fu-hee-fu-hee-hee-hee……A secondhand kiss from my Aizuu!"

The girl instantly regretted her decision.

Every fiber of her being wanted to look away.

"Goddess, what are you doing?!"

“What you mean? Say ‘ah’! It’s my turn to feed you! Ready, ahh-nn!”

Two voices not too far away cut through the din of the crowd. Aiz didn’t know who it was, but she instantly felt that she wasn’t alone in this struggle.

“Okay, Aizuu! There’s still a lot to see!”

Loki grabbed hold of Aiz’s wrist and pulled her through the crowd. The goddess’s head was on a swivel as she looked for an interesting shop along the street.

There were so many stands in the area that it was impossible to see everything at once. Juice stands, festival food, handcrafted item and accessory shops—the list went on. Loki went from stand to shop and back to stand, vigorously bartering with anyone behind the counter. Aiz watched the goddess’s enthusiasm and couldn’t help but smile more than once.

Even though she didn’t realize it, Aiz was enjoying Loki’s almost comical behavior.

“…”

“Hnn, what’s wrong, Aizuu?”

The girl’s feet had suddenly stopped. Her gaze was locked onto a stand that was selling weapons.

The stand specialized in swords. Blades as small as daggers and as large as claymores were neatly lined up behind two experienced-looking adventurers. Most likely, the weapons were forged by smiths with experience in the Dungeon. They also tried to appeal to average citizens of the Labyrinth City by offering decorative weapons with inlaid gems and crystals.

Aiz had handled many different kinds of swords since she first became an adventurer. She knew exactly what she liked as well as how to tell a good weapon from a bad one. Instincts taking over, her eyes flew up and down the rows of blades. She felt excited for the first time today, searching for a diamond in the rough.

Loki had seen that look on her face many times before and it made her grimace.

“Would it kill ya to be more ladylike, Aizuu?…’Kay, now, that’s enough, let’s get goin’.”

“…Okay.”

“What’cha makin’ the long face for? There’re stands like that all over the place. Not just here.”

Aiz slowly nodded and drifted away from the weapon stand.

There was still so much that Loki wanted to see. The goddess pulled her follower through the lively crowd with unyielding vigor.



Drip. A drop of water fell, splashing into smaller droplets on the floor.

Another one dropped from the ceiling, the light splash sending echoes through the silence.

Something woke up.

Sluggish movements rattled its narrow cage.

The silence was heavy, deafening.

Darkness continued in every direction. The air felt cold on its skin.

A new sound broke the silence, the footsteps of a mouse. It must’ve wandered in here, but the moment it caught sight of the *thing*, the rodent wasted no time in running away.

It didn’t try to get up right away.

Whether it was groggy after a long sleep or it was trying to assess its surroundings without giving itself away, it didn’t make a sound. The thing simply was enveloped in the tranquil silence.

Then, it noticed.

The black bars holding it prisoner were open.

Something else, too.

There were other cages like its own nearby, their occupants breathing quietly

in the darkness.

The thing made its way to the open door of the cage.

Leaving its claustrophobic prison behind, new echoes filled the silence. The others sensed its presence and emerged from their own cages.

Outside.

The urge to go outside.

Slithering in the darkness.

Consciousness returning, instincts burned bright within the thing's mind. There were no coherent thoughts, only desires.

Movement.

Following the sounds, moving through the darkness.

Moving up, moving out, toward the sounds of other creatures.

To the surface.



"Oh no, it's startin'!" Loki exclaimed as she suddenly noticed the noises coming out of the Coliseum.

"Are you sure this is the right street?"

"You bet it is! The main street is bustin' at the seams. This is a shortcut!"

She'd lost track of time exploring the street stands and shops.

The two women raced through the backstreets in an effort to catch what was left of the main event of the Monsterphilia.

It was true, there was almost no one in their way. Without a map, Loki and Aiz made their way toward the Coliseum on pure guesswork. The backstreets were narrow and lined with two-and three-story buildings, covering their route in shade. Magic-stone lamps dotted the walls along the way, but none of them was turned on.

Catching glimpses of their destination through the small spaces between the buildings, Aiz and Loki adjusted their course accordingly.

“…?”

Aiz frowned.

Her ears caught the faintest monster’s howl in the distance.

She tried to convince herself that was just a tamer fighting with a monster in the Coliseum, but for some reason she couldn’t shake the dread bubbling up within her.

At long last, Aiz and Loki emerged from the backstreet. The Coliseum stood right in front of them.

“Don’t like runnin’, makes me tired…Uunnn? Whassup with them?”

Loki tried her best to catch her breath. That’s when she noticed something strange about how the event staff was behaving.

The Guild employees stationed at this entrance for the festival looked anxious and twitchy, jumping at the slightest sounds. With the crowd roaring in the stands behind them, there was a surprising level of confusion outside the entrance.

But the fact that *Ganesha Familia* members were arming themselves for combat was the most telling clue that something was wrong.

Aiz and Loki exchanged glances before nodding at each other and approaching the Coliseum’s south entrance. Finding a group of Guild employees standing in a circle, Aiz walked up to them to find out what was wrong.

“…Excuse me. What’s happened?”

All of the employees spun around in an instant, their eyes flying open.

“A-Aiz Wallenstein…”

They were awestruck. Suddenly, one of the men jumped toward her and explained the situation as fast as he could.

Apparently, some of the monsters captured for the festival had escaped from the east gate. It was an emergency situation.

Their theory was that someone had set the monsters free. All of the Guild employees and *Ganesha Familia* members stationed on that side for security

had been found in some kind of trance. It was almost as if their souls had been sucked out of their bodies. They wouldn't be much help in the foreseeable future.

"We don't have enough forces to contain the monsters. I beg of you, help us…!"

Aiz had no reason to refuse.

She looked back over her shoulder toward her goddess.

"Loki."

"Yeah, I heard. Can't be on a date at a time like this. I'll let Ganesha borrow ya for a bit."

The Guild employees then informed Aiz and Loki about the number of monsters, their types, and the forces available.

Now wasn't the time to worry about how the monsters escaped.

Aiz took hold of the hilt of her rapier and dashed toward the east gate in hopes of saving the lives of any citizens who got caught up in this mess.

CHAPTER
5



TO BATTLE

Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

Пачатак вайны

© Kiyotaka Haimura

CHAPTER 5

TO BATTLE

A roar of applause swept through the crowd.

One of *Ganesha Familia*'s tamers had just issued a command and a once-uncontrollable monster took a seat on the arena floor.

The Coliseum, located in eastern Orario, stood high above the surrounding buildings. Energy swirled within its walls, threatening to bubble out over the top.

"Gotta hand it to Ganesha's guys, that was amazing! That one made taming look simple. I could never pull that off."

"Very much so. The chances of successfully taming a monster are extremely slim, and yet he pulled it off in front of a large audience…"

"It's all part of the show. Not only did he tame the monster, he pulled off all those flashy moves at the same time to up the entertainment value. I'd pay to see something like this any day."

Tiona, Lefiya, and Tione had come to the Coliseum to see the main event of the Monsterphilia. Arriving early in the morning, the three girls had claimed very good seats in the stands. Thoroughly impressed by the best that *Ganesha Familia* had to offer, they talked among themselves and the crowd.

The very colorfully dressed tamer took a bow and was received by another round of enthusiastic applause. The tiger monster looked like nothing more than a well-trained house cat as the man guided it out of the arena. Once they were clear, the arena's eastern gate flung open to reveal a very masculine tamer and a dragon standing over seven meders tall.

"They caught something that big in the Dungeon and dragged it all the way up here?"

“Of course they didn’t. They tracked one down outside the city. Most monsters born outside the Dungeon are much weaker, but dragons are always powerful.”

The three girls had a great view of the arena from their seats, a couple of rows back from the front.

All of the applause was suddenly replaced by thousands of gasps in unison. “Uaahhh!” Tiona tilted her head to the side, squeezing one eye closed. Lefiya covered her ears and took in a deep breath.

“Wait, don’t you think this is a little strange? Look at that creature. Wouldn’t it make more sense for it to be the grand finale?”

Somehow the elf’s voice was loud enough to be heard by her friends. Tiona straightened her head and blinked a few times before taking a closer look at the monster.

It was by far the most powerful and intimidating monster they’d seen today. The festival was scheduled to continue for a few more hours, so there was no reason for it to take the place of other monsters. The more Tiona thought about it, the stranger this timing seemed to her.

In that case, there was a reason for the organizers to change the order—as in the next monsters couldn’t make it to the arena.

“Also…don’t the *Ganesha Familia* adventurers look a bit anxious?”

“Ah, you noticed that, too?”

The Amazonian twins scanned the crowd. Sure enough, many people wearing *Ganesha Familia*’s emblem were running in and out of a private box on the top lip of the Coliseum. Most likely, their god, Ganesha, was inside. Other members of the familia were working their way through the crowd, talking with anyone who looked strong. Their body language told the girls that they were asking for something.

Tiona and the others couldn’t help but feel that something bad was going on. The anxiety on the *Ganesha Familia* members’ faces was impossible to miss.

“What shall we do?”

“…We could go and ask?”

Tione answered Lefiya’s question as she stood up from her seat.

The three girls squeezed their way past other people seated in their row and ran up the aisle to the exit.



“What’re Ganesha’s kiddos doin’, Misha?”

“Ehh, um, well, they’re moving to protect the people. They’re working with us to evacuate the east block.”

“Hrrrm…Can’t expect much out of ’em in that case. Best ta leave the monsters ta Aiz.”

Loki talked to a very nervous Guild employee as she looked around the area.

Order had been restored to the courtyard surrounding the Coliseum. Guild employees wearing black suits rushed into position as *Ganesha Familia* adventurers formed battle parties. A few adventurers had been pulled from the crowd inside to help; they stood in an unorganized group, waiting for orders. Finally, a Guild employee directed them to join other groups as needed.

Monster roars could be heard echoing from behind the buildings in the distance.

“Loki!”

“Huh?”

Loki spun around after hearing her name. She waved both arms when she recognized three of her own coming toward her.

They had been unsuccessful at getting any real answers from Guild employees, so the three girls came to her for more detailed information.

“To be blunt, some monsters escaped. I hear they’re still nearby.”

“Wha?! That’s bad, really bad!”

“Yep, sure is.”

Tiona’s sudden surprised outburst had no effect on Loki’s calm demeanor.

The girls bombarded her with questions. Loki just smiled and began to issue orders.

“Would the three of ya mind cleanin’ up if one of the monsters gets away from Aiz? Oh yeah, it’d be better if we had a good view. I’m goin’ up; y’all should, too.”

“Miss Aiz is already engaging the monsters in battle?”

“Nah, not yet.”

“Haah? Okay, then where is she?”

Loki answered Lefiya’s and Tione’s questions with one finger.

She pointed to the upper rim of the Coliseum.

“Up there.”

Her hair rustled in the wind.

Aiz surveyed the city from the top of the Coliseum, blond hair dancing behind her.

She had been granted special access to the roof of the building. Without question, this spot was the best vantage point in the area. She had a clear view straight down East Main and could easily see the places people were running away from at the same time.

She could’ve charged out after the monsters roaming the city right away, but this was a battle against the clock.

—Get a bird’s-eye view and snipe them from afar.

Those were Loki’s instructions.

“…There.”

While she could see them, Aiz had another ace up her sleeve. There was no wind in the Dungeon, but it could flow freely on the surface. Her Magic, Airiel, gave her a wide spatial sense as the breeze spread out throughout the area. She could find monsters in the blink of an eye.

There were eight beasts in her general vicinity. The Guild’s report said that nine had escaped. She couldn’t sense the last one.

But there was no time. Aiz drew the rapier from its sheath at her waist.

“Awaken, Tempest.”

Wind swirled around her.

The crowd erupted in cheers once again behind her. Taking a step forward, she leaned over the edge.

Lightly pushing off, the wind’s support made her float next to the man-made structure for a few seconds.

Her golden eyes locked onto the closest monster. She didn’t blink.

She’d take it down at full speed.

“Lil Rafaga.”

She kicked off the wall.

Aiz careened toward her target like a spear shot out of a cannon.

“?!”

“The hell is that?!”

Impact.

She pierced through the back of her target, a troll in the middle of a backstreet. A group of adventurers had been preparing to take it head-on and had a clear view of her approach. They stood there in awe and surprise as the townspeople who hadn’t evacuated yet dove for cover.

One!

The troll erupted in a burst of ash. Aiz landed on the stone surface of the street with a huge impact, spun around, and dashed toward an intersection—slicing in half the monster standing there.

“—GaAHHH?!”

Two!

No stopping.

Jumping to the top of a three-story building, Aiz ran from rooftop to rooftop in pursuit of her next target. She jumped down the moment her eyes caught a

glimpse of the beast. She traced its shadow, her rapier piercing the moving target between its shoulder blades.

Three!

The time spent on top of the Coliseum had paid off by dramatically reducing time between kills. Aiz was moving so fast and efficiently that she was reaching the monsters before the other groups dispatched to take care of them even had a chance. All they felt was a gusting breeze before the monster in front of them exploded in a mixture of blood and ash.

Even the robust four-legged deer monster Sword Stag burst into chunks of flesh as she ran by.

Four!

A blond typhoon whipped its way around the city.



“Please evacuate in an orderly fashion! There are no monsters in the area, remain calm!”

“My daughter, she’s gone! We got separated, and…AND…!”

“Ma’am, take a deep breath. Now, what color clothing is your daughter wearing?”

Guild employees did their best to control the chaos in the East Block residential area. With the help of adventurers, they guided the panicking and angry townspeople to safety.

Loki witnessed a conversation between a half-elf in a black suit and an animal person get interrupted by the dying roar of a monster in the distance. She looked in that direction.

“Tough luck, girls, looks like Aiz is gonna finish ’em off…”

Loki muttered to herself from her perch on top of a bell tower.

Her eyes caught gold and silver streaks racing across the horizon before disappearing behind a building.

Another roar of pain rang out a moment later before being instantly silenced.

“But…somethin’ seems fishy about all this.”

There had been no civilian casualties thanks to the quick reaction of the Guild and *Ganesha Familia*. Judging by the conversations going on beneath her, the evacuation was now complete. What’s more, no one was injured.

The Guild and *Ganesha Familia* should be commended for their bravery, but Loki had a different theory.

No one dead or bleedin’…This is too perfect to be a fluke…No monster would pass up a chance to snack on a kiddo.

Loki had seen several monsters come within striking distance of screaming demi-humans but didn’t even take a swing. All they did was look around the street, like they were searching for something in particular. There was the occasional outburst of anger as they crushed objects in their way, but not a single one went after the easy targets.

“No tellin’ what’s gonna happen next…”

Aiz finished off another monster down the street.

The only being with the ability to pull off something like this—a navy-blue hood, a lock of silver hair, and a broken smile immediately came to her mind.

“—Hnn?”

Loki looked at her feet.

The bricks groaned and shifted.

She hadn’t imagined it—the bell tower was swaying.

Loki grabbed hold of the windowsill and looked around outside.

“An earthquake…?”



“Ah-ha-ha, looks like we won’t get a turn.”

Tiona grumbled as the three girls came to a stop. They had been jumping from rooftop to rooftop through the residential district in pursuit of the monsters, but Aiz always got there first.

At this rate, none of them would get away from her, and the girls' presence here would be meaningless.

Aiz took off again in another direction. The girl's hair and clothes danced in her wake.

"Feels like we were offered candy but someone else ate it…"

"Oh? You, too?"

"…U-umm, neither of you have weapons or armor. I'm amazed you can say things like that."

In fact, none of them had any of their equipment at all. Large blades and a staff would only block their view in the stands, and Tione didn't want to accidentally sit on one of her knives. Wearing armor to the festival would have been just as uncomfortable.

But little details like that didn't bother the Amazonian twins. They were confident in their ability to fight as long as they could clench their fists, but Lefiya couldn't even fathom the idea.

"…?"

"Tiona?"

"Is something the matter?"

The girl was frowning, senses on high alert. Hunched over and looking left and right, she looked like an alley cat trying to figure out if she should fight or flee.

She looked at her sister and said:

"Is the ground shaking?"

"…Now that you mention it, yes."

"Perhaps it's just…an earthquake?"

But all of them knew that the shaking was much too local to be an earthquake. Only the houses in this area were quivering. Babel Tower was steady as a rock in Central Park. The girls knew something was very wrong.

Their senses had been sharpened from years of Dungeon crawling. Hearing an unexpected sound was a sign of things to come.

Then.

An explosion erupted from street level the moment the girls braced themselves.

“?!”

All three turned in that direction and saw a pyre of smoke rising to the sky less than a block away.

“EE-EEEEEEKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!!”

A woman’s scream cut through the air.

The smoke and dust wavered as it started to clear. That’s when a long, snakelike monster came into view. Its tail was still emerging from between the stones of the broken pavement.

The three girls felt chills run down their spines.

All of their faces turned a shade paler.

“Tione, this one means business!!”

“Our turn.”

The twins sprinted forward.

Lefiya took off just behind them. The girls raced across the rooftops, jumped, and landed in front of the beast.

“What corner of the Dungeon did Ganesha’s guys drag this thing out of…?”

“Is this a new species…?”

The snake’s lump of a “head” leaned forward as the last of the smoke cleared.

Pale-green smooth skin covered its long, thin body. The lump at the front of its body didn’t have a mouth or eyes or anything else to identify it as a head. In fact, it was shaped more like a sunflower seed. It “looked” at the girls, but they didn’t know how it could see them.

A faceless snake stared them down.

“Tiona, we pound it to dust.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Lefiya, start casting in case we need backup.”

“Y-yes.”

Tione issued orders to the others as they took up positions around the monster.

The ground trembled again as the monster shifted its attention to the twins charging at full speed.

A moment later, it used its entire body like a whip planted in the ground to attack the girls head-on.

“!”

The Amazons quickly jumped out of the way.

Stones flew in every direction as the beast’s body slammed onto the street. Fragments flew through the surrounding houses and buildings, opening countless holes. Another cloud of smoke and debris filled the ten-meder-wide street.

Crick, crick, crick. The monster’s body made a truly unnerving sound as it straightened up once again. Tione and Tiona circled around the creature to attack from behind.

“?!”

“What’s this thing made of, solid steel?!”

Sharp pain shot through their arms the moment their punches connected.

The monster’s skin repelled the attack.

Despite being unarmed, the Amazonian twins were top-class adventurers. Hundreds of thousands of monsters had been literally torn apart by their hands. And yet, neither of them could make a dent in this one. All their powerful fists had done was make the creature flinch. In fact, the creature’s armor had inflicted more damage on *them*.

Tiona shook her right hand so fast it was a blur, eyes opened wide in shock.

“—!!”

The creature let out a ferocious, angry roar. Perhaps their attacks had done

damage after all. It started violently whipping its body around, like an angry bull trying to buck off a rider.

The twins quickly retreated to a safe distance before finding new windows to attack.

“We can’t end this with our fists!”

“Ah, what I wouldn’t give for a sword right now!”

The girls yelled back and forth as they landed blow after blow against the monster but couldn’t seem to land a decisive hit.

The monster was very quick to counterattack, but the girls were too agile. The snakelike creature had turned most of the street into rubble but had yet to make contact with its opponents.

Neither side could gain an advantage. The battle was a stalemate, but neither side was backing down.

Meanwhile, Lefiya had found cover outside of the monster’s range and begun casting a spell.

“Unleashed beam of light, limbs of the holy tree. You are the master archer.”

She had no staff to help focus her magical energy. Therefore, she stuck her arm out straight forward and concentrated her energy into her palm.

The spell valued speed over destructive power. While it couldn’t wipe out hordes of enemies, it was more applicable to a wide variety of situations in combat.

Even better, the creature was completely distracted by Tiona’s and Tione’s attacks. It hadn’t even looked in Lefiya’s direction. She had plenty of time to focus and wait for an opening.

The elf’s voice flowed like a musical melody as a golden magic circle spread beneath her feet.

“Loose your arrows, fairy archers. Pierce, arrow of accuracy!”

The spell was complete. All that remained was to concentrate all her magical energy to a single point and pull the “trigger.” Suddenly— The creature turned

away from the twins and looked directly at her.

“Huh?”

Lefiya’s heart skipped a beat. The creature’s quick reaction to the new threat sent a chill down her spine.

The monster that had completely ignored her up until now suddenly had its faceless head pointed directly at her.

The Amazons were already getting out of the way—Lefiya knew in that moment this creature was sensitive to magical energy.

The realization came a second too late.

A sudden impact tore through her stomach.

“—ah.”

A pale-green tendril had shot out of the ground at her feet.

Without any armor to absorb the blow, Lefiya felt the green appendage, as thick as Lefiya’s arm, slam into normal cloth.

“Ka-AHH!” Blood erupted from her mouth, splattering on the ground. She could feel every unnatural crunch inside her abdomen as even more blood dripped from her mouth.

““LEFIYA?!””

The blow knocked the elf clean off her feet. Her eyes rolled into her head as she flew backward. *Thud!* She landed on her back, body twitching.

Tiona and Tione screamed at the top of their lungs and rushed to her aid. The elf’s feminine frame was much more delicate than their own. A hit like that could be fatal. Lefiya stopped moving, lying eerily still.

The tendril that burst from the ground started to wiggle. At the same time, the creature began to change.

It raised its lump-like head toward the sky. *Crick! Crick!* Lines appeared—and it *bloomed*.

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

Its roar reverberated through the streets.

Many petals stretched out to sunlight.

Each of them was an ominous deep red.

They all met in the center, a gigantic mouth lined with fangs. Pollen shook free with every movement.

The flesh inside its mouth was light pink. Its magic stone was visible deep in its throat as the beast turned toward its prey.

“Not a snake…but a flower?!”

Tiona yelled in horror.

The long body was actually a stem. Its faceless lump of a head turned out to be a bud.

The ferocious carnivorous flower turned its terrifying visage toward Lefiya.

Several more tendrils exploded from the ground as the creature’s body slithered toward the helpless elf.

“Lefiya, get up!!”

“GAHHH, outta my way!!”

Tione and Tiona’s path to their ally was blocked by the tendrils. No matter how many times they knocked one of the pale-green appendages to the ground, it would just rise again. Lefiya lay motionless in the middle of a wriggling forest of roots.

The Amazonian twins screamed as the monster’s head hovered over their friend.



No! Lefiya thought.

The creature’s long body blocked the sun overhead. Cast in shade, her body wouldn’t move, no matter how many times she begged it to stand. The cloud of pollen around her had become so thick it was hard to breathe. Even now, she could hear drops of saliva falling from overhead and landing next to her face.

Screams seemed distant. Some residents hadn't evacuated in time and now watched in terror as the creature prepared to devour her. Guild employees and adventurers did their best to guide the unlucky souls to safety as quickly as possible.

No, NO!! Lefiya screamed in her head.

She commanded her arms and legs to move. Anywhere was better than here. She called on every muscle, every tendon, every nerve to get her away from this creature.

But it was all for nothing. The creature's mouth was closing in and she couldn't budge.

"Aa-AAA!" At last, sound escaped from her throat.

Her cloudy eyes reflected nothing but the monster's incoming fangs and bloodred petals.

NO, NO, NOT AGAIN!

It's the same as before. Why is it always like this?

That's going to happen again.

Someone else is going to—

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Gold and silver streaks flashed before her eyes.

The creature's head was severed from its body. Lefiya saw sparkling blond hair through her painful tears.

Not from physical pain—that amazing girl had saved her once again.



The monster's final cries echoed through the streets as its head slammed into a stone wall.

Aiz had arrived at the last possible moment, slicing the creature's neck with all her strength. She landed gracefully on what was left of the stone street and turned to face her allies.

The monster's entire body was convulsing. It had been mere seconds away from devouring Lefiya, but now its headless body had collapsed to the ground next to her. It wriggled and twitched for a few moments before coming to a stop.

"Aiz!"

The tendrils that had been keeping the Amazons at bay fell limp to the street.

The human girl looked around and knew she'd arrived in the nick of time.

Her magic had alerted her to the presence of an unreported monster the moment she had slain the sixth festival escapee. Just like Tiona, Tione, and Lefiya, she rushed into battle. She saw the mage take a direct hit. Thanks to the wind's assistance, Aiz managed to enter the fray in time to prevent Lefiya's untimely death.

Aiz saw the twins rushing toward her, but she cast her gaze toward the elf.

Lefiya was still motionless on the ground. Aiz took a step toward her when suddenly— The ground in front of her started to crack.

"…!"

Rumbling from beneath the street reached her ears a moment later.

Aiz took a defensive stance as the stones around her shook hard enough to leave the ground.

"Wha—what now?!"

"There's more?!"

Pale-green stalks rose from the dirt as the twins yelled out to each other.

Three of them, all around Aiz.

Rising up like bars of a living cage, the buds opened wide and bared their fangs at the girl trapped inside.

Their moist breath was hot on her face. Aiz frowned and looked at each of her opponents in turn—when, without warning…

SNAP! A spiderweb of cracks ran through the rapier a second before it shattered.

“—”

“Huh—”

“Wha—”

Words left Aiz and the twins as all three girls watched the splinters of metal fall to the ground.

The blade couldn’t withstand the combination of Airiel and Aiz’s aggressive fighting style. Pushed beyond its limit, the weapon literally fell to pieces.

She had forgotten her own situation in the crucial moment—Aiz slew every monster with the rapier as if she were using Desperate. The last bits of the weapon flashed in the sunlight as they landed at her feet.

Someone was going to be very angry with her.

The first thing to jump into Aiz’s mind wasn’t the perilous situation of being unarmed against powerful foes but the fact that she could no longer return the rapier to its rightful owner.

“—!!”

The carnivorous plants howled.

All three fanged blossoms converged on her at once. Aiz quickly jumped out of the way.

“!”

A small sliver of the rapier still remained attached to the hilt in her right hand. Aiz brought it down on the closest monster.

Pain instantly shot through her wrist as the beast’s skin rejected what was left of the sharp edge. The wind’s assistance made no difference. Aiz took one look at the creature’s undamaged body and gave up trying that again.

“Why are they ignoring us? This time it’s Aiz!”

“They can sense Magic…?!”

No matter how many times Tiona and Tione struck the monsters, all three stayed in hot pursuit of the human girl.

Aiz weaved and dodged her way away from Lefiya. The heads took turns tearing through the air and crashing into the street teeth-first. Meanwhile, more tendril-like roots emerged from the ground to protect their bodies against the Amazons' attacks.

"Aiz, get rid of your Magic! They'll follow you until you do!"

"But…"

"We can take them one-on-one!"

The monsters' snakelike bodies slammed into a line of nearby street stalls, sending them flying in their pursuit of the blond girl.

The Amazonian twins called out to Aiz as they jumped in and out of the way of the mobile green stems. The human protested at first but saw the logic in their suggestion and was about to dismiss the wind protecting her.

That's when she saw her.

"__"

She caught a glimpse of a small human figure out of the corner of her eye.

A civilian who hadn't escaped in time.

An animal-person child had been hiding behind the street stalls. Overcome by fear, the girl sat on the stone street, shaking uncontrollably. Their eyes met.

If Aiz tried to dodge the monsters' next attack to the right, their long bodies would crush the girl in an instant.

She made her decision.

Strong wind gathered around her.

Aiz jumped onto the debris on her left.

Fanged jaws came down.



"Are you all right?"

A hand reached out to assist the groaning and flinching Lefiya.

The elf reached up with a trembling hand, grabbed hold, and managed to sit up.

“Ka-khaaa…kahh…aah…?!”

More blood dripped down her chin as she coughed. A female Guild employee offered her shoulder and helped the elf to her feet.

Her stomach and dry throat felt like they were on fire.

Every muscle movement sent a wave of searing pain through her body. It took every ounce of willpower she had to focus her eyes on her surroundings.

It was utter destruction. The stone pavement was in pieces, piles of debris everywhere. Near-skeletons of buildings were all that was left of shops and homes that once stood here. The street stalls were completely gone; only the occasional menu or piece of wood amid the rubble proved they were ever there.

Vision going in and out of focus, Lefiya searched for her friends.

Searched for the adventurers much stronger than herself. The ones who’d so kindly protected her despite existing on a completely different plane.

At last, her vision cleared enough to catch a glimpse of her allies not too far down the street.

“__”

What she saw made her blood run cold.

Inside the wooden remains of a destroyed shop.

One of the monsters had its jaws around a human girl, her blond hair just barely visible beneath its petals.

Only the torrent of powerful storm winds was keeping its mouth from closing all the way. At the same time, two more of the creatures were chomping at her legs. The Amazonian twins were doing their best to pull the monsters back, but to no avail.

Countless fangs were plunging deep into the wind, mere moments away from Aiz’s vulnerable skin.

“Please don’t move. We need to get you to a doctor!”

The half-elf Guild employee desperately tried to get Lefiya to stop struggling.

Noticing that the injured mage wasn’t blinking, the Guild employee followed Lefiya’s blue eyes. The half-elf’s heart skipped a beat.

“*Ganesha Familia* will be here shortly. Leave it to them; you need to get to safety!”

“…!”

Lefiya’s pain-ridden body lurched forward.

She struggled to breathe as the Guild employee calmly tried to coax her into retreating. Lefiya’s gaze dropped to her left hand.

Ganesha Familia. They had weapons and armor. Most likely, they could save her friends. There was no doubt in her mind that they would be much more help than she would in her critically injured state.

The pain coursing through her body was telling her to turn her back and run.

Lefiya cleared her throat, shut her eyes—then.

She clenched her left hand into a fist and opened her eyes with vigor.

She stood up by her own power.

“…?!”

“—I am Lefiya Viridis! An elf of the Wishe Forest!”

The Guild employee watched in silence as Lefiya tried to drive the weakness out of her body with the power of her voice.

“I am bound to the Goddess Loki. A member of the strongest, proudest, noblest familia in all of Orario. I refuse to run away!”

Her words became stronger with each passing syllable.

A new energy flowed into her as willpower took over like the trigger of a magic spell. Lefiya took one step forward, then another before taking off at a full run.

She returned to the battlefield in hopes that she could save her friends from

their desperate situation.

—I know, I know all too well!

Lefiya already understood.

I will only get in their way!

She was destined to always live in their shadows. She would never measure up.

She always had been and always would be protected by them.

No matter how hard she tried to help, they would always kindly push her away from danger at the moment of truth. They would say nice things like, “Leave this to us,” and refuse to let her fight alongside them.

Just like before.

No matter how strong I try to be, I don’t belong!

Any efforts to chase them would be futile. Clinging to their coattails would only widen the gap.

This feeling of inferiority tormented her to the point of submission. They were so far above her it was maddening.

The realization broke her spirit. The others were immensely powerful—the golden aura of that girl was strong; she was weak.

But…!

She wanted to give chase.

She wanted to help. She wanted to be useful.

If possible, she wanted to be part of the group.

She wanted to become someone who the girls who had accepted her, the girls who had saved her over and over again, would allow to stand side by side with them at the most desperate of times.

“!”

She was in range.

Lefiya came close enough to the monsters that there was no chance her

Magic would miss.

Dark blue eyes locked onto the monsters ensnaring her friends and she began to cast.

“I beseech the name of Wishe!”

In the end, all she could do was cling.

It was the only way to reach their height.

“Ancestors of the forest, proud brethren. Answer my call and descend upon the plains.”

No matter how much blood she coughed up, how many steps she had to take, how many tears she had to wipe off her cheeks.

The only option for clingers was to pursue their dreams.

“Connecting bonds, the pledge of paradise. Turn the wheel and dance.”

Spirits break, over and over. Willpower had a limit; nothing was immune.

Only those who didn’t know when to give up could mend a broken spirit.

Only the most stubborn of souls could get up time and again, no matter how hard they fell.

“Come, ring of fairies.”

Lefiya sang.

Swallowing the blood that still flowed up her throat, she continued her enchantment to validate her worth despite always being protected. She continued her song to reach that next plateau, closer to where they resided.

“Please—give me strength.”

Her song must reach that girl.

If her feet were too slow, then let her song accompany her into battle.

Even if she didn’t turn to listen, as long as Aiz heard her, was put at ease, was protected, she would be satisfied. She’d be part of the battle to slay the enemy threatening her.

Just like a fairy dancing in the forest. Just like a fairy fighting for the one she

loved.

A song that was truly her own, reaching out.

This song, this Magic must reach her.

“Elf Ring.”

Her golden magic circle turned to jade the moment those words left her lips.

“Lefiya?!”

“?!”

Tiona noticed a sudden influx of magical energy. Of course, the monsters trying to sink their fangs into Aiz noticed it as well and were instantly attracted to the stronger magic source.

Aiz’s eyes widened in surprise as all three creatures turned away from her.

“—Harbinger of the end, white snow. Gust before the twilight.”

Lefiya’s incantation continued.

Her already completed spell was warping into something new, a different type of Magic.

—There was a limit to the amount of spells someone could learn.

Each Status had exactly three spell slots. That meant that even the most skilled mages could learn a maximum of only three types of Magic.

The same was true for Lefiya—but her final spell was special: Summon Burst.

It allowed her to duplicate any elvish magic that she could either recite the incantation for or fully understand the effects of. This incredibly rare spell gave her access to a library of magical attacks. In exchange for the extended summoning time and an incredible amount of Mind energy, she could make any other elf’s magic her own, after witnessing it at least once.

For that reason, the gods and goddesses of Orario had given her the title of “Thousand Elf.”

“Fading light, freezing land.”

She chose to summon the attack magic of the elvish queen, Riveria Ljos Alf.

Lefiya was calling forth a blizzard cold enough not only to keep an enemy from moving but to freeze time itself.

The jade magic circle began to pulse. A second elegant voice joined Lefiya's song.

The two voices harmonized as the magic circle blazed brightly beneath her feet.

"—!!"

The three carnivorous plant monsters picked up speed.

Terrifying roars resonating like a broken bell, they launched their fanged blossoms toward the growing source of magical energy.

"Ah-ah-ah, I don't think so!"

"Stay down!!"

"!"

"?!"

However, Tiona, Tione, and Aiz were faster. Getting between the monsters and their friend, the three girls unleashed a barrage of punches and kicks to slow them down.

The elf saw her allies come to defend her, but she knew what was coming her way. She leaned forward and crossed her arms to protect her stomach.

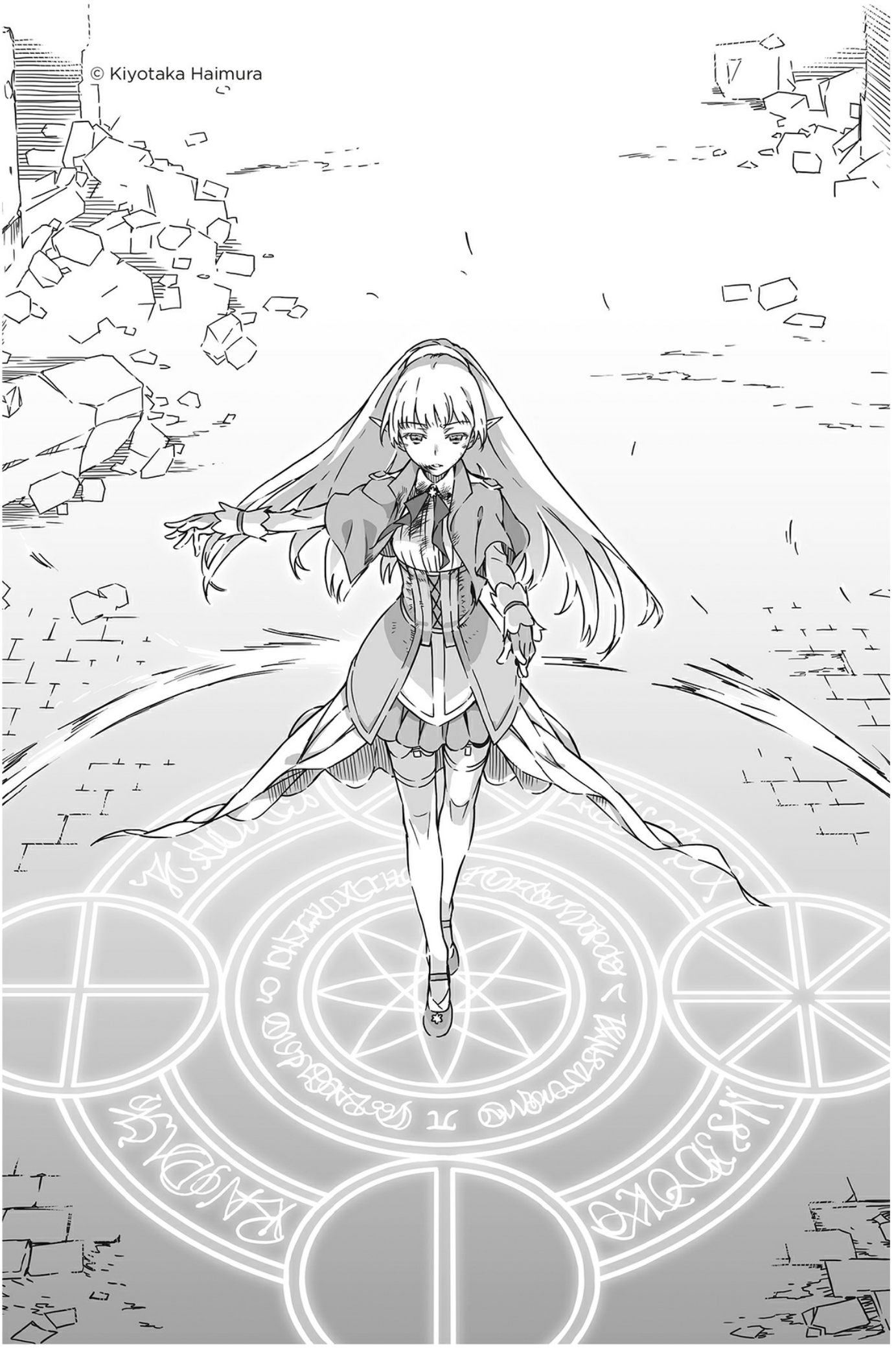
No sooner had she braced herself than more spear-like tendrils burst out of the ground in front of her.

Pain shot through her legs, shoulders, and head.

Fresh wounds were open and bleeding, but it would take more than that to kill her. Her dark blue eyes shot open and she finished casting her spell.

"Blow with the power of the third harsh winter—My name is Alf!"

The magic circle rapidly expanded.


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Her lips were illuminated by blinding jade light as she said: *“Wynn Fimbulvetr.”*

An arctic blast filled the street.

Aiz and the twins jumped out of the way at the last possible second as chilling white winds overtook the monsters. Their skin, their petals, even the sound escaping from their fanged jaws froze in place. A layer of frost overtook all three of the monsters.

Three overgrown flowers were frozen in time. They stood like statues caged in ice that would never melt. The spell turned the surrounding area into a winter wonderland, the streets a skating rink surrounded by buildings and debris that were frozen solid.

Wind whipped fractals of ice through the air, making the area sparkle like the inside of a snow globe under the bright midday sun.

“Nice, Lefiya!”

“Never had much of a green thumb anyway. See? It’s black and blue thanks to these weeds.”

Tiona came bounding toward the elf, all smiles, while her sister vented frustration. Both walked past Lefiya and up to two of the frozen monsters.

Neither of them hesitated the moment they arrived in front of the deep-blue beasts. They even took the same pose.

“!!”

“Take thisss—!!”

Both spun into the air and slammed their heels into the monsters.

Their wheat-colored skin was a blur on impact. Cracks raced across the surface of the ice before the carnivorous plants collapsed into a pile of shards.

“Aizuu.”

“…Loki?”

Aiz turned away from the frigid massacre unfolding at the hands of the Amazons to search for the voice that called out to her.

She found two human figures standing on top of the remains of an item shop. One of them was a little animal-person girl who looked familiar; the other was Loki. Her goddess was holding the young girl in a reassuring one-armed hug at her side.

Loki had a sword in her other arm. A moment later, she tossed it to Aiz.

“This is…”

“Hnn, kinda borrowed it from that shop over yonder.”

She pointed to the remains of a street stand that had been destroyed by the monsters.

Strips of steel sparkled beneath the wood debris. It used to sell weapons.

That morning, the two of them had visited a street stand just like it.

“’Kay, have at it.”

One look at Loki’s smile made Aiz forget to ask her when she’d found the little girl. Instead, she returned her goddess’s smile with a grin of her own.

“…”

Chilled air rose from the sheet of ice covering the ground.

Aiz carefully walked to the base of the last frozen monster.

It stood like a silent reminder of what the carnivorous plants could have done.

Now it was frozen solid, unable to defend itself or run away from Aiz as she drew the new sword from its sheath.

One slash became hundreds in the blink of an eye as lines crisscrossed its body.

Aiz jumped over the monster’s head to deliver one final blow. “Hyuun!” The blade whistled as it sliced through air and beast.

Sheets of ice crumbled to the ground.

Off-balance, the remaining pieces of the monster collapsed in on themselves.

More ice fractals danced in the sunlight, the air shimmering like the human girl’s blond hair.



“Thanks so much, Lefiya! You saved us!”

“M-Miss Tiona?!”

Tiona ignored Lefiya’s injuries and embraced her in a big hug that took the elf off her feet.

The elf’s left eye closed as she winced in pain, cheeks blushing bright red. Lefiya didn’t seem too proud of herself.

Looking as aloof as usual, Aiz sounded relieved as she walked up to her friend.

“Thank you, Lefiya.”

“Miss Aiz…”

“You looked like Riveria…That was impressive.”

Those words made her open both her eyes. Overcome with emotion she’d never felt before, the elf blushed as red as an apple before looking at the ground. Still in Tiona’s bear hug, Lefiya felt her lips find their way into a smile.

“Yeah, yeah, congrats an’ all, but ya still got work ta do.”

Loki clapped her hands twice as she walked between the girls.

The Guild employees were still running around like madmen. It was too early to let their guard down.

“Tiona an’ Tione, would ya mind goin’ underground? Make sure there’s nothin’ down there.”

“Yep, yep, can do!”

“How ya feelin’, Lefiya? You could go with the Guild lady, get fixed up a bit?”

“Ah, yes, I shall.”

The deity’s vermilion gaze next fell on Aiz.

“Take care’a the rest of the monsters. I’m comin’ with ya.”

“Understood.”

The group split up to follow Loki’s orders. Only Aiz and the goddess were left

standing on the ice.

“So, shall we?”

“Yes.”

The two started back toward the Coliseum when immediately—

The sound of cheers and applause in the distance reached their ears.

But to their surprise, it wasn’t coming from the Coliseum.

The sound was coming from the southeast, close to Orario’s second “labyrinth”—Daedalus Street.



The sun sank in the western sky, already halfway hidden behind the city wall.

The four girls walked toward home on North Main Street, under a sky of brilliant yellows and oranges.

“Haa! That was a long day.”

“A very eventful day, for sure.”

Lefiya grimaced as she responded to Tiona’s comment. Her injuries had been treated and her body bore no scars, but her once-refined clothing was an absolute mess.

Today’s incident had been resolved for the most part. Thanks to *Ganesha Familia* and the Guild’s efforts, there were no casualties and damage to the city was kept to a minimum. However, the perpetrator was still at large. No one knew the identity or motive, be it a simple prank or the first step in an elaborate plan.

“Looks like the Guild and *Ganesha Familia* will be on thin ice for a while. It was their responsibility to keep everyone safe.”

“Maybe that’s what the mischief maker was after…?”

“You could be right.”

Aiz listened to Lefiya and Tione’s conversation as she looked down at her own body. A twinge of sadness passed through her eyes.

“What’s the matter, Aiz? Something wrong?”

“…Tiona.”

Aiz looked up at the Amazon and her shoulders shrank apologetically. “Sorry,” she said weakly.

“The clothes, they’re ruined…”

“…”

While nowhere near as bad as Lefiya’s, several seams in Aiz’s clothing were torn and the hemming was frayed. The once-pristine white top was now a blotchy gray.

Her clothes weren’t made from the flexible, strong fabric of battle cloth for the Dungeon but normal everyday material. Of course they wouldn’t be able to withstand that kind of punishment.

Aiz seemed to be trapped by her own sadness, not knowing how to proceed. Tiona made eye contact with her and gently smiled.

“Let’s go buy some more sometime?”

“…Sure.”

Tiona’s smile was dazzling in the red sunlight. Aiz couldn’t help but do the same.

Her cheeks felt warm in the last of the sun’s rays.

“…”

Her spirit lifted by Tiona’s kindness, Aiz’s mind once again drifted toward the boy with white hair.

Just as she thought, he’d been at the Monsterphilia.

After the girls had gone their separate ways, she and Loki pursued the last of the monsters that escaped the Coliseum. But it was the boy who slew the final one.

Although she saw him only in passing, Aiz was grateful that she got to meet him today.

Bell…

His name still lingered in her memory.

Her mind was set; she would find a way to apologize. But there was something else, too.

Part of her was happy that the newbie she remembered had defeated a monster that should have been well out of his league.

It happened on East Main Street.

She had arrived at the entrance to Daedalus Street, but hundreds of people were already there. All of them were celebrating the return of one brave adventurer.

Many happy people all in one place.

A young adventurer had overcome his fear and slain a monster.

He'd gone from a laughingstock at the bar to being celebrated as a hero…and that made her happy.

Aiz looked up at the darkening sky with her usual distant expression.

"Hey, where's Loki?"

The girls were practically at the doorstep of home when Tiona noticed their goddess was missing.

"She said something came up. Also, she'll be late, so don't save dinner for her."

"Drinking again? After what happened today? She's something else!"

"Perhaps she needed to meet with another god…?"

The sun sank even lower.

The shadows of the girls on each building grew long and were swallowed up by the shadow of the city wall.

Twilight overtook Orario.



Magic-stone lamps of every color imaginable lit up the Shopping District, in southern Orario.

The night sky loomed over the city, but this district was very much alive. Humans and demi-humans of all shapes and sizes brushed shoulders as they excitedly went from theaters to bars and back again. Adventurers in armor stood out from the crowd. Even a few deities mingled with the masses.

One particularly classy bar was located in a corner of the Shopping District.

Loki and Freya sat around a table in a room so wide and well decorated it was fit for a king.

“My, my, what could be so important that you call me out at this hour?”

“Ya have some idea, I reckon.”

Both goddesses grinned. They held glasses of wine in their hands, but neither took a sip.

Freya looked completely relaxed. Loki, however, was grinning like a child who’d just figured out a secret.

“You’re the one who caused the scene at today’s festival.”

“That’s quite the accusation. Do you have any proof?”

“No need for that kinda wild-goose chase. Facts are facts. No one but you could’a done that.”

Loki gulped down the expensive wine in her glass like it was nothing more than water before continuing.

“Charmed, charmed, charmed, all of ’em were charmed. Ya turned all the Guild workers’ and Ganesha’s kids’ spines to jelly. Then, ta-daa! No more lookouts. Ain’t that right?”

Freya’s beauty could “charm” thousands of people at once.

No amount of reasoning could hold her beauty at bay. Instincts took over as a feeling of ecstasy washed over those who laid eyes on her. It wasn’t uncommon for particularly vulnerable beings to fall madly in love with her at first sight. Her allure was strong enough to wrap some deities around her finger. The children

of Gekai didn't stand a chance.

It just so happened that even monsters could fall under her spell.

"None'a the escapees hurt nobody. From what I seen, they were *lookin'* for somethin'. Somethin' that a particular boobs-fer-brains goddess wanted to find."

Pointing out that no living monster would turn down a chance for fresh meat, Loki made her final argument.

"The only one who could change murderous monsters into dangerous teddy bears is you. Plain an' simple. Can't figure out what the hell ya were tryin' ta do…but you're the guilty party."

"…Fu-fu. Indeed, it's exactly as you say."

"Ho-ho, you're takin' this well."

Loki grinned from ear to ear after Freya confirmed her theory without so much as a denial.

"Maybe the Guild would like to hear 'bout this? Wonder what kind'a penalty they'd draw up for ya…"

Freya kept smiling despite Loki's thinly veiled threats.

She closed her eyes and sat for a moment. Then she raised her eyelids just enough to flash confident streaks of silver at her counterpart. Then she spoke.

"The eagle feather robe."

"Huh?"

"The robe that I lent you still has yet to find its way back to me. If you wish to sell me to the Guild, I would like it returned beforehand."

Loki's grinning lips suddenly went limp.

"Wha…? You're talkin' about the big fluffy one from Tenkai? I just borrowed it! Why now of all times do ya want it back? Seriously, I can't just whip it outta thin air!"

"That's not my problem. But, of course, you're not the type to go back on a promise made to a goddess, now are you?"

Freya's gaze intensified, the corners of her lips pointing straight up. Loki struggled to come up with an answer.

"Well, but ya know…I've really taken a likin' to it. Would be sad to see it go…"

"If you're willing to stay quiet about today's events, and about my activities in the future…I'll offer you the robe for your silence. Do we have a deal?"

Loki didn't move. She knew exactly what Freya was saying, what it all meant. Her cheek twitched as her mind raced, weighing the options.

Damn it, she swore to herself as she rested her chin against the palm of her hand.

"That's dirty, bringin' up the past."

"Says the one trying to blackmail me."

Freya rolled her shoulders, thoroughly enjoying the moment. Loki's grin had been replaced by a scowl as she leaned away from the table. She slammed her back against the sofa chair like a pouting child. The soft cushions absorbed the blow as the deity's body sank into them.

"Gahh, don't be so high-an'-mighty, pissin' me off. My beloved kiddos got the short end of the stick because'a yer game. Got roughed up pretty bad, too. Be grateful."

"…?"

Freya looked confused.

That was very uncommon for the Goddess of Beauty. Loki's thin eyes narrowed.

"What's with that face? No need to play dumb. Ya know, the tenth one. The bloomin' snake with the big teeth, puke green?"

"…I set only nine monsters free."

"…Lyin' through yer teeth."

"It's true. All I wanted to do was distract your and Ganesha's children. It was not my intention to destroy anything."

She continued by saying it was just a prank to make some noise.

Both goddesses donned more serious faces.

They noticed that their stories weren't lining up, like buttons going through the wrong hole in a shirt.

"…'Kay, then, where did that beastie come from?"

"I have no clue. I have no idea where you got the story from."

They fell silent.

Still making eye contact, a heavy mood descended around Loki and Freya.



Blurry moonlight drifted through the thin cloud cover.

Silver stars twinkled from every corner of the night sky.

Ruins of an old building stood silently on this peaceful night.

Only the stone frame remained standing, around scraps of wood that were once walls. The city of Orario shone as bright as a beacon even at this hour, and yet somehow none of the countless lights fell on the ruin. It was shrouded in darkness.

One figure stood beneath the stone beams, head and shoulders outlined by moonlight.

One solitary being lurking in the darkness.

"Lord Dionysus."

A voice called out to the figure.

The female appeared seemingly out of nowhere. She approached the figure without making a sound. The moonlight illuminated a feminine body with long ears the shape of leaves and skin as white as snow.

The figure turned to face this newcomer, passing in and out of darkness as she pleased.

The clouds lifted. Moonlight flooded the ruin through the massive hole that was once the roof. The lurking god's features came to light.

"Were you able to collect it before the Guild?"

“Yes, I present it to you.”

Dionysus’s royal smile was nowhere to be found. The elf, one of his followers, held out her hand. Dionysus took the wrapped item out of her palm.

Pulling back the coverings, he picked it up between his thumb and forefinger.

He held the thing up to the moonlight and narrowed his eyes.

“This could be more trouble than it’s worth…”

Trapped between his long fingers was a magic stone with a glowing red center. It glistened in the moonlight.

EPILOGUE

UNDER THE SKY

© Kiyotaka Haimura

EPILOGUE

UNDER THE SKY

The sky spread out like a big blue dome over the city.

Just blue as far as the eye could see.

Gentle sunlight shone through puffy white clouds as Aiz made her way to the Dungeon once again.

The city was as lively as always.

The sound of hundreds of shoes on the stone pavement mixed with the voices of vendors selling their wares.

Horse-drawn taxis made their rounds. Aiz could hear the animals grunt and snort as their masters guided them through the crowd. Every passerby seemed to be in a good mood. Brilliant smiles decorated their faces as they clutched shopping bags in their hands.

Aiz weaved her way through the mass of humanity and passed several demi-humans along the way.

She spotted more and more adventurers in full body armor the closer she got to the Dungeon. It went without saying that they noticed her, too. Her ears happened to capture their hushed voices as she walked by.

One, “The most powerful female adventurer.”

One, “The immortal knight.”

One, “The queen of all trades—there’s nothing she can’t do.”

Her reputation was well known.

Most people were filled with a mixture of awe and fear at just the sound of her name. Aiz was in a league of her own.

Aiz avoided eye contact and pretended not to hear any of their words. In the

process of avoiding their gazes, she happened to notice something strange out of the corner of her eye.

A little girl was all alone.

Scared and trembling, the young human had found a hiding place just off the main street. No one else seemed to notice she was there.

Aiz came to a stop in the middle of the street, wondering what she should do. She made up her mind and walked over to the girl a few moments later.

“What’s wrong…?”

“…Waahhhhhh.”

Aiz stood over her and spoke in a quiet voice. The little girl looked up, eyes moistening by the second. Then the floodgates opened. She started sobbing like there was no tomorrow.

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Aiz’s face. She wanted to help the girl but didn’t have the slightest idea how. Even her words got stuck in her throat.

Her mind desperately searched for a way to comfort the crying child. Aiz stood like a statue, unable to move left or right.

It would have been quite comical if anyone were there to see it.

The queen of all trades, stumped by something like this.

The ever-refined and elegant Kenki had a flawless image. Who would’ve guessed that the Sword Princess, Aiz Wallenstein, would get flustered by something so trivial.

She could stand up to the most ferocious monsters in the Dungeon, but that didn’t mean she could do anything for this girl.

Quite the opposite, there were more things she couldn’t do.

“…Can you wait a minute?”

Aiz took a few steps back from the wailing child. Then she turned and ran as if trying to escape.

She reasoned that the little girl must’ve gotten lost. The best option for Aiz right now was to search the area for Guild employees and ask one of them to

help.

It took her longer than she would have liked, but she succeeded in her mission. Aiz quickly led the surprised Guild employee back to the girl's hiding place.

However, the girl was gone by the time they arrived.

"…!"

The Guild employee gave her a very confused look. Aiz knew instantly she had to see this through to the end. Putting Dungeon crawling on hold, she desperately searched the area for any clues to the girl's whereabouts.

She walked out to the middle of the street with her head on a swivel, looking for the little girl.

Storefronts. Rest areas. Entrances to the backstreets.

She checked every area that she thought a little girl might go looking for help. She nearly bumped into a lot of people in her haste.

The big hand of the large clock at Central Park traveled halfway around.

At long last, she found her.

The little girl was in the arms of a motherly woman.

"Oh, hi, lady!"

Relief flooded through Aiz's body when the little girl noticed her and waved.

The bawling little girl seemed like a distant memory compared to this smiling child. Aiz couldn't help but smile.

"Did your mother find you?"

Aiz walked over to them and asked a question. The little girl innocently shook her head from side to side.

Then came her answer.

"A boy with white hair found me!"

Aiz was stunned.

A few moments passed before Aiz could speak again.

“Did he have red eyes?”

“Yep! Looked like a cute bunny!”

The little girl flashed a happy, toothy grin.

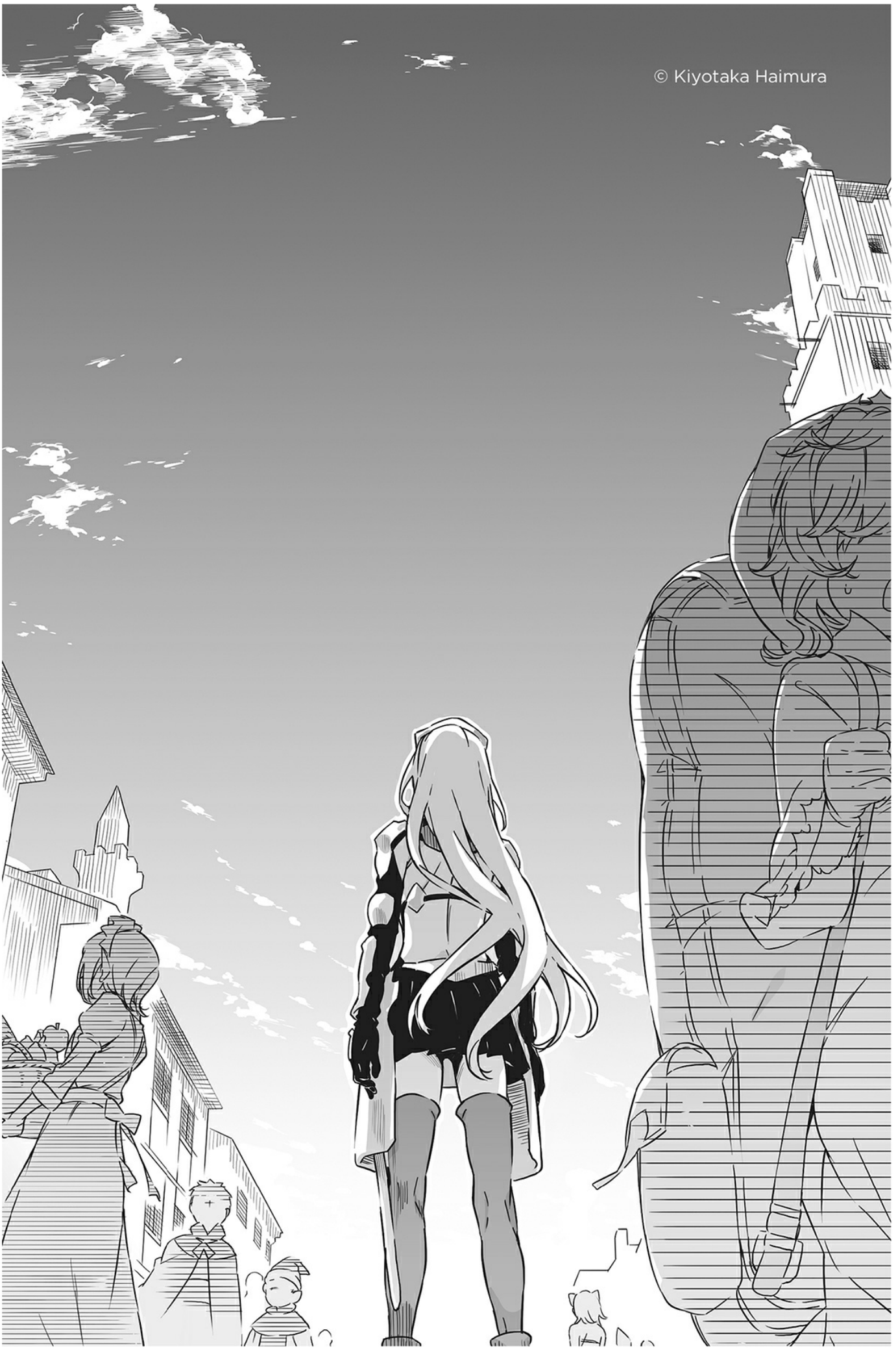
“…I see.”

Aiz spoke quietly under her breath. Then she said good-bye and turned to leave.

The girl’s mother bowed while the girl’s little hand flicked back and forth as they watched the blond girl leave. Aiz took one last look over her shoulder before she disappeared into the crowd. Mingling, she looked up at the blue sky.

Fluffy white clouds were making their journey across the heavens.

Her mind started drifting along with the beautiful free-flowing white puffs in the sky.


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It was a strange feeling, knowing that he could do something so easily when she could not.

Aiz came to a stop in the middle of the street. The flow of people maneuvered around her.

She had just missed him. And now footsteps she had never heard were getting farther away.

The clouds shifted in the wind.

Today’s sky over Orario was blue once again.

Где та казка, ім'я якій...

Aiz • Wallenstein

BELONGS TO:	*Loki Familia*
RACE:	human
JOB:	adventurer
DUNGEON RANGE:	fifty-eighth floor
WEAPON:	thin bladed swords
CURRENT WORTH:	7,700,000 vals

Skill Lv.5

STRENGTH:	D 555	DEFENSE:	D 547
UTILITY:	A 825	AGILITY:	B 822
MAGIC:	A 899	HUNTER:	G
IMMUNITY:	G	KNIGHT:	I

MAGIC: Airiel

- Magical Endowment (Enchantment)
- Wind Element
- Chant: "Awaken, Tempest"

SKILLS: ???

FAVORITE WEAPON: Desperate

- Unbreakable, a Durandal
- Made by *Goibniu Familia*: 99,000,000 vals
- One of the few weapons that can withstand Aiz's fighting style, it is a first-class Superior.
- A long bladed saber, its destructive power is low when compared to other Superiors.







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Afterword

Recently, I had an opportunity to talk about SRPG with one of my coworkers at GA Bunko, Mr. Tsuyoshi Nanajyou.

“Actually, my heroine was influenced by the long-haired knight, Nabell.”

“Oh? Was she?”

“Yes. Specifically the moment after she slices through an enemy with the Kill Sword.”

“Ah—…”

I’ll never forget the look in Mr. Nanajyou’s eyes when he said that he could see Aiz Wallenstein with the Kill Sword.

Swordsmanship techniques so precise that any enemy can be vanquished with one swing of a blade.

But at the same time, each victory draws the attention of stronger opponents—that’s my image of a knight.

I feel that the heroine of this story, the Kenki, reflects this image to the letter.

She was originally created to be the idol for the main character in the main storyline. However, she was so strong that “he would never be in danger should they battle side by side…” I can’t count how many times my advisers told me she had the potential to completely ruin the main storyline.

It was comments like these that inspired me to have her star in a spin-off.

Now I had a place to explore what my heroine was truly capable of without worrying about the main story. While this is both exciting and intimidating, nothing would make me happier than readers following this story as well.

Now it’s time to show my gratitude.

First to Mr. Kotaki, who has been a tremendous asset in the creation of this

series. I will be depending on you to help keep both stories running smoothly in the future. Next, to Mr. Kiyotaka Haimura, who created an amazing amount of superb character designs and artwork for this spin-off, and my editor Mr. Takahashi, who made it all come together. To everyone involved in this project, I couldn't have done this without you.

I also want to extend a special thanks to Mr. Kuribito Misaki for his amazing artwork created for the limited-edition releases of this book and the main series. Thank you for everything you've done.

Lastly, I want to thank you, the reader. Words cannot express my gratitude.

Until the next installment.

Fujino Omori

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON? ON THE SIDE: SWORD ORATORIA, Volume 1

FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Andrew Gaippe

Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA GAIDEN SWORD ORATORIA vol. 1

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