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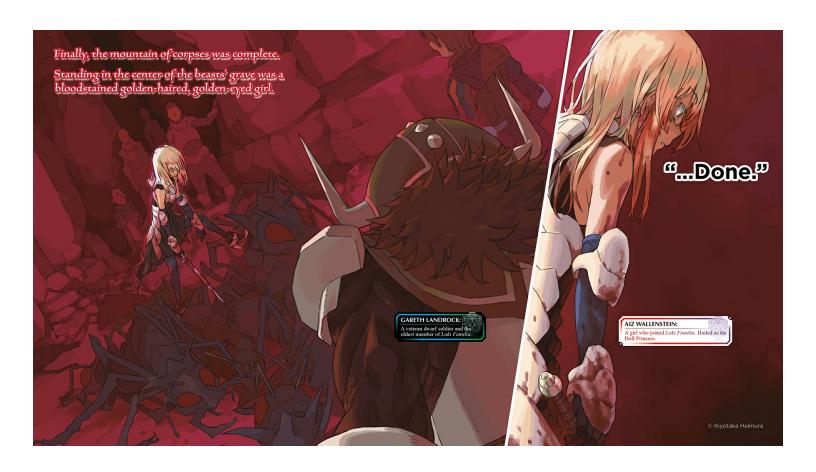
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VOLUME 9 FUJINO OMORI

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

ON THE SIDE: SWORD ORATORIA, Volume 9

FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Dale DeLucia

Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA GAIDEN SWORD ORATORIA vol. 9

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PROLOGUE

RECOLLECT IONS OF AN ELF

Гэта казка іншага сям і

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PROLOGUE

RECOLLECTIONS OF AN ELF

There was a certain state known as the Kingdom of Rakia.

It was nominally a militant monarchy located in the western part of the continent, but in actuality, it was headed by the deity Ares and built up by his followers—*Ares Familia*. All the kingdom's soldiers and military personnel had received a Blessing and since time immemorial would constantly wage war at the behest of their god's divine will. Their armies had a history of expanding by force, invading other cities and countries.

And now they were embarking on a new military expedition.

—The Kingdom of Rakia's army was marching on Orario.

The nation of warmongers had pointed its spear at the very center of the world. Crimson banners fluttered and countless boots thundered as they steadily advanced on the giant walls protecting the city.

The Guild drafted a mission, dispatching several familias based in the city to intercept the invading army. *Loki Familia* was one of those summoned.

The curtain rose on the war between the invaders and the adventurers.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

But—

"Captain, Gareth is blowing away the unit of knights by himself according to plan."

"Tell him to keep intercepting them like that. I'm sorry to work him so hard, but they still have reinforcements coming."

"Captain! I busted up three of the squads that were trying to retreat like you ordered!"

"Good job, Tione. But you're supposed to be relaying my orders, not personally carrying them out."

The battle had turned into a one-sided assault launched by Orario's forces.

On a plain far to the east of the city, a never-ending stream of screams echoed across the battlefield. From their camp overlooking the battlefront, members of *Loki Familia* watched as the Rakian army was put to rout. Thanks to its proximity to the Dungeon, Orario had gathered the world's strongest adventurers. In this age of gods where quality surpassed quantity, when Rakia's soldiers were only Level 3s at best, they had no chance of gaining the upper hand. While their enemies struggled, Orario's adventurers appeared unfazed, even bored.

"We've got a bunch of issues popping up thanks to the Evils, so why is Rakia bugging us now?"

"Our troubles are obviously not a problem in their eyes."

"I guess it's like our goddess always says about the timing being bad."

Considering that a hostile nation had invaded, this was technically an emergency. As one of the city's strongest groups, *Loki Familia* was forced to take part in the defense. The flags with the trickster's emblem that currently served as their battle standard were clearly sapping the enemy's will to fight whenever they saw one.

Deployed as messengers, Tiona, the catgirl Anakity, and the human Narfi exchanged strained laughs and sighs as they carefully moved among the various groups.

"—Fusillade Fallarica!"

On the main battlefront, countless fiery missiles streaked across the field.

Lefiya held a staff in both hands. Exactly as planned, she loosed a wide-range bombardment spell on the enemy formation that was advancing on them.

A thunderous boom sounded right before a crater appeared in the ground, sending soldiers and horses flying. The opposing army was already on the verge of collapse after a single blast. Everyone, from the enemy soldiers to the various

familias from Orario comprising the rest of the temporary alliance, shuddered at the sight of the elf standing on the top of the hill.

"Lefiya, you're overdoing it. The goal is to force them to retreat. At this rate, you'll totally wipe them out."

"S-sorry, Miss Alicia...Maybe it's because we are always fighting monsters in the Dungeon, but it's somewhat hard to hold back..."

"Let's try harder next time...We're moving on now, as the captain ordered."

Alicia, the Level-4 elf adventurer, corrected the girl's timing on her spell. Lefiya clutched her staff and hung her head at the older elf's look of disappointment. Riveria was too powerful, so she was working behind the scenes while Lefiya's attacks exploded around the battlefield.

It was a raw demonstration of quality over quantity.

A single skilled mage had—with a single spell—scattered a hundred units.

To the Rakian soldiers, it was a living nightmare.

"Aghhh, Commander! That pink elf from Orario is coming this way! Gah...She's Concurrent Castiiing!"

"Retreat! Retreeeat!!! We can't hold!"

A Level-3 fast-response weapon platform on legs. That day, the pink elf became a symbol of terror for the *Ares Familia* soldiers as she dashed around the battlefield raining immense magic attacks on them.

"Damn you, Orario scum!! Stand and fight! Stop waddling around and blasting magic all over! Does no one in this forsaken city understand the beauty of proper battle?!"

"Lord Ares...A mob of adventurers who resort to sneak attacks and schemes obviously wouldn't know anything about the art of war. Besides, didn't we also prepare several artillery units with the intent of using them for a trap on our enemies?"

"Wh-what's with that accusing tone of voice, Marius?! I'll have you beheaded!"

"—Reporting! Our front lines have completely collapsed due to *Loki Familia*'s insane mag—Due to the Thousand Elf! We've nearly been wiped out!"

"Gah! M-Marius! Do something!"

"Very well. Have all the troops retreat. We're withdrawing from this position."

The magical explosions were already sending tremors through the Rakian army's base camp. While the God of War's bellows reverberated in the luxurious tent, the first prince of Rakia who served as his executive officer began issuing orders in a practiced manner, or perhaps it was better described as *resigned*.

Finn had ordered his familia to show Lefiya off as the successor to Riveria, the city's strongest magic user, and the Thousand Elf's reputation grew by leaps and bounds after the battle. The news even made waves among the familias in Orario.

Of course, he also wanted to encourage the growth of her magic abilities, but his ulterior motive was to exploit anything he could to solidify *Loki Familia*'s position, no matter how small. How this led to the young elven girl catching the attention of a certain magic country will have to be a story for another time.

"Lefiya's really lettin' 'em have it."

The patron gods of the various familias that had been summoned to defend Orario were gathered atop a hill far from the battlefield. Despite the distance, they could still observe the merciless onslaught as Lefiya's magic savaged the opposing army. The snot-and tear-filled cries of the enemy reverberated across the landscape.

Loki slumped back down into her chair, losing interest.

"Tedious, isn't it...?"

"I've got bigger fish to fry, ya know..."

Loki's response was natural, given how she had postponed her familia's search for the key to Knossos due to current events, which she considered to be a colossal waste of time. Next to her was Freya, the silver-haired Goddess of Beauty, who was being waited on by a follower she had brought along. She also

didn't know what to do with herself.

This was just another duty required of the city's two strongest factions. If they hadn't made an appearance on the battlefield, the Rakian army would have let it go to their heads, which left these two familias no choice but to be front and center. Loki sighed again, having long since lost count of how many times this had already happened.

Rakia had picked fights with Orario before, suffering losses every time. The main impetus for the attack this time was likely because Ares was looking to satisfy his long-standing grudge and had yet to learn his lesson. Incidentally, this was their sixth attempt to invade, as discussed at Denatus.

"Ares, ya dumbass, if you can see the difference in strength, then don't attack in the first place! What a joke."

Loki mumbled her complaint while stifling a yawn.

"That girl's actually become half-decent..."

"That's rare, Bete. I'm surprised to hear you praising someone you normally call a weakling."

"Screw you," the werewolf muttered. Riveria wore a half smile as she watched the younger elf's countless spells arcing down around the plains.

They were near a patch of woods away from the main battlefield. Taking Aiz, Bete, and a small group of familia members, Riveria was leading the counterattack against the Rakian army, crushing any detachments of soldiers that were trying to sneak around. All their targets had been knocked out, and the rest of Riveria's party was busy tying them up.

Observing Lefiya's performance alongside Bete, Riveria began to comment.

"She still has a ways to go...Of course I mean in her technique, too, but right now Lefiya's heart is wavering."

"...Huh?"

"She's impatient."

Riveria was also a spellcaster, meaning she noticed flaws in the girl's craft that Bete missed.

Watching the sweaty elf in the distance who weaved spell after spell, Riveria was reminded of someone else, and her gaze narrowed.

"The more you hurry, the less room you have to breathe...and the more you hurt yourself...That girl was like that, too," Riveria said to herself under her breath.

"What girl? You mean Aiz?"

Her murmur did not escape the ears of the animal person next to her. Bete glanced over at the golden-haired, golden-eyed girl keeping watch a short distance away.

In response, Riveria simply changed the topic.

"Whatever happened to Lena Tully after all that? She seemed awfully attached to—"

"—Can it! Don't you dare bring that up, hag!"

The effect was immediate as Bete started hollering. Instantly fed up, the werewolf stormed off to escape further discussion.

"…"

Now that she was alone, Riveria looked at Aiz, the commotion of the battlefield rolling over them in waves.

The girl was doing her job while watching the surroundings with interest. A small bird chirped, paying her no mind as it descended, landing on her finger as she tilted her head in curiosity. It was as though the bird had been called to her by the wind, entranced by a spirit of the element.

This nature, this landscape, this fragrance did not exist in Orario. They were all fresh and new to the girl. In fact, even counting the time in Meren, she had been outside the Labyrinth City only a handful of times—she had no memories of anything beyond that confined area.

For Aiz, this view of the outside world is unknown.

"There are so many things I still have yet to teach her..."

Aiz Wallenstein's everything lies inside those walls.

Riveria murmured as she gazed at the girl's figure.

Softly, she pushed at the door of recollections inside her mind.

Yes.

She could remember it even now.

When she had first grasped her sword.



The young girl was crying.

Her voice raised and throat rasping as tears streamed down her cheeks.

First, she stared up at the gray sky.

Then she stared around the room she had been brought to.

Her tiny chest kept quivering.

A flood of emotions overwhelmed her, merging together inside until she couldn't even tell what she was sad about anymore. She couldn't hear the voices of the people incessantly calling out to her. Fragments of her meaningless sobs fell to the floor, leaving countless stains. The hole that had been torn open in her heart dragged her into a darkness that felt unbearably cold.

The sun rose; the sun set.

Again. And again. Time kept moving without her.

No matter how much she cried, the world refused to change.

The people she loved would not hug her anymore.

Her irreplaceable happiness would never come back.

Her cries went unanswered.

Her *hero* didn't appear.

"Wouldn't it be nice if you met a wonderful partner, too."

Her mother's words were nothing more than a dream.

"I hope that someday, you find a hero—your hero."

Her father's words were just a fairy tale.

A hero who would save her had never existed in the first place.

The instant she understood that in the back of her mind, she felt her heart freeze over.

An eternal wall of ice that would never melt guarded it.

And so.

When her throat was too sore to sob and she had no more tears to shed, she spoke.

The young girl had lost her innocence.

All emotion vanished from her expression, leaving her face like a doll's and her eyes like swords as she pleaded.

"I want power."

The crimson-haired goddess, the prum hero, the great dwarf warrior, and the high elf mage. As they sorrowfully gazed down upon her, she made her request.

The girl's small hands drew the sword that had been thrust into her heart.

That was the moment the Sword Princess was born.

CHAPTER 1

SCENE AT THE

CAMP

Гэта казка іншага сям'

Аднаактовы ў лагеры

CHAPTER 1

A SCENE AT THE CAMP

"Guahhh..."

Lefiya was listless.

She still had Mind to spare, but her body was exhausted from all the Concurrent Casting.

"Good work, Lefiya!"

"You were a huge help out there. Here, dinner."

"Ah, thank you..."

Tiona and Tione encouraged her.

A moonlit night had fallen. Loki Familia's camp had been set up at the edge of the plain, a position that would let them stare down at the Rakian army. Ares Familia's encampment was visible in the distance, but the surrounding tents lit by campfires and magic-stone lanterns all belonged to Orario's familias.

Lefiya had been maneuvering around the battlefield to launch her attacks since the very start of the fight. All according to Finn's plan. She had satisfactorily fulfilled her role by providing mobile fire support, blowing holes in the enemy's defenses and their strategy as well as training her Concurrent Casting ability.

"But really, you were amazing today, Lefiya! As your roommate, I'm proud."

"What are you feeling proud for? Well, this isn't exactly making the best of a less-than-ideal situation, but I think the captain probably intended to use the battle to put Lefiya on display for everyone in and outside Orario."

"You mean as 'the successor of the city's strongest mage,' right?"

"Oooh, I get it. Like announcing to the world that Loki Familia's still got it.

Telling everyone 'check out our future first-tier adventurer.'"

Some of the familia's girls were sitting down together. Lefiya's roommate, the magic user Elfie; the other human Narfi; the catgirl Anakity; and the elf Alicia all chimed in as Lefiya quietly sipped at her stew, looking down.

"What future first-tier adventurer?...I'm nowhere near that yet. I didn't even manage to do everything the captain asked without messing up today..."

"You performed perfectly today, Lefiya. You did your job just fine."

"But I couldn't completely control my magic; the spells kept getting too big...
And I think I accidentally got other familias caught in the cross fire as well..."

Alicia, the spotter for Lefiya's support fire, started to smile.

Apparently, Orario's merchants and merchant familias had made a mysterious request for them not to kill any of the enemy soldiers. This came as a relief for Lefiya, who had never killed another person, but it required a precise control on her spells. Finn had also issued his orders with the intent to force the enemy to fall back and withdraw.

Alicia was considered a veteran even when counting the entire familia. She gently tried to soothe the younger elf, but Lefiya was her own harshest critic.

Not to torture herself, but because of her intense drive to improve.

"I dunno about the details, but I thought you were amazing! You were flinging out spells with Concurrent Casting left and right like Riveria, and the other side just kept screaming!"

"Yes, it was amazing when you blew them away. Us front-liners didn't even get to do much."

"Um, I think Mister Gareth took on a whole squad of knights or something..." Lefiya countered.

"Well, Gareth's a special case. Ahhh, to have the captain rely on you...I'm sooo jealous"."

Tiona looked up with a smile, pausing between bites of stew, jerky, and fruits to speak while Tione seemed a bit sulky as they both reassured the young girl about her contribution to the battle.

While Lefiya had been in the spotlight with her eye-catching support-fire mission, Tione and the other first-tier adventurers had gone to work elsewhere, acting as a diversion and aiming for weak points, which, in a sense, had prevented the enemy from achieving their true objectives. It was clear that Finn had put a heavy emphasis on pursuing a strategy that would prevent the situation with Rakia from getting any worse, but that was irrelevant for the Amazon who had a burning desire to be useful to the person she loved.

Lefiya laughed nervously as Tione glanced over at the boys' group, where there was one other person whom Finn valued highly—at least that's what she thought.

"Bete, let's have a meal together!"

"How about a drink?!"

"Shut it! Leave me alone! Don't crowd me, you losers! The hell's gotten into all of you?!"

"Give it up already, Bete. It was over once Loki tricked you. If ye don't want to get along with the greenhorns, then give me a hand and get me seconds."

Across from Lefiya's group, the guys had formed a lively cluster around Bete.

"Don't get cocky, old man!"

The werewolf howled as Gareth joined in on the fun.

"...They sure are in high spirits."

"To think we'd see a day when everyone wants to be around Bete..."

Anakity was exasperated while Narfi's response was filled with trepidation.

Since the recent incident, the other members of the familia had begun to idolize him. Men and women alike. Bete's bluntness had not changed, but it was having the opposite effect on people now.

Lefiya was starting to feign a laugh when a certain girl suddenly appeared, approaching Bete from behind.

"Hwa! Lena arrives on the scene! Yoo-hoo, Bete Loga!"

"Gah?! The hell are you doing here?!"

"When armies are on the march, prostitutes always follow! I tagged along with Aisha and the others when they decided to go fishing for men. All I had to do was ask, and High Novice let me right in."

"Raul! You dumbass! Don't just let this thing come into our camp!"

"Sorry, because of the issue with the key, I couldn't just turn her down..."

"Aisha and the others went hunting for Rakia's knights, but don't you worry— I've only got eyes for you, Bete Loga! If you're all tense from standing on the battlefield, then just let me take care of you tonight...!"

"Beat it!"

"Hng-waaah!"

Lefiya's false laughter faded as Lena cried out, her yelp tinged with an edge of pleasure. The girls lost the thread of their conversation as pandemonium unfolded on the boys' side of the camp. Shaking their heads, one after the other, they wrapped up their supper and stood to put away their dishes. The last to finish, Lefiya stood to follow the others.

...If only I had more power...

Trailing behind Tiona and the others as they chatted, Lefiya pondered the conversation they had been having earlier.

More people might have been saved if only I...Leene and the rest might still be here with us.

She understood it was a presumptuous and meaningless hypothetical, but she couldn't help herself from thinking about it. No, everyone else was surely thinking it, too.

And of course, the werewolf who couldn't stand any weakness must have felt it even more keenly than she did. They were all simply holding themselves together in order to focus on the Rakian invasion as consummate professionals.

But because Lefiya was engrossed in her hunger to improve, she never noticed.

The old Lefiya, who used to respond nervously or withered and lost her nerve at any mention of her being Riveria's successor, was gone. Her azure eyes only

looked higher.

As the night deepened, she turned upward.

The starry sky and the beautiful, distant flickering of the heavens spread before her.

"...I want to be...stronger."

Softly, she whispered this to herself.

Except for the lookouts, the camp fell into slumber.

The fragrance of the grassy plains, foreign to Orario, drifted on the wind as a dim darkness enveloped everyone.

And among the sea of tents, the light of a magic-stone lantern seeped out of one of them.

"Lefiya...Are you still awake?"

Sheets rustled as her roommate, Elfie, turned to glance at her.

The sound startled Lefiya, who had been on her stomach reading a book by the light of a magic-stone lamp.

"S-sorry, Elfie, everyone. You can't sleep with the light, right?"

"Nah, I'm fine with a night-light, so it isn't a problem, but..."

The book was a treatise on magic. As Lefiya dimmed the light, Elfie and the hume bunny Rakuta made odd faces.

There was no need to obsess over developing her skills in a situation like this.

Lefiya could tell exactly what they were thinking.

They were right. Whatever she could stuff into her head right now would not allow her to gain mastery over much. It was far more important to sleep and restore as much stamina for the next day as possible.

However, Lefiya could not help but be irritated at doing nothing as time slipped away.

Loki Familia didn't have a moment to waste on venturing outside the city and getting into conflicts with other countries. They needed to develop the means

to combat the groups trying to destroy the Labyrinth City or else devote their time and energy to further improving themselves. With this in mind, something resembling a compulsion had seized Lefiya.

Like I suspected, I'm bothering them, she thought.

"I'm just having a bit of trouble sleeping. I'll try getting a little fresh air," she said, picking up the thick book she had been studying.

Waving at the lookouts she passed, she headed to the edge of the camp and sat on a comfortable-looking stump. It was decently far from the closest patrol, so she probably wouldn't be questioned.

Along the way, she had turned on the portable magic-stone lantern she had borrowed, and now she started reading again.

"Ah...Miss Aiz."

After a short while, a breeze blew through. As it brushed aside her long hair, Lefiya happened to glance in the direction of the wind and noticed the goldenhaired, golden-eyed girl standing there.

Aiz had volunteered to keep watch because she had hardly done anything during the day. The Level-1 and Level-2 members of the familia were uncomfortable to have someone in the leadership on watch duty, but they eventually gave in to her request. Though no one had mentioned anything, Aiz probably noticed that the lower-level adventurers were getting more nervous than they were during their usual dungeon crawling. Finn had also granted his approval.

"…"

Aiz was gazing out into the plains, in the direction of the Rakian army.

But Lefiya could tell that wasn't where her eyes were focused. Since long ago, Aiz's gaze had always been fixed onto a place far off in the distance.

Lefiya was beginning to understand a bit now that she had experienced a similar feeling.

Normally, she would have gone over to greet Aiz, but tonight Lefiya only lowered her head and immersed herself once more in her attempts to absorb

more knowledge.

"What are you doing, Lefiya?"

"Gyaaa!"

However, a voice from behind gave her a fright.

She spun around frantically and came face-to-face with Riveria, her long jade hair glimmering in the darkness. Lefiya hadn't noticed her approaching at all.

"L-Lady Riveria! Why are you here...?"

"A little while ago, Elfie came to visit me. She said you were burying yourself in books again."

"Ah..."

Beneath Riveria's stern gaze, Lefiya wilted like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Rest. You worked harder than anyone today. If you don't recover enough Mind by tomorrow, then you will not be doing anything."

"I am truly sorry...But..."

"But what?"

"I cannot stay like this...I feel like if I don't get stronger as a mage, then I'll lose even more important things..."

"…"

"I cannot just...do nothing." Lefiya shared what was bothering her.

Before Riveria could respond:

"—Ya sure are diligent, Lefiya. Even though your boobs are already this big..."

"Kyaaa!"

All of a sudden, someone grabbed her breasts from behind.

It was Loki. With a lewd little snort, the goddess's hands started moving. Lefiya was caught off guard, since it had been so long since this had last happened, and she didn't hold back at all as she threw Loki over her shoulder.

Sounding like a squashed frog, her muffled groan reverberated in the darkness. The various lookouts, including Aiz, started to respond to the noise but, recognizing the voice as Loki's, just continued their patrols as if nothing had happened.

"Ha-ha-ha...You've really grown, Lefiya. Escapin' my breast bind in a flash!"

"What are you doing all of a sudden?!"

"Loki, don't butt in if you intend to behave like that. It's unbearable to watch."

"I've got nothin' else to do, so I've gotta fondle me some breasts."

Lefiya and Riveria glared at Loki as she writhed on the ground where she had landed without even a hint of remorse.

Lefiya turned bright red and covered her chest as the goddess hopped back up and retrieved the book that had fallen in the shock.

"Even after comin' this far, you're studying, huh? Heh-heh...Sorta reminds me of how Aizuu used to be."

"Huh?"

"I know you've been tryin' yer best until now, but this is the first time you've shown that stubborn side. That's what makes me think of Aiz all those years ago. Right, Riveria?"

"...Yes. I can see what you mean."

Surprised at the turn the conversation had taken, Lefiya froze up.

Being told that she resembled the very person she longed to emulate made her heart skip a beat.

"You wouldn't know it from seeing her now...but Aiz has really improved her manners. When she was younger, she was quite unruly. Never listening to us, always going overboard..."

Lefiya couldn't believe what she was hearing. Sure, Aiz was a bit hardheaded sometimes and occasionally made decisions without consulting others, but as a general rule, she always listened to what Riveria and Loki said. Lefiya simply

could not imagine an Aiz who constantly disobeyed.

She couldn't help glancing at the golden-haired, golden-eyed swordswoman who was calmly standing in the distance.

"We were at our wits' end who knows how often. Right, Mama Riveria?"

"Quit it, Loki. Don't tease me." Riveria knit her eyebrows as Loki grinned up at her. "Anyway, she used to be very similar to how you are now, constantly rushing in and making mistakes that were unbearable to watch. Do not try to force things, Lefiya. It's fine to work hard, but don't mix that up with overwork."

Flustered for a few seconds, Lefiya made up her mind.

"U-um, then...Could you tell me a bit more about how Miss Aiz used to be?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, if I could hear a bit more, it might be a useful lesson for me. I-it's certainly not just become I'm curious about her. I mean, o-of course I'm curious, too, but..."

Lefiya started to trip over her tongue as she tried to explain herself.

She wanted to learn about the connection between the Aiz she knew now and the Aiz of the past who she had never known. She couldn't deny that it was partly because she wanted to hear more about her idol, but she also thought there might be something useful in looking back at how the Sword Princess came to be.

Riveria looked troubled by the request, but—

"It'll be fine to tell her a bit. Just think of it as a lullaby. Will ya go to bed after ya hear it, Lefiya?"

"Y-yes!"

And that was when Loki threw her a bone.

As the goddess sat on the stump, the high elf vice captain sighed.

"Just one story. I am sure Aiz would rather not have embarrassing old stories about her spreading around. That means you cannot go sharing it, either. If that's okay with you, then I can tell you a little bit."

"P-please do!"

Lefiya leaped at the opportunity to learn more about her idol that had just fallen into her lap.

Glancing over at where Aiz was standing watch, Riveria said, "Let's go elsewhere so she doesn't overhear us and try to cut us to pieces."

Lefiya could not tell how serious she was as she started to move. The young elf followed along with Loki to the second-in-command's personal tent.

Riveria lit a lamp, glancing at Loki in annoyance as the goddess made herself at home.

"It was nine years ago when we first met...A lot of things happened leading up to that winter day when Aiz was placed in our care." THE YOUNG

RECOLLECTIONS CHAPTER

1

GIRL'S BEGINNINGS

Гэта казка іншага сям'

Пачатак дзяўчыны

RECOLLECTIONS CHAPTER 1

THE YOUNG GIRL'S BEGINNINGS

"Are you sure about this?" the goddess asked.

She stood facing a small back.

The skin was unbelievably smooth and pale.

Untouched by violence, as if antithetical to the very idea of it.

"If I do this, there's no goin' back, ya know?"

The goddess checked one more time as she gave her final warning. Her vermilion hair wavered. Blood seeped from the cut on her finger.

"That's part of becomin' a god's follower."

The little girl had only one response.

"Hurry and do it."

Her voice did not waver in the slightest; her determination was sharp like steel.

An unwavering resolution. Her golden eyes, fixed straight ahead, were the same. In them was a cold gaze like an unsheathed blade that would cut through any-and everything. It was too sharp for a child not yet even ten to wield. The goddess could sense only danger in the girl's future from it.

The goddess looked down and softly put her finger on the girl's back.

Her flowing blood slowly drew out the letters of the gods.

The line of characters was like an inscription, vermilion hieroglyphs reminiscent of a sunset.

Once the goddess's and girl's true names were inscribed, the Blessing announced to the world that another god's follower had been born.

"Welcome to Loki Familia. Now yer one of my followers."



"Rose."

The bored werewolf receptionist waiting at the counter looked up when she heard her name.

Before her eyes was a high elf who possessed peerless beauty.

Rose had been chosen by the Guild in part for her good looks, but she could not hold a candle to the high elf. It was a bit of a well-known story around the Labyrinth City that this unrivaled high elf had even inspired the jealousy of a goddess, setting off a full-blown incident. The jade hair gathered around her collar was jewellike, befitting the dignified aura of a high-level magic user.

However, the young receptionist was neither entranced nor jealous of those looks. She did not even fix her bored slouch as she responded—seeming more annoyed by the hassle than displeased.

"Welcome, Loki Familia Vice Captain Riveria Ljos Alf. What brings you here today?"

"You can stop with the formal greetings, Rose. You're not even acting like you mean it."

"It says in the manual that we're supposed to do that for the major familias, so I can't help it, you know? If we don't do what we're supposed to, we get a pay cut."

Riveria furrowed her brows in a dignified way, to which the werewolf responded while twirling her red hair with one hand.

They were in Guild Headquarters, located in the city's northwest district. This organization was the main administrative force in Orario, which had neither king nor feudal lord. Whether past, present, or future, it served as the Labyrinth City's core.

"Five years ago, when I first met you behind the counter, you were so innocent. You've really changed. I think you were fourteen then? That willfulness hasn't gone anywhere, though."

"That was right after I started the job. Could you please not bring up things from forever ago?"

"For an elf like me, it's not all that different from something that happened only a month ago."

The sun shone into the lobby as adventurers and workers bustled around. Rose sullenly crossed her arms. She was wearing a black uniform provided by the Guild and, at the moment, emphasizing the one area where she could win against Riveria. She responded with an overfamiliar tone of voice.

"Well? I'm sure you didn't come to shoot the breeze. If this is gonna be a pain, I'd rather you hurry up and get it over with. They get fussy over every little thing when we deal with you guys or *Freya Familia*."

As if confirming what she said, all the Guild staff behind the counter glanced over at the two of them.

Silenced for a moment, Riveria nodded and responded.

"Yes...Registering an adventurer. I'd like you to process someone."

Rose looked confused.

"Registering an adventurer...And where is said new adventurer? I can't register someone if they aren't here themselves."

"She's here."

"Huh?"

"The new adventurer is here."

Following Riveria's gaze downward, Rose leaned over the counter.

Like she said, there was indeed a person standing there. A young human, still so small that the counter was enough to hide her. A golden-haired, golden-eyed young girl wearing plain clothes.

Rose's eyes widened. Despite the girl's age, her beauty rivaled Riveria's. Her golden eyes were particularly striking; in them dwelled a strong, determined light that was entirely at odds with the rest of her appearance. Her gaze contained a steely resolve unbefitting a child.

"I would like to register this girl as an adventurer."

"...All right, all right. I'll take care of it."

Rose bluntly accepted the request.

Assuming a professional attitude, she suppressed a reproachful glare and swallowed what she really wanted to say as she started the registration process.

"Can you write?"

""

The little girl nodded in response to Riveria's question.

Standing on a stool made for prum adventurers, she grabbed the quill pen offered to her and started to write on the provided parchment.

"... Wait, those are hieroglyphs? Use Koine."

"?!"

Rose was shocked as Riveria helped the girl fill out the registration sheet's required sections.

Name...Aiz Wallenstein. Age seven, eh? And absolutely nothing else...

Place of birth was blank, background was blank, everything else was blank, blank...A void that told nothing. Other than her age, no information was listed at all.

Rose frowned but didn't say anything.

This was Orario. Outlaws looking to get rich quick and people with guilty consciences came here all the time. And the Guild welcomed anyone who could take on the Dungeon. If they investigated everyone who didn't reveal their past or career, it would never end.

Other than special cases like spies or informants working for other countries or cities, anybody could become an adventurer. That was the rule here. Rose accepted the parchment and approved it, like always.

"As for an adviser...Well, you guys won't need that. A big familia like yours doesn't need any support from us."

"Yes, we'll take care of her instruction ourselves."

The Guild had instituted a system of advisers, mainly to assist newly established familias and novice adventurers, but it was unnecessary for one of the largest and most famous groups in Orario.

At that, Aiz Wallenstein looked up at the high elf.

"Is it...over?"

"...Yes. The registration is done."

"Then I'm going."

Despite just meeting her, Rose could tell from that curt exchange that the little girl was heading for the Dungeon.

The sharp-eyed girl jumped off the stool, about to dash off. But before she could leave, Riveria grabbed her by the collar of her shirt.

"Wait, you fool. Do you really intend to go straight to the Dungeon?"

The girl coughed cutely before glaring like she was about to get revenge for her parents. Not that the expression could possibly faze a first-tier adventurer.

"Going into the Dungeon without any preparation is suicide. What exactly were you planning to do without a weapon, at least?"

"Tch..."

"The first step is obtaining equipment. You need weapons and armor."

Riveria won the argument with sound reasoning. Blushing slightly in embarrassment, Aiz glared at her before giving in reluctantly.

"... Want to use the Guild's stock?"

Watching the exchange from the sidelines, Rose cut in.

"Yes, please. Those will be perfect for a novice who doesn't know anything."

"I never thought I'd see the day I'd be offering beginner's adventurer equipment to *Loki Familia*. All right, dear, follow this clerk to get your measurements taken."

She called over one of the women behind the counter to lead Aiz aside. The

human worker held out her hand, but the girl refused to take it, simply following behind silently like a doll.

"Someone who can write *hieroglyphs*. Did you abduct her from some kingdom? Or one of the professors in the Education District?"

"Do not pry. That's all I can say."

"Hmm...Well, whatever. Though we'd rather you do something about the Evils than mess around with new adventurers."

"That's a bit of a sore spot."

The two spoke without looking at each other, focused only on the unsmiling little girl who was having her measurements taken.

"So the city's biggest faction is planning to arm a small child with a sword, then send her to die in the Dungeon?"

""

"You're that desperate to expand your faction's influence? If so, I gravely misjudged you."

"..."

"Even if she wanted it herself, isn't it the job of the adults in the room to stop her?"

"…"

Once they were alone, Rose unleashed all the opinions she had been holding back. They were her true feelings, her criticisms as a Guild employee who had seen too many adventurers rush to their deaths.

Riveria did not respond. Glancing over, Rose saw that the high elf was trying her best not to show any emotion, so she ended her tirade.

Rose had only just met the girl, after all.

To her eyes, it looked like Riveria was also trying to figure out how to cross the moat that the little girl had dug around herself.

"That one's headed for an early grave."

She ended with her appraisal as a member of the Guild.

"A fast life doesn't begin to describe it. I've met a lot of adventurers, but that's the first time I've seen eyes like that. The moment you look away, she's gonna get herself killed."

Riveria had a clear answer to Rose's warning.

"I won't allow it," she declared. "That's why we are here."



This air is familiar. When I was younger, I stumbled into here.

The moment Aiz stepped in, she remembered that sensation.

As she felt the vaguely cool air on her skin, her eyes took in her surroundings.

Despite being underground, phosphorescence lit the area. The dim blue walls and ceiling indicated that this was the entrance of the labyrinth.

This was the first floor of the Dungeon, in the Upper Levels.

Passing through the spiral staircase to the big pit below Babel and beyond the wide Beginning Road, Aiz and Riveria arrived at a certain corner of the labyrinth. There was a single path to follow, with no forks in the road. However, Aiz seemed agitated as she stood out front. Excessively so, as if she was tackling the most stressful thing in the world. Her sharp gaze searched for any hint of monsters.

"Quit tensing up so much. You are breathing too shallowly. What are you going to do later if something as minor as this wrecks your nerves?"

Despite being only a few steps behind her, Aiz didn't hear Riveria's words. The young girl tightened her grip on the sword in her hands. She had a Guild-provided straight sword, quaintly named Little Blade. It was a weapon generally used by prums, but it was perfect for Aiz, who was not even 120 celch tall. Her armor had also been provided by the Guild, something called Little Leather also intended for use by prums.

Her leather boots creaking, Aiz proceeded step by step into the Dungeon. She noticed that her field of vision was narrowing. When it became too hard to breathe, she finally realized that she had been hyperventilating. Her body had

become so tense, she could barely move at all.

Become strong.

She had no idea whether she was feeling nervousness, exultation, or something else altogether.

I have to become strong.

But Aiz realized that she was, at this moment, standing at the starting line.

For my wish, no matter what.

It announced the end of her life as a naive little girl. There was no one who would protect her anymore. Or at least that was what she believed.

Having taken up such a scary weapon and accepted its profound weight, she had no choice but to wield it.

That's why I'll...fight monsters.

Aiz wished for power.

She had insisted that she had to become strong.

And in response, they had—Loki Familia had met her demand.

It's fine as long as I can go to the Dungeon.

If she received a Blessing, roamed the Dungeon, and defeated monsters, she would obtain the power she was looking for. That was what they had said.

Riveria watched in silence with an inscrutable expression as the girl crossed her starting line.

The moment Aiz had been so desperately waiting for finally came.

```
"Graaa…"
```

"ļ"

Short limbs and a chubby torso. Greenish skin. A goblin. One of the monsters native to the first floor and a common low-level creature for adventurers to face first.

Standing before her on the path, the goblin bared its small fangs and growled. Aiz's heart skipped a beat. Her back grew hot where the Blessing had been

inscribed, as if it contained a black flame.

"Don't rush in thoughtlessly. Don't think about killing it in one blow, either. Just—"

Riveria's advice was ignored before she even had a chance to finish. Aiz dashed forward without listening to her instructions at all.

"Tch! Fool!"

The elf's rebuke fell on deaf ears as the young girl charged with her sword held high.

Despite yelling at her, Riveria made no move to help. She had already determined that even if the goblin landed a counterattack on the young girl, it would not be able to inflict a lethal wound. Also, it was important to learn from mistakes. That was what she thought.

Then something unexpected happened.

Golden hair fluttered.

A slash came down with all her weight behind it.

The monster was *in pieces*.

"___"

"Gyaaaaaaa?!!!"

Flesh scattered, blood sprayed, and the creature raised a dying cry. Its limbs ripped apart, the ugly monster turned into an even uglier lump of meat. It had taken only an instant for a slash from Little Blade to fell the monster.

Riveria was at a loss. It looked more like the monster had been hit with a sledgehammer than with a blade.

One strike.

The goblin was dead from a single strike.

The first strike of a Level-1 adventurer who had just obtained her Status should not be that strong.

It was an unbelievable result—overkill.

This marked the very first battle of the adventurer known as Aiz Wallenstein, as well as her first victory.

"This..."

Aiz stood up straight, her upper body covered in gore from the clumsy slash. Her lips trembled as she whispered subconsciously.

"...This...is the first..."

The inaugural kill.

Her first step past the starting line.

However, no emotions swelled in her chest. There was no sense of achievement, no excitement, nothing. Covered in blood, she seemed disinterested as she surveyed the results of the fight.

This was only the first stop along the way. The road to reach the strength she desired was so long that such a small step mattered very little in comparison to the goal in the distance.

That was why Aiz ran.

She screamed to fan the flames of her fighting spirit, her chest quivering.

Drawn by the girl's cry and the scent of their kin's blood, a mob of monsters gathered ahead on the path.

Riveria came to her senses and tried to keep Aiz in check, but the young girl shook her off and headed deeper, slicing into the pack of howling monsters.

The sword created a symphony of dull thuds, leaving countless wounds in its wake.

Along with monstrous screams.

"This can't be...It's impossible."

That was all Riveria could do to put into words the scene that unfolded before her.

"Goghaaa!"

"——AAA?!"

Whenever the girl unleashed a strike with all her strength, any monsters standing before her were blown to bits.

Just like the first goblin, hunks of their flesh scattered.

"Uuuuaaaahhhh!!"

To Riveria, it was plain brute force. The girl put her weight behind the prumsize sword and leaned into every attack right as she started to fall. However, the force contained in that blow was more than enough to slay a goblin or a kobold. Their menacing growls quickly changed to yelps of fear. Because of her strength attribute, the sword itself was already wearing down.

It was a bizarre sight—monsters' arms and legs strewn about while the wall was splattered with fresh blood everywhere. A normal person would never associate the carnage with this girl who couldn't properly wield a sword and had no idea how to fight. As Aiz continued to snarl and charge at the monsters, Riveria felt a chill.

"Ha!!" "Gegee?!"

Riveria shuddered as Aiz finished off the last remaining monster. Gritting her teeth with all her might, the girl fully committed to a slash that struck the kobold in its torso. The monster's body crumbled along with its magic stone, turning to ash.

"Haaa-haaa-haaa..."

The only sound left was the girl's ragged breath echoing in the Dungeon.

"...Aiz, that'll be all for today. We're going back."

Riveria could tell that Aiz's condition was getting dangerous and decided it was time to return.

"I can still...keep going..."

Aiz's desire to fight was still high, and she backed away when the elf held out her hand.

Then something suddenly fell out of Aiz's mouth with a plop.

"Ah..."

"...?"

The girl seemed shocked as she realized what had happened. Riveria dubiously leaned over and picked up the object that had fallen from Aiz's mouth.

"This is..."

The shining white thing lying in Riveria's open palm was not a magic stone or anything of the sort, nor was it a drop item—it was a baby tooth.



"Ga-ha-ha-haaa!"

Loki burst into laughter as she examined the cute little baby tooth.

"Usin' so much strength that ya lose a tooth?! That's rich! But yeah, yeah, makes sense. Aizuu's just a sweet li'l seven-year-old girl, after all!"

"But to grit your teeth so hard while you're fighting..."

Finn smiled with chagrin from behind his desk as Loki rudely kicked her feet up on it, holding her stomach after too much laughing.

They were in the office of *Loki Familia*'s home. Loki, Finn, and Gareth were present, along with Aiz and Riveria, who had just returned from the Dungeon. They had come to report on Aiz's debut after she registered at the Guild.

Aiz was blushing as she avoided making eye contact.

"Hey, Aizuu! Smile and say 'cheese'! I wanna see that cute little gap-toothed smile of yours!"

"Don't wanna."

Aiz turned away and headed for the door as Loki approached with a lecherous grin.

"I'm leaving."

"—Not a chance! Gareth!"

All of a sudden, the goddess snapped her fingers. Sighing, the dwarf closed in

and lifted Aiz like a feather.

"Gh—?! L-let me go!"

"Bwa-ha-ha! I'm the goddess here!"

Hoisted by her arms, Aiz swung her legs helplessly as Loki immediately started her attack. Narrowly avoiding any perverted locations in a calculated manner, she began to tickle Aiz.

"~~~~Ngh?!"

"Come on now—open yer mouth for me!"

The little girl's eyes went wide as her stomach was assaulted by two hands' worth of fingers. Resistance was futile, and in seconds she burst out in exclamation.

"Sto—Gya-haaa! Stop it! Ah-ah-ha-ha!!"

Riveria put her hand on her cheek and turned away while Finn's familiar exasperation appeared on his face. Aiz blushed bright red, tears in her eyes as her mouth opened wide.

Loki peered in and saw the gap where the upper molar next to her canine had fallen out, leaving her gums visible.

"Ah-ha-ha! Sooo cute! I'll hold on to that memory forever! I'm gonna cherish this tooth!"

After her guffaws died down, Loki wrapped the tooth in a scarf like she was preparing it for the afterlife.

Soon they settled down.

Containing her involuntary laughter, Aiz gradually stood up, her golden eyes blazing. She closed in on Loki with tremendous speed and lashed out with a leg sweep.

"Hmph!"

Now that she had received a Blessing, the young child's low kick was backed by enhanced strength that could slay even monsters, and that attack scored a clean hit on Loki's shin. The goddess rolled around while cradling her leg as Riveria and the others tried to suppress the headaches they felt coming on. Furious enough that even her ears seemed red, Aiz didn't give Loki so much as a second glance when she finally left the room.

The goddess's coarse wails echoed around for a little while longer.

"...So how was it, Riveria? How did she seem?"

Judging that the young girl was now far enough away, Loki stood up as if she had been faking all along. Her demeanor was dead serious, nothing like her ridiculous performance earlier.

Meeting her gaze, Riveria shared her impressions of the girl.

"For the most part, it went as expected. No thought at all about the danger to herself. Because of her goal, she is too obsessed with power."

"'I want power,' huh? It's not my place to talk about other people's wishes, but that girl's desire is a bit too direct. It's dangerous. And it's painful to watch."

Finn smiled sadly as he leaned back in his chair. Then, as if just realizing something, he soon raised a question.

"Good job getting her out of the Dungeon, Riveria. Seems like she would have kept fighting until she collapsed. Was that little baby tooth how you did it?"

"No. Before she had a chance to collapse, her weapon gave out. That was when she started listening again."

"What's that? Even if it was one of the Guild's stock weapons, it shouldn't be falling apart from spending half a day with a greenhorn..."

Riveria drew the shortsword at her waist, the Little Blade she had taken from Aiz, then handed it to Gareth. Sliding it out of the scabbard, he noticed the blade clearly had significant chunks missing. The dwarf could not contain his surprise as he examined the weapon in his hand.

"She killed monsters with one blow...literally blowing them to pieces. That is not a feat that should be possible for a Level-One adventurer."

"Do you think...it was that Skill?" Loki raised her eyebrow a bit.

"Anything else would be unthinkable." Riveria confirmed her suspicions. "That is an amazing Skill...but it's also the chain dragging her closer to death."

What had happened in the Dungeon replayed itself in Riveria's mind. Defeating too many monsters summoned more enemies, leading to a dangerous predicament. Then there was also Aiz's lack of concern for her wounds.

Looking into the elf's jade eyes, the others sighed with a tinge of anxiety.

"Guess we can't be tellin' her about that magic like this..."

"Yes. If we provided her a powerful weapon, it'd only be putting her in even more danger. She isn't ready yet."

Looking down, Gareth responded as if he saw something in the broken sword.

Loki had not told the girl about the magic ability that had appeared on her Status. It was obvious that the moment she learned about that colossal power, she would force herself to keep fighting without end.

"First, we need a way to control that Skill...If we can't instill a mind capable of controlling those emotions, this is hopeless. What she needs now isn't physical conditioning. It's mental training."

Finn, Gareth, and Loki all nodded in agreement with Riveria's conclusion.

"Yeah, let's get to it...So we wanna teach her how to think like an adventurer—or more like how to fight and just, like, general knowledge, yeah? Plus an education on how to act like an upstandin' person. Someone's gotta teach her."

```
"Teach? But who..."
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" *"*

"..."

"..."

Silence fell in the room as everyone focused on Riveria.

Sensing their silent gazes, the mage looked up, flustered.

"Wait a minute...Me?"

"Unfortunately, the captain can't really focus on a single member. And I have to deal with the Evils, too. Of course, I'll make time to check in on how it's going."

"Is my job description not vice captain?! What about Gareth?!"

"I got a slew of annoying missions still. And I ain't sure how to put it nicely, but I dunno the first thing about how to handle a lass that age. It'd probably be easier for Aiz to have a woman watching over her, right?"

"That's a convenient excuse!"

"And besides, Riveria, you were the one who volunteered to watch over Aizuu today. Doesn't she bring out your motherly instinct?"

Finn and Gareth shrugged helplessly while Loki smiled provocatively.

"Don't make assumptions, Loki!"

"It's a perfect opportunity. Riveria's gonna be a mama!"

"I'm unmarried and you know it!"

"I know, I know. High elves can hide their age, but ya should give it a try before yer too old to get married."

"Hmph!"

"Iggyaaa?!"

She swung her staff much more sharply than Aiz's kick, hitting Loki in the shin again and provoking another scream. Red with fury, Riveria glared down at the goddess rolling around the floor. Finn and Gareth awkwardly laughed while watching the two's antics.

"Jokes aside, I actually do think you are the right person for the job, Riveria."

"Finn...You are expecting too much from me. Taking care of a girl, from a different race no less. I can't..."

"Then let's put it this way. It's the captain's order."

Finn's eyes contained a playful glint as he announced his decision.

"Aiz is a member of our familia now. Welcoming her in is our job as adults.

We have to receive her with an affection that would match her real family's."

"…"

"Of course I think it'll be rough, but we'll help out, too. I've no intention of foisting it all on you, after all."

"That's what being friends is about, right?"

Finn smiled gently and Gareth grinned a hearty grin.

And finally, a teary-eyed Loki stood up, massaging her leg.

"I also think it's important for you personally, Riveria. From now on, there'll be more little ones joinin' our familia, so it's important for them to know a mama's touch."

Riveria's expression was incredibly severe, but she finally gave in. Apparently resigned to her fate, she blushed, looked away, and offered one final protest.

"Who are you calling mama ...?"



Thunk!

Several large books landed atop the desk.

"...What is this?"

Aiz suspiciously eyed the mountain of books piled in front of her.

The day after her first trip into the Dungeon, she had been practically dragged to Riveria's room after she finished breakfast.

Even for someone like Aiz, who had held little interest in other races at the time, she could tell the room belonged to an elf. There were a lot of wooden things. Something about the ceiling was different. Magic-stone lamps resembling flowers and fruits had been placed next to the simple bed and atop the desk that was covered by a stack of parchments—probably familia-related documents.

Her silver staff leaned against a shelf decorated with a vase containing an arrangement of pure-white flowers. Alongside it was a large, clear bottle with a young budding tree growing inside. Probably both from her elf village. Magic

potions and beautiful gems—spare magic jewels—were neatly lined up on other shelves. By and large, the documents and things occupying the shelves were an expression of the room's occupant.

Aiz sat in a chair in the middle of the large room, uneasy at all the different things around her as she looked up at Riveria.

"Starting today, we're going to be working on your fundamentals. In short, studying."

"...Studying...?"

"Yes. About the Dungeon, obviously, but also about skills and magic and such. I'll be teaching you the mind-set of an adventurer."

"...I don't need that. Just let me fight."

"Fool. Do you really think you can become stronger without even knowing what it means to fight? If you desire strength, then you must first comprehend the things you don't yet know and strive to rectify that lack of knowledge."

Riveria casually shot down Aiz, ignoring her glowering look.

Aiz had trouble dealing with the high elf. Having just joined, she still was not really used to anyone in *Loki Familia* and felt some distance between her and them, but spending time with this woman was particularly bad.

They had only just met, and she was so overbearing and nagging. Aiz had known a female elf like that before, but this Riveria person was far more overbearing than she had ever been. It brought back memories long buried from her youth—though it was only two or three years past—that elf scolding her until she cried countless times. She could not hide her immense discontent.

"Ah-ha-ha! Ya hate studyin', huh, Aizuu?"

Loki had invited herself in along with Aiz. She smiled as she constructed a house of cards on the other end of the desk. She had come to see how Riveria was faring on the first day of her teaching assignment, but there was no way Aiz knew that.

Ugh. She gulped.

Loki had hit the mark, but the girl sullenly refused to answer.

"Aiz, what you need is the 'great tree's spirit' that is essential for us mages. You need to develop a state of mind that will not be swayed by anything. If you continue to fight by relying on your Skill like you did yesterday, you will inevitably self-destruct."

Riveria explained the situation in a clear voice without any hesitation or mumbling.

However, as far as Aiz was concerned, the elf's bell-like explanation might as well have been gibberish.

What are you saying?

What are you even talking about?

It doesn't make any sense at all.

Wasn't I clear that I don't wanna study? Just let me get a new weapon and fight. Isn't that obviously the fastest way to get stronger? Why is this elf so full of herself?

She kept trying to make Aiz do things she did not want to do, annoying and angering the girl. That frustration kept building, summoning more anger until she couldn't totally hold it in anymore. Trembling slightly, she hung her head.

"Why don't ya just give it a chance, Aizuu? Aren't ya happy to have such a beauty around all the time as a mentor? Hee-hee-hee, the cute little girl and her gorgeous governess...That's a great pairing. Hey, Riveria, could ya put on a pair of glasses for me?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

While Loki and Riveria kept talking, Aiz's irritation finally hit her limit. A strained whisper escaped her.

"—Was way prettier."

Looking up at Riveria and Loki, Aiz's face was scrunched into a furious glare.

"Old hag!"

She screamed at Riveria.

"…"

"Eeep!"

Loki genuinely gasped when she saw the high elf's facial expression freeze over in an instant.

Riveria's eyes narrowed. Not noticing the sudden change, Aiz stared at her defiantly, and then, before her eyes could even catch what was happening, the elf's fist swung down.

The next instant—bonk!

"?!!!!"

It was an iron fist.

Lightning had landed on the back of Aiz's head. Between the pain and the shock, she could not respond. The force behind it was so great that she could even feel it in her tailbone sitting in the chair.

The world was spinning. Or at least it felt like it was.

"It seems you need to learn proper respect for your elders first."

Holding the top of her head with both hands to soothe the ache, Aiz quivered at the curt tone of the elf beside her. Even Loki was afraid, swallowing her usual jokes. Nervously looking up, Aiz actually shuddered when she saw the high elf glaring daggers at her.

"Let me be clear. I will punish excessively impertinent comments."

As the high elf stared down at her with a frozen expression and cold eyes, Aiz felt an uncontrollable terror for the first time. At the same moment, she also realized the difference in their strength.

If I'm a goblin like one of the dozens I killed yesterday, then she's one of the "crazy strong" Monster Rexes Father and everyone else talked about...!

"We're starting. Pick up the pen. Note down everything I'm about to tell you, and etch it into your brain."

"...?!"

Loki put a hand to her face and muttered, "She's done it now," as Aiz, trembling in terror, finally began obeying the high elf.



The next day arrived.

On the second day of studies, Aiz quickly escaped from Riveria's lectures.

"Where are you, Aiz?! Come back here!"

Aiz stealthily kept her distance, hiding from the terrifying high elf, whose voice was audible even one tower over in the manor. Fortunately, she didn't run into anyone else in the hallways or on the stairs, so no one could give away her hiding spot.

The Twilight Manor was almost entirely empty. She did not know the specifics, but apparently Orario's public order was in disarray at the moment, and practically every member of the familia was running around responding to various quests and mandatory missions handed down from above.

Aiz had already decided that Riveria was the queen of terror.

I really don't get that elf at all. Aiz was admittedly not that great at studying to begin with, but she could not help feeling that the standards she was imposing were insane. What's with all those books?! There's no way I can remember so much stuff! She still had a headache because of the intense study session the day before.

It had been enough that even the usually easygoing Loki awkwardly tried to persuade Riveria to rein it in a bit. "Come on, Riveria—it's just the first day, after all, so go a little easier on her..."

I don't wanna study anymore...I hate studying...

Crawling around between the towers on all fours, Aiz unleashed all her frustrations in her mind. She had already developed a severe allergy to giant tomes. Her face was scrunched up like she had just eaten her most hated food, and she trembled as the image of that devil teacher flashed across her mind.

There isn't even any point in studying. I don't have the time to waste on something like that...

As her frustrations boiled over, she felt an impatience to match her discontent.

There were other things she needed to be doing. What she wanted was something else.

The strength to realize her wish. Weapons that could kill monsters. What Aiz wanted could be achieved only on the battlefield.

Sneaking into a deserted archive, Aiz sat down in a small opening at the corner of the room between bookshelves, burying her head in her knees.

I have to ... get stronger ...

Feeling an uncontrollable desire weighing on her little chest, Aiz squeezed her eyes shut.

" ?"

Suddenly, Aiz felt something was off.

Going to the Dungeon and fighting monsters had given her the seeds of an adventurer's sense, though imperfect, and it alerted her to the change in the situation. Noticing a presence, she looked up.

"Hey."

In front of her, a prum man smiled at her.

"Guh?!"

"Uh-oh. You all right there?"

Taken aback, she had tried to retreat and hit her head on the wall.

While stars were bursting before her eyes, he squatted down, looking concerned about her.

How did he know I was here? No, where did he even come from? I didn't notice him approaching at all.

Aiz looked shocked as the prum, Finn, still smiling, tilted his head.

"Why...? This is...?"

"Mm, because you were desperate to get away from Riveria, it was easy for someone who was in a different location to sneak up on you."

Just as Aiz started to wonder if he had told on her to Riveria, he cheerfully

added, "I haven't told Riveria," as if he had read her mind. "She can be a bit too serious about her jobs, so I figured you'd eventually try to escape...I didn't think you'd already be there by the second day, though."

Aiz felt uncomfortably trapped as a strained smile drifted across Finn's face.

She did not really understand the prum they called Finn yet.

She had been told he was head of their group, but she didn't really get that sort of impression from him. It seemed he always had that gentle smile on his face. She couldn't explain it, but she had the feeling that he was easier to deal with than Riveria.

Since he was about the same height as her, he met her eye to eye.

"Was Riveria's lecture that rough? Do you hate it already?"

He looked like a boy at first glance, but his appearance was at odds with his mature voice, which left Aiz furrowing her brows. He was naturally getting involved in this as part of his role as the familia's captain.

"I have to become stronger. Let me fight! I don't have time to waste studying!"

All the frustrations and emotions that Aiz had been holding in finally came rushing out.

"Studying is pointless!"

Her voice reverberated in the archive.

Having listened to her complaints in silence, Finn suddenly stood up.

"Hmph. Then shall we head outside?"

"Eh?"

"You want to fight, right? Then I'll be your opponent."

He smiled that same gentle smile as Aiz reacted with confusion.

"How about some combat studies?"

Finn brought her to the manor's central yard, surrounded by various towers.

Because it was visible from any of the towers, she wondered for a second

whether he was simply trying to let Riveria find her, but he said, "If Riveria shows up, I'll explain to her. I promise."

What they were doing now was a mock battle. She was supposed to fight Finn as if he was an enemy.

Aiz held a training shortsword. The edge was intentionally dull, but it was still made of metal and had a fair amount of heft as a blunt weapon. A hit from that would still be plenty painful.

On the other side, Finn was holding a broom with the brush removed—a wooden pole.

Finn took a couple of practice swings to check how it felt before turning to face Aiz.

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"Um..."

"Hmm? What's up?"
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"Is that...okay?"

"Ah, my weapon? Don't worry about it—it'd just be a waste."

She froze a bit as the prum casually responded with a smile.

Just like her future self, she was a tomboy who hated to lose.

"All right, let's do it. Come at me however you like."

She didn't need to be told twice.

Readying her sword, she shifted into a battle stance, measured her timing, and rushed at him.

"Charging in from the front. Hmm, easy to read."

"?!"

Finn disappeared before her eyes, and she stumbled as her slash missed its mark. She swiveled around wildly, but her opponent was just standing behind her without a care in the world, that same smile still pasted across his face.

Enraged, Aiz flew in again with her sword.

"Your resolve is respectable, and your swings have a nice sharp edge to them.

There's the glimmer of something there."

"Guh!"

"But unfortunately, that's not enough in a fight."

Finn kept chatting as he continued to dodge Aiz's wild slashes without breaking a sweat.

Even if she was only seven years old, she had still received a Status, so the attacks she dealt out had force and speed behind them. However, what had worked on the monsters she fought before was entirely useless against this adventurer. Finn was not doing anything particularly special, either. He did not counterattack and simply choose to nimbly evade her. He wasn't even moving especially quickly or working in any impressive parries.

He was just casually facing Aiz and circling around her.

"—…?I"

I can't hit him. I can't hit him at all. Not even a scratch.

Before she realized it, Aiz was gritting her teeth and putting her whole body into swinging the sword.

"That Skill isn't going to work on me."

But Finn dodged even that attack without batting an eye.

Despite trying a violent blow using her whole body, the only sound that rang out was the *whoosh* of a big whiff. Aiz tried it again as beads of sweat rolled down her cheek and her breathing became ragged.

Around the fifth time he dodged her attack, he tripped her up as she passed him, sending her tumbling down onto the grass.

"You done?"

"Kuh...Waaaa!!"

Standing up, Aiz screamed in a blind fury as she swung her sword around.

She did not notice the person watching them fight as she tried to cut Finn countless times—and went rolling across the ground just as many times.

Finally, Finn started to counterattack. Using the tip of the wooden pole, he poked her waist or her arm, as if pointing out her mistakes. He did not put much strength into the blows, but it was enough to knock Aiz onto her butt.

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"Yep. Weak."
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"Grrr—?!"
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Then he hit Aiz once with a stronger attack.

Blown back, she collapsed faceup on the grass. The training sword thudded against the ground beside her. Finally unable to move, Aiz looked up at the blue sky in disbelief.

The prum walked over to her, his golden hair swaying in the wind as he calmly looked down at her.

"Your style of fighting relies on the strength of your Status...of your Skill. When we remove that from the equation, this is what happens."

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"...!"
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Aiz's cheeks turned a bright red, a mixture of her frustration from the fight and her personal embarrassment. Finn continued as she dragged herself up to a sitting position.

"Us first-tier adventurers often say that many adventurers are controlled by their Status."

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"Huh...?"
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"Lots of people rely too much on their Blessing. That is not the same thing as your ability and techniques."

Aiz's ears stung, recognizing the implied just like you in his tone.

"What you lack are techniques and strategy. And, more than anything else, knowledge."

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"|"
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"Not only do you not know how to approach an enemy—you don't even understand the idiosyncrasies of your own weapon. You are truly just a child. Even if you go to the Dungeon, as you are now, you'll only end up getting

yourself killed. I guarantee it."

Finn smiled softly as Aiz's golden eyes went wide.

"Aiz, we never started out strong. We grew from lots of training on top of a ton of adventuring and, yes, studying, too—Isn't that right, Riveria?"

"...Yes."



Aiz gasped and swung around. Riveria was standing at the entrance connecting the courtyard to the tower. She had been watching their mock battle the whole time. Stepping down onto the grass, she approached them.

"There was so much I had to learn. And just as much I had to experience and practice. When I encountered things I didn't know in the world, I endeavored to learn everything I could..."

"…"

"In order to achieve my desire."

Hesitating for a second, Riveria offered her hand. Aiz was taken aback, looking between the elf's hand and her face. She wavered for a moment, then finally reached out.

The slightly cool hand helped her stand up.

"Aiz, your wish...It's a lot more difficult than our desires and goals. If you want to achieve it, then you're going to have to survive the things we went through and struggle even more than we did. Do you understand that?"

Hanging her head at Finn's question, Aiz slowly nodded.

After going through the mock battle, she had become painfully aware of their difference in ability and could finally begin to understand the heavy implication behind his words.

Just how rash and reckless she was being. How narrow her field of view had become.

She was beginning to see how big the world really was.

She finally understood it.

"I can't give you permission to explore the Dungeon for a while, but if Gareth or I have time, we'll do some physical training with you, like today."

"|"

"Just like you wanted, we'll teach you how to fight. So keep at it during Riveria's lectures. I want you to strengthen your mind and your body."

After smiling at Aiz, Finn turned to Riveria.

"So, Riveria. As an elder deserving of respect, do you have anything to say?"
"..."

As if she had been thinking about it all along, Riveria fell silent for a moment and then spoke directly to Aiz.

"Aiz...I was too intense before. I handled myself poorly. I am sorry."

Aiz was visibly shocked at her apology. The woman's gaze and words conveyed a deep regret and an unfamiliar but sincere parental concern.

Just a little—really just a tiny bit—Aiz's chest tightened. It was all she could do to nod.

"Me too...I'm sorry."

For some reason, she could not bring herself to look up, so she stared down at the grass as she spoke.

"Please...help me study."

She bowed her head.

Riveria's expression showed her surprise for a moment before changing to a smile.

"Yes. I'll try my best."



It was early morning, before the sun had begun to rise.

Aiz made her way down to the courtyard holding a sword. Cloaked in the early dawn, the manor was silent. The cool air caressed her skin as she gazed up at the dark sky. Aiz felt like she understood a little bit of the secret behind the strength that Riveria and the others possessed.

They had gradually built it up. It was the product of an actual mountain of experience.

And it wasn't just them.

Surely her father and the other brave people with him had done the same.

" "

Embracing the loneliness in her heart, she steeled herself and drew the sword that Finn had given her.

"Simply, soundly, and steadily build your strength."

When Riveria had told her that, Aiz made up her mind. In order to fulfill her wish, she would put in more work than they ever had. She would be more resolute than they were.

With a strong determination in her chest, she began to swing her sword by herself.

Her unending effort would persist without interruption into the distant future.

BRIEF CALM

Мімалётнае статычныя скрытыя

CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF CALM

"We're returning to the city. Start getting ready."

This was the fifth day since the battle had begun.

The conflict with Rakia was still ongoing when Finn gave that order.

"It seems like Rakia just wants to drag out this war for some reason. They've been focusing on harrying us instead of committing to any decisive attacks. They want to keep Orario's forces outside the walls."

According to him, the enemy's real aim was inside the city.

No one questioned the wise captain's decision. It was imperative for some of the familias to return to the city in order to avoid playing into the enemy's hand. When the Guild heard Finn's analysis of the situation, they would understand. Surely they would call back some of their forces without delay. *Loki Familia* had their justification for the move.

They had left a decisive-enough impact on the battlefront on the first day, so as long as *Freya Familia* and *Ganesha Familia* stayed, it would be more than enough to handle what was left. It was rather convenient how Loki's plan ended up pushing all the annoying stuff onto Freya, who she was always quarrelling with, as well as her familia.

Loki Familia quickly withdrew from the field, leaving behind their battle standard to convince the enemy they were still there.

Later that evening, they reached Orario.

"We can't prepare for the Evils while fighting a war. If our operations against the Rakian forces drag on much longer, we won't be able to find them."

They passed through the giant city walls at sunset, earning looks of surprise and suspicion from the populace. Finn gathered the familia in the plaza before the city gate to brief them on the plan going forward.

"Riveria and I will take care of handling the spies Rakia has probably snuck into the city. The rest of you should continue the search for information about the key...but also rest up a bit. You've probably strained yourselves a bit participating in the war, since that's not our usual job, and we haven't had a break in half a month. Raul, gather all the requests for time off. I'll take care of scheduling them."

"Got it!"

After that, the various members dispersed to enjoy their brief respite.



Far from the battlefield, and right before they got back to Orario.

Gareth and a handful of people had separated from the main group and started inspecting the area surrounding the city.

"Found it!"

"Th-there really was one..."

They were on a rocky outcropping over four kirlos away from the city.

Stepping into an inconspicuous cave close enough to the coast to see the waves, the adventurers found a man-made passage hewn into the natural rock.

"When I heard they were moving those man-eating flowers into Meren, I thought this might be the case. Small or even middling ones I could see, but getting big ones out via the city gate would be too suspicious. Even with the cooperation of *Ishtar Familia* and other mercantile groups."

Gareth's group had taken a different path after they were released from dealing with Rakia. If they reentered the city, it would be an incredibly tedious process to get back out again, so in order to take care of the familia's current objective of gathering information about Knossos, they intended to look from the outside for any underground passages out of the city.

"They got Knossos's man-eating flowers out from here..." The chienthrope Cruz was dumbfounded.

"They can also bring in food and supplies. Not to mention all the resources to

create the labyrinth..."

"Another route in and out that could avoid inspection by the city, you mean?"

"Aye. The Rakian spies Finn was suspicious of might be using it, too."

It was also possible that in the past, the Evils had used it to raise money, charging a high toll to let outlaws into the city.

Raising a magic-stone lantern, the Level-4 Cruz stared down the man-made passage.

"Still, it's amazing we found it...Honestly, when I heard we were going to be searching every nook and cranny around the city, I got dizzy just thinking about it."

"It's not like we're just turning over any old rocks looking for it. Examining the ground's a dwarf's specialty. If nothing else, I've got experience!"

Before he came to Orario, long before he met Loki and Finn and joined the familia, Gareth worked as a miner of coal and ore in his homeland. He had set out for dangerous volcanoes and found countless veins of precious metals. And of course, he had been involved in the construction of countless tunnels. Based on Knossos's estimated scale, the size of Orario, and then the need for discretion, he had zeroed in on this location.

"Let's destroy this. Can any of you lads use explosive magic?"

"Y-yes!"

"Then torch it. This'll cut off their main supply line. Since Knossos is connected to the city and the Dungeon, it's just a minor setback for them, though...After we're done here, we're gonna make sure there aren't any other routes in. North, south, east, and west, we're goin' over all of Orario's surroundings with a fine-tooth comb."

"Gaaah...Understood."

While Loki Familia's few male members began to chant, Cruz steeled himself unhappily. The Labyrinth City itself was huge; the area of its surroundings was immeasurable.

Their break would have to wait for now.

"Sorry, Bete Loga, but it isn't here, eitheeer."

"Feh...A big waste of time, huh?"

The curtain of night had fallen on Orario. In the moonlit southeast quarter of the city, people were going about their business in the restored part of the Pleasure Quarter. The night they had returned to the city, Bete and a group from *Loki Familia* were searching for the key. He had dragged Lena, formerly of *Ishtar Familia*, away from the war front to show him where the key was, as she had promised. They were in Belit Babili, Ishtar's home.

"Looks like the Evils got here first...But there's no trail. I can't smell those assholes at all."

"Yeah, there's no signs of a struggle, either. Maybe Ishtar or another familia member who knew about it already took it?"

They were inside a hidden room connected to Ishtar's inner sanctum. There were golden crowns and gorgeous veils glittering with stardust adorning the shelves and wardrobes, but Daedalus's Orb was nowhere to be found. The small box on top of the table that Lena had seen was empty. Aggravated at Lena, Bete tore the room up, looking high and low for it before turning to glare back at her.

"Beeete, I searched that Tammuz guy's room, but I couldn't find it. Sheesh, I want some overtime."

"Overtime, my ass! You probably just did a half-assed check. Stupid Amazon."

"Like I'd do that!"

"Aki and the animal-person kid helped out. We checked everywhere, but there wasn't a hidden room or anything."

Tiona and Tione and the others had met up with them in the goddess's sanctum.

Bete scoffed as their report killed his last hope at a lead.

"Back to the drawing board again. Would have been nice to get the key that Valletta what's-her-face had."

"Bete blew them all away, though."

"...What, is it my fault, huh?"

He hadn't just blown them away; he'd incinerated them. He sullenly avoided eye contact. The reality was that even if they wanted to search for the key belonging to the commander of their newly resurfaced enemy, there were no leads to follow.

They hadn't witnessed it themselves, but knowing how enraged he was at the time, they wouldn't be so insensitive as to blame him for not pressing Valletta Grede for the key's location, but...

"Quit it! Don't blame Bete! It's all my fault!"

For some reason, Lena's cheeks were flushed as she excitedly covered for Bete.

"It's just that when he thought they had killed me, he swore to get revenge for me but...Hee-hee-hee-hee...I guess that's love. Love?! Proof Bete loves me!"

"Shut your damn mouth or I'll shut it for you!"

"What?! My mouth...with Bete Loga's mouth?! Yaaah! So bold! But if you say so, dear. Mmmm~."

Lena closed her eyes and pursed her lips only to be struck in the cheek by Bete's clenched fist.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

"I'll kill you, you delusional twit."

"Could you quit acting so lovey-dovey? It's an eyesore."

"Why are you getting jealous, Tione?!"

Lena rolled on the ground, holding her cheek, while Bete seemed about ready to burst a vein. Tione seemed even more murderous than the werewolf as she watched her fellow Amazon flirt (that's how it appeared from her perspective), while Tiona desperately pinned her older sister's fists behind her back.

As the room instantly descended into chaos, the catgirl Anakity and the others sighed.

"Lefiya...Was it here?"

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"Yes, Miss Aiz..."
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The eighteenth floor of the Dungeon. Aiz, Lefiya, Narfi, and a few others were in the area just outside the great forest.

The grove of blue crystals reminiscent of ancient stone circles sparked Lefiya's memory. Around one and a half months ago, she had run into Bell by chance and gotten involved in a fight with a trap monster while chasing some Evils' Remnants. At the time, she wasn't able to catch them in the confusion, so she didn't get any information, but now that they knew of the existence of Knossos, Loki Familia came back to reinvestigate.

Standing at the edge of the forest, they saw a giant rock wall towering above them and marking the end of the floor. They began searching the area.

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"Miss Aiz?

"Here...They tried to cover it, but this patch of ground has been walked on a lot more than everywhere else."

Leaning over with her hand against the wall, the first-tier adventurer dug at the ground a bit and elaborated in her usual few words. As nervous as the rest of the group, Lefiya stepped forward and let loose an Arcs Ray. The rock wall's face broke apart with ease, revealing an inner cavern. Beyond that stood a giant metal gate.

"An orichalcum door!"

"Yeah, we found it..."

The others whispered among themselves as Aiz stared fixedly at it.

They had found the once hypothetical route connecting Knossos and the Dungeon. Suddenly tense, they carefully began examining the cavern and the door blocking the passageway, on guard for a surprise attack from the enemy.

"This is how the Evils' Remnants brought the man-eating flowers aboveground, isn't it...?"

"Maybe? There might be other doors connecting to the Dungeon..."

Aiz reminded Lefiya of the possibility of more routes between the Dungeon and Knossos. However, from this, they could confirm that Knossos at least went as far down as the eighteenth floor, the middle levels. They had confirmed Finn's prediction. Lefiya and the others were once again awed by the ominous man-made labyrinth.

"Miss Aiz, it looks like we won't find the key. What shall we do? Leave a lookout to watch for anyone going in or out?"

"...Mm, we probably shouldn't. Most likely, they already know...that we came here..."

After Narfi finished examining the door and delivered her report, Aiz shook her head.

She looked at the things on either side of the gate: sculptures of devils. Their stone eyes hid a dim blue light. It was probably the same technology as the surveillance "eye" that had been used to operate the door from afar and separate *Loki Familia* when they had wandered into the man-made labyrinth before.

Leaving a lookout here would not help them find anything, and haphazardly splitting their forces would just needlessly increase the risk of being attacked. The others grimaced and backed away from the door, understanding Aiz's implication. The wall was quickly regenerating as they moved, and before long the entrance in the rock face was covered over again.

"We should report this to Finn. But first, look around the area...a little..."

"Yes, we should search to see if there is anything else first."

Despite Aiz's clumsiness with words, which should have been a fatal flaw for one of a familia's commanders, the group split up to carry out her order. The golden-haired, golden-eyed girl furrowed her brow apologetically, blushing a little bit as the others smiled. That was just one side of her they loved.

In any case, they had at least accomplished something. They had not found the key that they needed to take it on, but *Loki Familia* was closing in on Knossos, slowly but surely.

"Lefiya...There was a time...you ran into Bell, right?"

"Y-yes, Miss Aiz. And after that, a masked adventurer saved us..."

"Masked adventurer..."

Searching together with Aiz, Lefiya paused to wipe off some sweat.

They had spread out around the forest and the stone circle under the white crystal light shining down from the ceiling. Squinting slightly in the sunlight filtered through the trees, Lefiya stole a glance at Aiz as she looked around the area.

I heard Lady Riveria's story of Aiz's past, but...Ahhhhh, I still cannot really believe it. A willful, childish Aiz...

Lefiya mulled over the story she'd heard from Riveria that night at the camp.

Mischievous, freer with her emotions than she was now, unreliable...It was an unimaginable story given the beautiful, awe-inspiring swordswoman standing before her now. She could not believe her ears when she heard it.

Ahhh, but I would have liked to see a cute little seven-year-old Miss Aiz with a tooth missing! Oh, if I ask Loki, maybe she'll let me see that baby tooth...Wait, what am I getting excited about?! I'm not some p-p-p-pervert...!

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"What is it...Lefiya?"
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"Ahhh?!"

Lefiya frantically snapped back to reality when Aiz turned to check on her. She briefly feared that Aiz had figured out the daydream she was having, and she quickly tried to hide the truth.

"Ah, um, that is...For some reason, Lady Riveria told me that I resembled how you used to be, so I was just looking at you a bit...Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Eh? Lefiya thought as Aiz stared intently at her.

Holding her gaze, Aiz closed in until they were nearly nose-to-nose.

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"U-ummm..."
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She examined the shocked elf's face, then gently grabbed her left hand and examined that too, then caressed her silky golden-yellow hair. Aiz's hand

moved down, checking her clothes and staff and all her equipment, before she finally nodded.

"Yeah...it's fine."

"I-it's fine...?"

"You're...taking much better care of yourself than I did."

"Eh?"

"You're nothing like how I was."

With that, Aiz smiled just a little bit.

Lefiya was shocked—she had never seen the younger Aiz's smile, but for some reason, she could imagine it looking like that.

She was at a loss for words.

The smile wasn't particularly self-deprecating, but she felt like Aiz meant exactly what she said. But she could not understand why Aiz mentioned it, and that perplexed her.

In the end, Lefiya couldn't find any words to say before they left the floor along with everyone else.



While her followers were running around, the patron goddess made some moves of her own.

"That dumbass Ares should know how strong we are by now. Just quit it alreadyyy."

Swallowing a yawn, Loki took in the scenery with a bored look.

Placing her arms on the armrest of her seat, the Goddess of Beauty next to her leaned forward slightly.

"So, changin' the topic a bit, Freya."

"Why so serious all of a sudden?"

"...Ya know a child by the name'a Tammuz?"

Wails echoed around the battlefield as Loki confronted Freya with a sharp question.

Facing forward, the silver-haired goddess was silent for a moment before turning her silver eyes to meet Loki's gaze.

"...Did this child do something?"

"Don't dodge the question. Ya know 'im or not?"

"I haven't the slightest clue what you're getting at, Loki. Without understanding your intent, all I can say is I don't know."

The familia members guarding the pair instantly got nervous at the sudden frosty exchange. As both sides watched each other, on guard for attempts to harm their familia's patron goddess, Loki responded as if she had expected Freya's answer all along.

"Because of that pain-in-the-ass fight you had with Ishtar, her vice captain went missing. I wanna know where he went."

"Why are you asking me?"

"The day he disappeared, the ones tearin' up the Pleasure District were your children. It's normal to check if you had seen him, or had seen him get killed, or if you're *hiding* him."

"Why are you after that child?"

"I'm lookin' for somethin', ya see. A kinda creepy magic item, got weird symbols inscribed in it."

"..."

"Ishtar had it, but now that she's back in Heaven, I was wondering if her second-in-command might've taken it...Just covering my bases."

The location of *Ishtar Familia*'s vice captain, Tammuz Berrilli, and the whereabouts of the key to Knossos.

Loki was using the impending war with Rakia to visit, intent on pinning those pieces of information down. It was all in order to corner the capricious Goddess of Beauty who always seemed to elude contact.

Freya recognized that discussing the conflict with Rakia was not really the point, and that Loki had come here specifically for a chance to meet her in person.

"Hypothetically, Loki..." She started speaking, maintaining her calm, composed demeanor. "Hypothetically, if that child you were talking about happened to suit my tastes...and I can't imagine why, but if someone happened to be coming after him..."

"..."

"Do you think that I would carelessly reveal that child's location?"

Freya ruled over beauty and love. She would protect the children she favored no matter what, and regardless of the consequences, she wouldn't allow anyone to take them away from her.

That was the message hidden behind Freya's smile.

So that's how it was.

"But yes. If I find anything out, I'll let you know...probably."

However, she could not flat-out reject Loki. As if announcing the end of the conversation, she turned away from the goddess who wielded the same status and military strength as she did.

In response, Loki swung her legs up and rose to her feet.

"Welp, guess that's how it goes. Finding out he's being shielded by the most annoying woman possible's still something, at least."

"Oh-ho, what on Earth could you be referring to?"

"But I should tell you, if you pull your usual queenly act, there won't be any taking it back."

"Oh my. Is that a threat?"

"Just the truth. Before you know it, your castle might get *blown away*...And if it does, I'll be the one pointin' and laughin'."

Loki snorted disgustedly before leaving with her guard. The trickster goddess departed quickly as Freya silently stared at her.

That conversation had taken place on the first day of the war.

"Loki is looking for Tammuz..."

They were now in *Freya Familia*'s camp in the fields outside the city. Freya was inside her giant tent, reflecting on the events from a few days before. Sitting on her seat, she asked the person before her: "*Tammuz*, tell me again. What was Ishtar planning?"

"Y-yes, my lady. Ishtar had reached out to *Kali Familia* and even the Evils' Remnants in order to defeat you. She wanted to lure Warlord and the rest into Knossos to strike them down with the demi-spirits..."

The kneeling dark-skinned, black-haired man answered the beautiful goddess as his cheeks flushed.

As Freya listened to him, she fiddled with the metal orb inscribed with the symbol *D* in her right hand—Daedalus's Orb.

The day that her familia destroyed the Pleasure Quarter, she had charmed the defeated goddess's favored child. She stole him away while Ishtar herself watched. Just as Loki suspected, *Freya Familia* was hiding him.

At first it had been merely curiosity. She had brought him back to their home in order to find out why Ishtar was willing to use any method possible to take her down. But after a few days, *someone had tried to kill him*. A mysterious guest had invaded her castle in an assassination attempt.

Strong, beautiful, and loyal, Tammuz had already piqued Freya's interest and received her favor. There was no way the Goddess of Beauty would willingly hand over one of her children. To protect him, she had Ottar and a couple of others dispose of the assassins. Thoroughly, in order to prevent any more information leaking out.

Freya had not revealed anything to Loki in order to protect her follower, but at the same time...she clearly understood why he was being targeted.

It was because of the key he had taken with him when *Ishtar Familia* had been destroyed.

"The Evils' Remnants, Knossos, demi-spirits..."

She examined the key glinting in the light of the magic-stone lamps, her full lips repeating the information Tammuz had given her.

"It seems things have gotten interesting while I wasn't paying attention."

"What shall we do, Freya?"

Stationed beside her throne, the boaz warrior Ottar solemnly awaited his mistress's commands.

Despite receiving the keyword, she could not connect everything with only Tammuz's information. She was silent for a moment before responding.

"I would like to determine whether something is happening in Orario at the moment."

"Should I contact Loki Familia?"

"No. If we exchange information with Loki, she will no doubt demand this key."

She smiled bewitchingly as Ottar looked up at her.

"I suspect holding on to this for the moment will be better...That's merely what my intuition is telling me, though."

Of course, the intuition she mentioned was the intuition of a divine being. She rose from her throne.

"Call Allen for me. I'll have him go back to the city."

"I've got a reward lined up, so find me that magic item."

The first words out of Loki's mouth upon entering a certain familia's home were directed at the god before her eyes.

"That's rather abrupt. We've formed an alliance, haven't we? Could you tell me what it is?"

Hermes grinned as he held up Finn's sketch of Daedalus's Orb. It fluttered in the air as he shook his hand questioningly.

They were meeting in *Hermes Familia*'s home, the Traveler's Lodge. The war was still raging outside the city, but Loki had returned to Orario and marched into Hermes's base without even a bodyguard, causing a stir among Asfi,

Lulune, and his other followers.

"And this after you didn't tell me about Daedalus Street. You investigated it like we discussed, right? When I asked Dionysus about it, he wouldn't tell me anything."

"You were the one Dionysus said to watch out for, after all."

"Come on now. I'm Hermes! I've got nothing to hide."

"You were the reason Freya wrecked Ishtar's place, weren't ya?"

"…"

Ignoring his jokes, Loki pressed harder. Hermes smiled, raising his hands as if surrendering, but he neither confirmed nor denied her accusation.

"It's a bit late for me to be gettin' suspicious, but Dionysus ain't the only one with doubts about you. What is Uranus hidin'? What's he plannin'?"

"Who knows? We get a lot of contracts from the Guild, but...it's not like they totally trust us, either. Ouranos doesn't tell me everything."

Not everything.

Loki really wanted to smash her fist into the jaw of the god sitting across the desk from her.

—Sheesh, they're all damn foxes who won't show their hands.

"If you're gonna play dumb, then we'll keep quiet about what we've found as well."

"Well, that's a problem, since I really don't know anything."

"Yeah, yeah. But—if you happen to find this magic item, bring it to me, and I'll share what I know."

Them's the terms.

Hermes Familia was a Dungeon-crawling familia, but they also made a living by working in several other industries like negotiations and information brokering. They were good at what they did and maintained their neutrality. If something needed to be found, there was no place better to send the job.

Ouranos's ulterior motives or the key's whereabouts. One or the other. That was what Loki was demanding.

Hermes looked down at the parchment sketch again.

"If you're calling it a commission, then we'll take it, but...Got any leads to start with?"

"Nope. It's somewhere in the city."

"Come on now. That's a bit much, don't you think?"

"Oh yeah. There might be a lead at Freya's place. There ya go—somewhere to start. Deal with it."

"H-hey now. You sound like you're just telling me to go die in a fire."

Hermes's face actually twitched at that last comment. Loki stuck out her tongue as Hermes started to break into a sweat.

"If ya want my trust, then ya gotta do that much, at least. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention, but there's more than one of those magic items. Anyway, I'm countin' on you."

Finishing everything she had come to say, Loki quickly took her leave.

The war tiger and the prum girl glanced around in confusion as she left their home.

After Loki was gone, Hermes sighed slightly and turned to his followers standing behind him.

"Oh boy...It's rough being stuck between a rock and a hard place."

Now you say that?

Asfi and Lulune merely snorted at the dandy god.



Days passed.

As the encirclement of Knossos steadily progressed, *Loki Familia* had a real sense that they were closing in on the creatures and remnants of the Evils holed up there. However, time mercilessly flowed on while they remained unable to

open the way in. The passage of time was not merely beneficial to the enemy. If this went on too long, it would bring about the collapse of Orario itself. Lefiya and the others were getting impatient. They were one move away. If only they could just get one step further on this front. That was the kind of atmosphere that hung thick around *Loki Familia*.

On the other hand, things with Rakia were rapidly headed for a conclusion. Thanks to Finn's arrangements, they had received word that *Ares Familia*'s spies had been captured. He had shared the information with *Hephaistos Familia* and asked for assistance, so they ended up with the glory, but in *Loki Familia*, he was greeted by cheers of "That's our captain!" with Tione leading the call.

"But the people of the city have no clue about that."

Lefiya murmured to herself as she walked through the streets. It was late morning, and the sky was clear and blue.

Because the Guild loathed unnecessary confusion, the existence of the spies was not made public. Apparently, there had been quite a few of them, and they had even brought in a certain legendary magic item—one of Crozzo's Magic Swords. If there had been any mistake, an entire block might have gone up in flames, but there was no telling that from the peaceful hustle and bustle of the city.

Rakia did not have any other cards left to play, so the war outside the city would be cleared up soon. That was what they believed, and then they would finally be able to seriously start dealing with the Evils.

Currently she was out gathering information during her shopping trip for the familia.

"Hey, did you hear? The Little Rookie beat a floor boss. Or at least I heard it was some kind of insane beast!"

"I guess his victory in the War Game wasn't a fluke."

"Yeah, we might be seeing the birth of another amazing adventurer."

"G-grrr..."

Lefiya groaned a bit. Instead of the news about Rakian spies getting rounded

up, the Little Rookie was the talk of the town. In the shops, in the markets, among passersby, all she heard was chatter about his feats.

It had not even been a month since the War Game, and the excitement had not passed yet. Everyone was talking about the instantly famous super rookie and how they had high expectations for him.

I'm here doing all I can, and he is just hopping around for attention...!

For Lefiya, who was going through a lot of trial and error in her quest to become strong, his fame was practically taunting her. It wasn't as though he had any bad intentions, but to her, it felt like while she was struggling up the slope, the person next to her was easily springing up by leaps and bounds like a rabbit.

Lefiya felt her insides churning from a combination of regret and jealousy.

...But I think I get it.

Suddenly, a tinge of understanding appeared on her face. She knew why Aiz had started training him. She had wanted to understand the secret to his crazy rate of growth.

The kind and serious girl instinctively thought that compensation for the training would be selfish and had sincerely answered the boy's request for mentorship.

Lefiya, after hearing she resembled how Aiz used to be, had a hunch that she might understand what Aiz had felt at the time.

"It's aggravating...really, really aggravating, but...I should try asking, too."

Right as she was saying that to herself—

"Ah."

"Ah."

Turning the corner, she unexpectedly bumped into the boy himself. The white-haired, red-eyed boy, Bell Cranell.

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"Lefiya?"
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[&]quot;Wh-wh-why are you here?!"

"Um, I just happened to be walking past, is all..."

She was shaken by the sudden encounter, but when they were both in the same neighborhood, encountering each other in the street wasn't that strange.

Lefiya was at a loss for words, but Bell did not seem to mind as he soon asked a question.

"Um, you wouldn't happen to have seen the goddess—Hestia, would you?"

"Hestia...you mean your patron deity?"

"Yes, she left our home, so I was looking for her."

If he was asking someone who viewed him as a rival, then something must have happened. It was easy enough to guess from the light sweat on his face that he had been searching all over town.

The goddess Hestia. Lefiya had not had any direct interactions with her, but Lefiya knew of her. Her patron goddess, Loki, was often bad-mouthing her. And Lefiya had also caught glimpses of her working at the Jyaga Maru Kun shop.

"I haven't seen her...Did something happen?"

"Ah, no. That is...We just had a little fight, kind of."

Lefiya's voice finally came back. Her curiosity was piqued as Bell's gaze darted around in embarrassment. Lefiya blinked.

"That's unexpected...I thought you were bad with women. The sort of person who gets lovestruck and can't stand his ground."

"Gah?!"

He was almost pathetically taken aback, indicating her words had struck home.

She remembered when they first met. When they bumped into each other then, as soon as he found out she was an elf, he turned to mush, unable to calm down as he flushed red.

Now she held a grudge against him for various crimes related to Aiz, but at the time, she had thought he was modest and unsophisticated. A fight between him and a beautiful goddess was entirely unexpected. His rubellite eyes looked clouded over, as if with unspoken emotions, and his expression was dark.

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"...Was it really just a fight?"

"H-how did you know?"

What do you mean, how...?
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Lefiya dubiously raised an eyebrow as he struggled to find the words. Looking at him now, anyone could tell he was worried about something. That was how easy he was to read.

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Sighing slightly, Lefiya responded.

"If I see Hestia, I'll let you know."

"Eh?"

"You are worried, right? I'm saying I will help you."

"Th-that's...I couldn't bother you. And besides, you...um, don't really..."
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"I'm not sure what you think I am. While it is true that I dislike you, I have enough of a heart to help people who are in trouble! And you can be sure I'll get my compensation from you later."

Yes, just like Aiz.

She was not a saint. If she managed to help him find Hestia, then she could ask him for the secret to his growth. Lefiya would simply be helping Bell in order to create an excuse to learn that.

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"Th-thank you very much!"
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"...It's not that big a deal."

Turning away from Bell as he thanked her, she felt a flush of heat rise in her cheeks from his straightforwardness.

After he had bowed more times than she could count, Lefiya headed for the city's western quarter to look for information about the key and maybe track down the goddess's whereabouts.

Searching for a magic item in the giant Labyrinth City and finding a single

goddess were both difficult propositions. But for the latter, there was at least a chance someone might have seen her. Lefiya traveled along the high-traffic Main Street and asked around.

Dark clouds...And it was clear before. It might rain.

Inside the tall city walls, she could see a mass of gray clouds to the north. With the darkening sky urging her onward, she naturally sped up.

A little while after she ran into the boy, she found out that the childish goddess had wandered to the north of the city. At that moment, Orario's usual liveliness suddenly changed.

"...? The city feels more panicked...?"

Her elf ears reacted. There was something out of place among the sounds of the city's usual bustling noise. An animal person ran through the market looking pale, grabbing people all the while to spread some piece of news. Human shopkeepers were huddled together, whispering and pointing in the same direction. Adventurers and Guild employees ran past without a sidelong glance.

Lefiya looked where they were heading—to the north.

"Did something...happen?"

Feeling the city's growing restlessness, Lefiya was about to head north herself when— "Lefiya!"

"Miss Tione, Miss Tiona?!"

"Lefiya, it's big trouble!"

She ran into the Amazons dashing from the side street.

They had Urga and Zolas equipped. Lefiya finally realized that something really big was going on.

"Did something happen?!"

"Rakia's last-ditch attack!"

"For some reason, they appeared at the city's north gate, and rumor has it they managed to kidnap a goddess."

Lefiya was horrified.

The situation wasn't exactly clear, either, because they had only just learned of the events themselves, but apparently all available Guild members and adventurers were assembling at the north gate.

"Wh-which goddess was kidnapped?!"

"It was little Argonaut's goddess, they said..."

"Wh...? Hestia?!"

"Yes. And they've already dispatched an emergency rescue squad with—"

Lefiya was dumbstruck by what was unfolding around her, but Tione continued without letting her get a word in edgewise.

"Е-ЕННИНИННИННИННИННИННИННИННИННИНН!"

And when she heard the last bit of news, she screamed.



"…"

Riveria's gaze dropped to the book open before her.

She was in Twilight Manor's office. The members were in the middle of getting ready to leave, while she found herself looking over *Loki Familia*'s records that Finn maintained with great care.

Ever since they had established themselves in Orario, he had kept track of the familia's history, recording the people in their rosters and the depth they reached in the Dungeon, as well as details like their levels. Of course, secret things like magic and skills and the like were not recorded, but the growth and efforts of their comrades were described there. It was a vivid testament to Finn's dedication to running the faction effectively.

Among the many records, Riveria eventually reached one girl's past.

"Danger lurking." "Needs company to enter the Dungeon." "Something shines in her swordsmanship." "Gareth and I may have trained her too well." "Even if she had an escort, getting to floor 10 solo in half a year is amazing." And on and on...She laughed slightly at the journal-like notes Finn had left in the margins of the records.

It was not the first time she had taken several of the thick record books off the shelf and opened them on the desk.

Abruptly, she took off the hair band pulling her hair back.

She peered at the golden hair band in her hands as her long, pale jade hair flowed like a clear forest stream down her back.

"Oh, Riveria. Ye were in here?"

Gareth had been passing by the open door when he saw her and entered.

"Gareth, you're back? What is it?"

"Do you have any Alb's Pure Water? This stain's stubborn. I've a feeling I won't be able to get it out without it."

Gareth held a sheathed shortsword in his hand. Pulling it out revealed a nicked and battered blade. It was a rare piece with a visible wave running the length of the blade. It was noticeably dirty, giving it a sense of age, but it was clear from the luster that the blade's edge had not dulled yet.

"That sword...You were holding on to it, Gareth?"

"I suppose. It was a special occasion, so I decided to take it. Finn said to take a break, but I've got nothing I want to do, and it was starting to get dark...Then all of a sudden, I remembered this."

Having just returned to Orario after going around destroying the entrances to Knossos outside the city, the dwarf lifted up the shortsword he had brought from his room.

"For some reason, I got the urge to give it a good polish."

Gareth's eyes turned warm as if he was remembering something as he examined the damaged sword.

"What about you? You're letting your hair down when you're not going to bed. It's been a while since I've seen you do that."

Gareth glanced up at her. Riveria was silent for a moment, staring at the hair band in her hand.

"The other day...I told Lefiya a story from Aiz's past."

"Oh?"

"It's not just that, though...I've found myself reflecting on what happened back then. It's rather unlike me, but I've been feeling sentimental lately."

Hearing that much, Gareth stroked his beard, as if agreeing with her.

"Ga-ha-ha! That's just how it goes. I'm the same, after all. We probably think back on the past because the fighting is so intense now. If we die, we won't be able to do that, either."

"Don't say something so ominous, Gareth."

Riveria glanced down at him, but he just smiled back at her warning.

"Perhaps we're the ones who can't let go of her."

"..."

"Well, Aiz's become a perfectly competent adventurer. She's gradually stopped being such a handful for us—"

Just as he said that, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed from the hallway, and someone rushed into the office.

"Riveria! Gareth!"

"Alicia? What is it?"

They both turned to the ashen elf who had rushed into the room.

The second-tier adventurer breathlessly delivered her report.

"Aiz has left the city in order to track Rakia's detached forces! It seems she's headed toward the Beor Mountain Range with Little Rookie!"

Their eyes filled with shock, and they both whirled around to look out the office's window. The sky to the north was filled with dark clouds extending out to the mountain range—lightning struck in the distance, and the thunderclap rolled over Orario.

"...The Beor Mountain Range...in poor weather...I've a bad feeling about this."

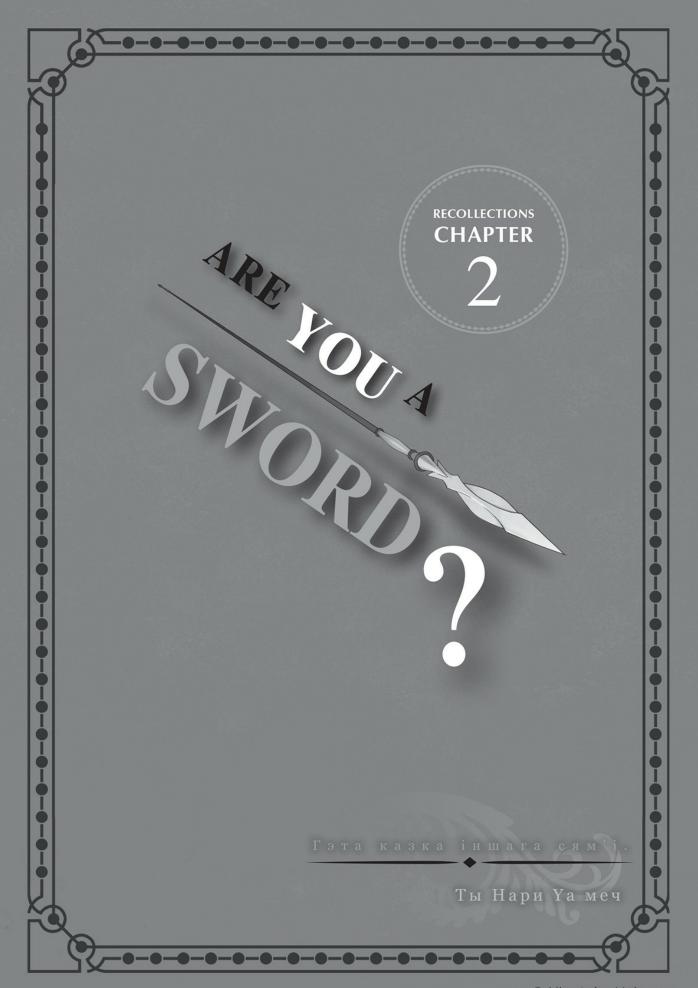
"Yes...At the very least, we can't afford to make any assumptions about the situation...What a mess."

Riveria responded to the dwarf as they both furrowed their brows.

They quickly set off. Bringing Alicia with them, they left the office.

The two moved through the hall quickly in order to meet up with Finn, who had taken command of the operation. Riveria sighed slightly.

"She's still quite the handful."



RECOLLECTIONS CHAPTER 2

ARE YOU A SWORD?

Aiz Wallenstein

LEVEL 1

Strength: E489 → D502 Endurance: E434 → 438 Dexterity: D597 → C605 Agility: C606 → 615 Magic: I0

Riveria looked at the girl's updated Status's numbers and sighed.

"Half a year since becoming an adventurer...That's an impressive rate of growth."

"I knew she had potential, but to come this far..."

Finn smiled wryly after she handed him the sheet that had been translated into Koine.

Loki had updated Aiz's Status first thing that morning, and she had informed Finn and Riveria once they returned to the manor after finishing a mission for the Guild.

"At this rate, she's headed for a pretty crazy level-up. Far as the familia's concerned, it's all sunshine and rainbows...But as for Aiz herself, I'm not too happy about this."

The familia's patron goddess sat cross-legged on top of the office's desk.

"Yes...With how she's been wearing herself down, that's to be expected."

"She's constantly asking for more training with Finn and Gareth, and she's been serious about her studies. She has largely learned to control her emotions, but...that girl still does not take care of herself. Training, training, training. Always training."

"She's only learned some of how to handle herself in a fight, but it was

enough to let her brute-force her way a little. I might have been a bit premature giving her permission to go into the Dungeon."

"That said, with the Evils runnin' rampant in the city nowadays, it'd be a problem if Aizuu didn't keep gettin' stronger, either. It's not like y'all will always be around to protect her."

The fact that Aiz did not pay any heed to the toll on her body was bothering them. The first-tier adventurers had no complaints about her desire to learn more and more from them, but she was too impatient. To put it bluntly, she refused to pay attention to anything other than becoming stronger.

There was plenty of blame to go around, though. Finn and Gareth had seen a spark of something in her techniques and then witnessed her joy at receiving instruction, which eventually led them to unwittingly teach her too much.

"Do you know what the lower-class adventurers call Aiz now?"

"What?"

"It's a riot. She's the Doll Princess."

"I'm not laughing."

"Seriously. Our Aizuu is waaay cuter and more huggable than any doll!"

"That's not what they mean."

Riveria felt her frustration rise a notch and stared at the ceiling after Loki's joke.

"Anyone who keeps plungin' ahead without rest eventually falls on their face...Not that we can get that through to her, though..."

Her quiet confession resonated in the office as Finn and Riveria nodded in silent agreement.

The second hand on the big grandfather clock that Loki had bought on a whim ticked audibly. Finally, Riveria spoke up.

"What is Aiz doing?"

Loki just shrugged and smiled wryly.

"Dungeon, what else? Gareth's taking care of her."



"Gishaaaaaaaa?!"

A monster howled its dying cry as a single slash of a sword sliced into it.

Without waiting for the purple moth's severed body and wings to hit the floor, Aiz landed and charged on to the next prey.

"—I"

"Gegaaah?!"

The sword's edge neatly ran through the gap in the killer ant's exoskeleton. She struck it at one of the few joints in its carapace. A spray of blood gushed from the giant ant monster's soft interior. As it faltered, she landed a second strike, effortlessly slaying it.

"Aiz, don't be so reckless! Come back for a moment!"

"I can keep going!"

Ignoring Gareth as he defeated a monster to the side, Aiz advanced, her long golden hair fluttering in the air.

The armor she had equipped was a prum armor dress, a grade above the Guild-provided gear she used to wear. The sword she held was a steel shortsword purchased from a weapons store. The former had been modified to match Loki's tastes; the latter Gareth had given to her after using his judgment to pick it out. Armed with those two items, Aiz dove straight into the swarm of monsters. The way she used her small body to close the distance and gain the upper hand against them was reminiscent of a quadruped on the prowl.

Her movements had become unimaginably polished in half a year. It was almost unrecognizable compared to when she used to rely on only brute force and overkilling things left and right. She cut down on the unnecessary movements and power, using her speed and precision to take out the monsters. Using the information she had learned about her enemies, she hit their weak point with greater precision than ever: Since her current targets didn't have a proper head, she simply sliced into the magic stone in their chests.

It was all the product of their lessons. Aiz was gradually developing her own

fighting style: a preemptive frontal charge coupled with speedy slashes. However, that gave them one more thing to worry about.

"Her defense is all over the place...Sheesh, she's really only thinkin' about defeating them."

A killer ant's counterattack cut her cheek, but Aiz paid it no heed as she thrust her sword in retaliation. The leather and white metal plates of her armor dress bore countless nicks and scratches from monster claws and teeth. By accepting that damage, though, Aiz was able to unleash twice as many attacks of her own.

She despised defense and disregarded it because she considered it inefficient. Gareth was left troubled as he watched her fight unfold.

Coincidentally, at the same time as Riveria and the others were worrying about her, the girl was ignoring the pain and simply continuing to swing her sword.

"Ngh...!"

"Good grief, you've destroyed another weapon."

Right as the last monster hit the ground, her steel sword cracked before shattering into pieces. Aiz's muted expression shifted, her eyebrows scrunching a bit. Gareth groaned.

"Aiz, you need to account for your own body and take better care of it. Eventually, the bill comes due."

"...I can win against the monsters. It's fine."

"I'm not talkin' about winnin' and losin' here..."

Aiz turned away, wiping the blood dripping down her cheek. Gareth could only sigh. But he declined to push any further as he collected the magic stones and drop items.

Among the three of them, Aiz preferred Gareth's company to the rest.

They hadn't yet known each other half a year, but the things he taught her were more exciting than the subjects of Finn's lessons and simpler than Riveria's. But more than anything, he did not talk much. She had made becoming strong her ultimate goal, after all, so she was grateful for that.

The dwarf warrior's line of thought appeared to be that pain was just another experience Aiz could benefit from, so he wasn't as fussy as Riveria. And it was so much less stressful for her because of that. Riveria had been scolding her more often lately—and Aiz was rebelling against it—so this was a way for her to maintain her emotional equilibrium.

"Let youngsters make mistakes. And then have them learn from them."

Aiz did not grasp the true meaning behind Gareth's words, but she interpreted it conveniently for herself.

"Gareth, just a little more..."

"No can do; we're headin' back."

He was not going to let her force the matter further.

Cut off before she could even finish, she gave a look of dissatisfaction that only the four of them had seen.

"Unbelievable, breaking swords after only a couple of swings...Look, this is the last one I've got."

Pulling double duty as a supporter, Gareth handed her a spare sword. It was her third one on this trip alone. He grumbled about getting too much practice finding cheap weapons from no-name weapons shops as he handed her a potion, too.

They were on the seventh floor.

Currently, they were holed up in a room that dead-ended off the main route.

Under Gareth's instructions, Aiz had stopped actively hunting monsters and was in the process of reluctantly heading back when she suddenly changed her mind and her expression along with it. The stench of monsters pervaded the passage, which stirred up her desire to battle and to kill.

Aiz was already rather muted, but when she was in the Dungeon, she seemed entirely emotionless. She just kept slaughtering monsters with a frozen expression.

The Doll Princess.

Even when a monster's blood splashed across her face, her expression did not change in the slightest. The other adventurers had given her the nickname half in fear, half in scorn as she continued to do nothing but hunt monsters. In this half a year, the newest member of *Loki Familia* had shaved away at her emotions until there was nothing left in her quest to wipe out all the monsters. She had become something of a legend around the Guild and among the lower-class adventurers. At the same time, though, she was the obvious candidate for super rookie of the year.

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"Gareth."
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"What?"

"The armor...is getting...tight..."

"Huh, already? No, I suppose around your age is when humans start to mature. We just got it fitted, though. Hmm, I guess we should get it changed."

"I want a custom...weapon, too. One that won't break."

"The little newbie's tryin' to make a joke. Learn how to not break your weapons first."

"...Then let me go to the tenth floor next time."

"That's not happening."

"...Why? I already went there twice before..."

"I heard you got full of yourself and nearly let an orc murder you. You've gotta get permission from Riveria and Finn first."

"..."

On the way back, she verbally sparred with Gareth. He would not go along with what she really wanted, though, and her frustrations showed even more clearly on her face.

Feeling more and more constricted by the limitations placed on her lately, Aiz was turning into a big ball of rebelliousness. It wasn't quite bad enough to call a temper tantrum, but she was visibly sullen and unhappy.

She seems to act like the young girl she is around the four of us,

though...Gareth observed. That Doll Princess nickname aside, her rebelliousness ain't much different from when we first met her...Though lately she's been looking especially haggard...

Watching her from a step back, he felt that despite the muscles she had developed, her arms and legs were scrawny.

"Uwaaaaaaaa!"

All of a sudden, several screams erupted from somewhere up ahead.

Aiz sprang into action fast enough to give anyone watching whiplash as she rushed toward the source of the screams. She arrived at the path that connected to the sixth floor above.

"Gaaah?! Damn it! Don't screw with me!"

"There's too many of them!"

"Someone heeelp!"

A swarm of killer ants was gathering around a handful of parties with different emblems. The lower-class adventurers were having a rough time, since a swarm that size was rarely encountered on the upper levels.

"A swarm of killer ants! Some adventurer messed up and pulled a pass parade?!"

A first-tier adventurer, Gareth could immediately tell what had happened. A killer ant had gotten wounded, panicked, and released pheromones to call for reinforcements. An adventurer's failure to finish the job had escalated into the situation before them.

The pass parade had occurred on the main path and managed to block off the connecting path, leaving them no way to escape. Seeing the agitated monsters, Gareth nearly joined the fray, but then— "——!"

Aiz dove in headlong without analyzing the situation at all.

"Wait! Aiz!"

Gareth's attempt to stop her fell on deaf ears, drowned out by the cries of the killer ants.

With the adventurers' plight as an excuse, she broke past the limits that Riveria and the others had told her to maintain. Unleashing the full force of her Status, the girl transformed into an angel of destruction. Her face emotionless, her golden eyes filled with an overwhelming desire to kill, she swung her sword like the God of Death's scythe.

"Th-that's Loki Familia's..."

"Golden hair, golden eyes...No mistaking it..."

"Uwah..."

Even as their claws lashed at her, wounded her, drew blood, she slaughtered monster after monster. The adventurers who had asked for help paled, speechless as they watched her fight.

The monsters screeched as shattered exoskeletons burst in the air and severed limbs and heads soared across the passage.

In the midst of the feral attacks, her fierce sword techniques exterminated the swarm of killer ants one by one.

"...A killing doll."

"Doll Princess...No, War Princess."

Someone mumbled as the monsters' blood and lamentations alike disappeared into the battlefield.

Gareth stood by himself, silent, watching the murderous scene that left no room for him to intervene.

"...Done."

Finally, the mountain of corpses was complete.

Standing in the center of the beasts' grave was a bloodstained golden-haired, golden-eyed girl.

The silent corner of the Dungeon was painted red. Since it was along the main route, a great many people witnessed it.

The adventurers were frozen in place, having caught a glimpse and sensed a portion of the girl's madness.

Before their eyes, the girl, covered in wounds, looked up at the ceiling in the labyrinth with no sky.

Finally, cracks ran along her sword, and it shattered into shards like silver raindrops.



"I want a sturdier sword."

Expressionless, Aiz made her demand in a sharp voice.

"Those are the first words out of your mouth right after you come back?"

Riveria massaged her brow, as if trying to soothe a headache.

The office had become a lecture hall. After returning from the Dungeon, Aiz was immediately called in. Even if she hid the wounds using a potion, the stains from all the blood splattered across her armor couldn't be scrubbed away. The elf was furious after hearing the gist of things from Gareth.

That said, Gareth himself seemed unconcerned.

"Aiz, that's enough! Your behavior has been intolerable lately!"

"No...it isn't. I do my studies. I listen to what Gareth and Finn say, too."

"That's not what I'm talking about! You need to take better care of yourself!"

"More importantly, my sword—"

"What do you mean, 'more importantly'?! You think I'll let that slide? Fool!"

It's started again. Gareth looked worn out. Reaching a stopping point in his paperwork, Finn looked on with his now well-practiced wry smile. Loki was away dealing with another issue as Riveria's scolding heated up.

"Don't think it's fine just because you're improving! This is exactly how adventurers who haven't properly developed their abilities get themselves killed! And you went and used your Skill despite what we said! Even after we told you so often not to rely on it and use your normal Status to fight!"

"...Stupid elf."

"What?!"

"Calm down, Riveria."

Gareth tried to soothe Riveria after Aiz's absentmindedly whispered response. The high elf winced as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, they were full of hurt.

"...And you've been so focused on training that you haven't been eating properly."

Riveria took Aiz's right arm.

Even taking into account her young age, it was far too scrawny. There was no extraneous flesh at all. Only refined muscle, skin, and bones. Almost swordlike in the way it had been honed for a single goal. Her once beautiful golden hair was in similarly terrible shape.

Aiz was spending literally all her time training. She ate the minimal amount of food required to sustain herself, angled for any chance to steal a moment with Finn or Gareth for a mock battle, and spent all her free time practicing sword swings. Given how early she got up, she was probably losing sleep. She had probably accumulated a tremendous deal of fatigue.

Aiz pulled her arm away from Riveria, an awkward look on her face.

That face had become hollow as well.

Or rather—it had been sharpened.

To a dangerous extent.

Her battered body had definitely gotten stronger, increasing the power she could call upon.

But at this rate, it was almost as if—

"I can fight. So it's okay. More importantly..."

More importantly.

Aiz didn't notice that the moment she said it, Riveria's face contorted in anguish. Her eyes filled with sadness.

Only Finn and Gareth noticed their friend's response.

"I want a weapon that won't break. A weapon that can fight more."

Stepping away from Riveria, Aiz settled her gaze onto Finn, the captain.

He glanced over at Gareth, standing behind the girl. The dwarf was holding the shortsword that had broken in the last fight.

"If money is the problem...I have enough, right? Use all of it...if you need to."

All the things she had gotten from the monsters she defeated were exchanged for money, which was deposited in her savings. Riveria was managing it, though the payments for her items and weapons were deducted accordingly. Even accounting for the necessary costs, Aiz had managed to kill over three thousand in the past six months, so if she used all her savings, it was more than likely she'd get a fairly good weapon. She was sure of that.

However.

"Aiz...I'm in agreement with Riveria. We can't give you a strong weapon when you're in this state."

Finn flatly rejected her request. Glancing back to Aiz, he continued.

"Even if we ignore your current condition, you've gotten so focused on your goal that you can't even notice when the people right in front of you are worried."

Riveria quickly looked away from Aiz.

Aiz did not understand what it meant, but she was also too worked up to think it over.

Why don't they get it? They know how hard I'm working to fulfill my wish. Those were the sorts of thoughts swirling in her heart.

Aiz gritted her teeth, her shoulders quivering, before finally dashing out of the office.

"Oi, Aiz!...Haaah, good grief."

Gareth stroked his beard as she disappeared down the hall.

Back in the office, Riveria bent over, looking down helplessly to avoid meeting Finn's eyes.

"...What was it they said in the Far East at times like this?"

"Ah, I remember that."

Finn's and Gareth's voices hung in the silent room, exchanging glances as they held back a sigh.

"No child knows how dear she is to her parents."

Aiz ran away from the manor via a back door.

A swirl of wildly different emotions crossed her doll-like face as she pumped her arms, trying to escape. She was not just running away, though. She had a goal in mind.

She was headed for Northwest Main Street, also known as Adventurers Way.

I'll find one myself!

An angry glare rising on her face, she let out the full torrent of discontent she had built up at their stubbornness.

Since it had come to this, she decided to find a sword that met her standards on her own.

At this point in time, Aiz was famous, often called the Doll, but she also had some simplistic views and a naughty streak that befit her age. It was particularly striking when she was dealing with Riveria and the others, and how much she despaired when she felt they had abandoned her. It could even be called sulking. The truth was that she had already run away from home like this several times before.

And as per usual, Aiz had set off based purely on emotion.

Requesting a made-to-order weapon from a smithing familia would be best, but...

Perhaps because of her childish nature, Aiz had pressed her face to a certain weapons shop's show window on more than one occasion, staring at the wares on display. But she had also been stunned at the sight of more than seven zeros lined up on the price tags before.

More than anything, though, she did not have any connections with a smithing familia. It was entirely unrealistic.

I guess I have to look for a weapons shop...

The next best alternative was searching for a hidden gem.

Aiz was not a connoisseur, but in the past half a year, she had at least learned which weapons cut well and had good durability. Being able to find a weapon that suited its owner was a crucial skill for adventurers.

Northwest Main Street was a major spot for businesses catering to adventurers. As would be expected of a place called "Adventurers Way," there were countless different specialty shops marketed toward adventurers lining the street. And of course, that included weapons shops.

As for payment, the adventurers' shops would generally be willing to accept a commission if someone showed a familia emblem. Doubly so in her case, since she had the *Loki Familia* emblem. She could arrange the payment from her savings once she had her hands on a sword.

—Think about it later. At that point, Aiz seemed to realize she was no different from a child who insisted on having a certain toy. Bending her values to suit her goal, the seven-year-old girl wanted something special for herself, even if her time as an adventurer influenced what that something would be.

Irritated with the adults who would not let her have her way, she kept rushing ahead without thought.

"...Rain?"

The drops began falling at the worst possible time.

The gray clouds filling the sky had brought a heavy downpour to the city. Normally, Aiz was indifferent to getting drenched, but when the rain started to blow horizontally, even she faltered.

Bedraggled and weather-beaten, she paused her search and fled into the nearest building.

She glared up at the sky, water dripping from her hair, clearly uncomfortable in her soaked clothes.

"—Waaah. Man, I'm beat! I could see it was gonna rain, but who knew it'd be this bad?!"

A woman entered the building that Aiz had taken shelter in.

She had a dark complexion and short black hair. Her body was curvaceous in a way that a childlike Aiz could not begin to match, and her voluptuous breasts were just peeking out from her top as she started to undress.

"I have to meet up with the goddess, too...What a disaster."

But most distinctive of all was the jet-black eye patch over her left eye.

Human...No, a half?

As Aiz focused on her, struggling to determine her race from those characteristics and the general mood about her, the woman wringing out her top finally noticed the girl.

"Oops, someone was already here, huh? And such a cute little girl to boot. Sorry you have to see me like this. You were so small, I didn't notice you!"

"...I'm not small."

The woman was stripping down to just her bra without shame and laughing teasingly. Aiz unconsciously reacted to her bluntness and objected despite only just meeting her.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry!" The woman laughed before squinting her right eye, examining the girl. Aiz was just starting to scowl back when the woman's face lit up.

"Golden hair, golden eyes, and an impertinent, surly look. Would you by any chance be the little girl in Gareth's familia?"

"ļ"

Aiz's eyes opened in surprise.

"You know Gareth?"

"Of course. I've contracted with him. I see; I see. You're the Aiz Wallenstein he mentioned..."

After convincing herself of the young girl's identity, she offered her name.

"I go by Tsubaki. Hephaistos Familia blacksmith."

Aiz was stunned again at the name she spoke—not Tsubaki but that of the familia she belonged to.

"Oh, I've heard stories about you and your rampages, massacring a swarm of monsters. You're called the Doll Princess, aren't you? Ha-ha-ha, you are certainly as pretty as a doll, but—"

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"Please!"
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"Hmm?"

Aiz interjected as Tsubaki stroked her chin. She had a request for the bemused blacksmith.

"I'd like you to make a sword for me!"

Hephaistos Familia was the biggest blacksmithing group in the Labyrinth City at the moment. Their name was known around the world. Even someone as oblivious as Aiz recognized the "H $\phi\alpha$ Io τ o ς logo. If she could get a member of that famous smithing familia to make a sword for her, then...

Aiz looked at her with hopeful eyes.

"Hrmph..."

In response, Tsubaki squinted her right eye.

"Why do you want me to make you something?"

"Because I think you must be an amazing blacksmith...!"

"Why do you want a sword?"

"The swords I use...all break...so I want a sword that won't...!"

Aiz did not notice Tsubaki's gaze as she stumbled over her words, looking for how to respond.

Her gaze swept over the girl's body. Scrawny limbs, bruised skin, unkempt hair.

"If you got a sword, what would you do?"

"—I want to become strong."

Finally, her right eye met the dark flame in Aiz's grim, golden eyes.

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After a moment's pause, Tsubaki smiled.
  "I refuse."
 When Aiz was visibly shocked, she elaborated.
  "I have no intention of giving you a weapon."
  "Why?!"
  "I'm not interested."
  "Wh—?"
  "No, 'I can't stomach the thought' might be a better way to put it. Either way,
give up. Craftsmen are the kind of people who won't budge if they're not
interested. Myself included."
 Aiz was about to argue more with Tsubaki, since she was being so vague
about why she was turning down the request, but then the smith responded.
  "Besides...'I want a sword that won't break'? What a strange thing to say."
 Time froze when she heard the next words out of Tsubaki's mouth.
  "If you want a sword that's not broken yet, there's one right there, isn't
there?"
 Tsubaki pointed straight at Aiz.
  "Fh..."
 The girl could not move.
  Her outstretched finger was definitely pointing at Aiz.
  What is she saying?
 At the moment, Aiz was not even wearing a sword belt, let alone a sword.
 A sword...Where...?
  No.
  What she is pointing at.
  What she is looking at is—
```

-me?

The moment Aiz instinctively realized it, the woman narrowed her eyes and curled her lips. To Aiz in the moment, the smile looked like a mockery.

"Oh, the rain stopped."

Aiz was frozen stiff, but Tsubaki ignored her and cheered the rain passing.

"Well then, little girl. If you want a weapon, look elsewhere."

She parted with those words.

The wound remained in Aiz's heart, as if a sharpened blade had stabbed her.

A sword that hasn't broken yet?

A sword that will someday break?

Me...a sword...?

Even after Tsubaki left, Aiz could not move from that spot.



"Oh, ye finally came back!"

The sky was shrouded in darkness.

Gareth breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Aiz approaching the manor, hanging her head.

"Where'd you go, lass? I was just lookin' for you with Riveria."

"…"

"We were getting worried...Aiz?"

Noticing her unusual behavior, Gareth changed his tone as he called out to her. Her shoulders jumped. She lifted her face and finally noticed Gareth was there.

"Gar...eth..."

"Did something happen?"

"...I met a person with an eye patch...Tsubaki..."

"What? What about Tsubaki?"

Watching Aiz sluggishly nod, Gareth furrowed his brow as if sensing what had

happened.

"Did she tell you something?"

"…"

He waited patiently without speaking, and finally the young girl explained in her small voice.

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"She...I'm...a sword..."
"..."
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"I'm a sword...That's what she said..."

Even as she was speaking, Aiz could not understand why she had been so stricken by it.

But that gaze and the smile she saw at the time were still etched into her brain. Those words had struck her at her core.

I'm a sword?

Not a person, a weapon?

A sword that would someday break? Destined to be destroyed?

All of a sudden, Aiz did not know what she was anymore. She lost sight of herself. Those simple words of Tsubaki's—the assessment she could not deny—had shaken her.

Her heart raced to an uneasy beat.

Aiz didn't want to look in a mirror. She was afraid she might not see herself in the reflection. She might see something else entirely.

"Oof, Tsubaki...Ye sure opened a big can of worms."

Seeing Aiz in this state, Gareth breathed his biggest sigh of the day. He had forged a direct contract with the smithing specialist and he knew her personality all too well, which was why he directed an extra-large complaint her way.

Gareth called out to the still-soaked girl.

"Aiz, after you warm up in the bath, come to my room."

"...Eh?"

"I'll talk to Riveria and Finn for you."

Gareth left Aiz with that as she looked up to see him lumbering back to the manor.

Aiz just stood there for a minute before slowly dragging herself to the bath to get rid of the chill like he suggested. After steadily warming herself up, she changed into the dressing gown that had been prepared for her at some point. She wandered hesitantly for a bit before heading to Gareth's room.

Her destination was directly beneath Finn's office, at the north end of the collection of spires that formed the manor.

"Aye, so ye came?"

Aiz thought the room was the exact opposite of Riveria's.

Axes and greatswords and other large weapons and shields were everywhere, giving it a vaguely rustic feel. In the corner was a sooty treasure chest that showed its age, drawing the eye. There was a large desk, shortened to suit a dwarf, and a collection of tools that appeared to be for tinkering with things was laid out across it. There was a large collection of documents as well, though not as many as Riveria had. Instead of magic-stone lamps, there was a lantern that looked like it burned coal.

In the middle of the room, Gareth was sitting on his bed. His ax, what looked like Aiz's shortsword, a hand towel and some wool, some knives and other tools were all spread across a sheet atop the bed as well.

"Gareth, that's..."

"Aye. I'm going to teach you how to maintain your weapons."

Aiz blinked over and over at his sudden declaration.

Not minding her reaction, Gareth beckoned to her. "Come on—over here."

Bewildered, Aiz did as he said and sat on the bed with him. She watched him as he sat at ease, rummaging through the sparkling tools before suddenly pushing her sword and a cloth into her hands.

"Try to do it just like I tell you. First, run it along the core of the blade..."

"L-like this?"

Following his instructions, she began the weapon's maintenance. Aiz grew flustered when she couldn't emulate Gareth's movements the way she intended; it forced her to acknowledge once again just how unskilled she was. Still, she did not have anything else to do at the moment, so she silently focused on her work.

After Gareth taught her what to do, he returned to wiping down his own weapon. When Aiz made a mistake or did not know what to do next, he would wrap his large hand around hers and tell her, "Like this," explaining it in a few words.

She had thought he always sounded so exciting, but the way he put his hands on hers was soft and kind.

It was difficult to describe the mood as the time passed. The dwarf fell silent as the two of them continued to polish their weapons together.

If she'd had a grandfather...it probably would have felt like this.

As something whispered in the recesses of her heart...

"Aiz, ye see...you have to take care of your weapons like this."

Gareth broke his silence.

"...?"

"If you leave them soaking in monster blood, they'll rust. If even a speck of dust sticks to them, the edges will grow dull. Weapons seem sturdy, but the reality is that they're delicate things."

"…"

"There's a saying. 'Weapons are an extension of their wielder.' We have to take care of them as parts of ourselves."

"That's...What?"

Without raising his face, still focused on his ax, Gareth narrowed his eyes.

"It's the same for adventurers."

"|"

Aiz opened her eyes wide at those words.

"Look at the sword in your hands. It's the weapon you were using today. It's covered in wounds...just like you right now."

"...!"

"That's what Tsubaki meant."

The rusted shortsword in her hands exemplified the truth that Aiz had refused to recognize.

Just like Gareth said, the sword was damaged all over. She looked at all the nicks left on it. This *extension* of Aiz was crying out in pain right now.

She saw her scrawny arms, scarred skin, and damaged hair reflected in the steel blade.

Afterword

This is the side story's ninth book, which takes place behind the scenes of the events in the main series' eighth book.

In terms of organization, unfortunately, the present-day segments have a bit of a feeling of skipping around, but if you read the main series' eighth book, I believe you will enjoy them even more.

With this book, part two is now complete.

Unlike part one, which featured the so-called strongest faction as they took on the Dungeon and all their various efforts, part two is mainly about shining a light on the main characters and their pasts. Since I wanted the final story to go to the main protagonist of the side story, allow me to finish this part here. (Though there are still characters here and there who I haven't covered yet.)

Personally, I'm always unsure how much of the side story's protagonist's backstory to reveal in the main series and how much to leave for this series. However, this time, as I was sketching it out, that past, or perhaps more so her bond with her familia, turned into the main topic of the story.

The frivolous goddess, the prum watching over her from a step removed, the heroic dwarf with his grandfatherly smile...and the high elf best described as her second mother. I think the collection of characters around the protagonist managed to make the main series' story much more vibrant.

In particular, the conflicted high elf really carried the story for me when I wasn't sure I could put it all into words. When she said "I love you," I was honestly surprised. I'm truly sorry for setting your character to be unmarried. In any case, it would be nice if there was another opportunity to write more episodes in the past where the protagonist and high elf show more emotion and are constantly bickering.

I'd like to move on to my thanks.

To my editor Takahashi, chief editor Kitamura, thank you for supporting me when I hit the brakes right before the goal. To Kiyotaka Haimura, who gave the protagonist a different sort of cuteness in her past arc and as a village girl, my deep gratitude for providing such wonderful art despite the dreadful schedule the author stuck him with. To everyone who helped make this book happen, I extend my thanks. And also to all the readers, thank you for picking up my book.

Until the next book,

Thank you very much.

All the best.

Fujino Omori

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