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4

DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

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Chapter 1: A New Story Unfolds in Laoravia

I swore something?

What did I swear again?

Slowly, I opened my eyes and sat up. My head felt heavy as I scanned the room.

“Where am I?”

It was no place I recognized. The wooden room was cramped, with the bare minimum in the way of furnishings. There was one wide-open window, through which a cool breeze was blowing. The room was modest, sure, but it was relaxing too.

There was one other man in the room. He bore sharp features, and he was seated in a chair that constituted one of the very few pieces of furniture. From what I remembered, his name was...*Palinchron*.

Ah, right. It's Palinchron Legacy. I owe this man my life!

Upon seeing me rise from my sleep, he closed the book he was holding, patting me amicably on the shoulder.

“Oh? You're up now, are you, Kanami? Good timing. Your sister just woke up too. I'll take ya over to her.”

With that, he exited the room. I got down from the bed and made to follow him. Then, my body stiffened. It was an unpleasant sensation.

Something's off.

It was like my wires were crossed. Like the limbs on my doll had been swapped around. But accompanying that pall of unease was a distinctly refreshing sense of *liberation*. I could practically feel the breeze through the gaping hole that had been opened up in my heart. I had a hunch that I was misconstruing something important—that I'd forgotten something essential. But I also got the sense that I had that very fact to thank for feeling so light on

my feet. It was a weird sensation.

“Kanami! Would you come already?!”

At his urging, that sensation dissipated. I could hardly keep the man to whom I owed so much waiting, so I chose not to brood over it.

“Ah, my bad, Palinchron! I’m coming!” I said, exiting out the door myself.

When my eyes met the hallway, I remembered where I was—the headquarters of the guild called Epic Seeker. The room I had just been in was a guild medical office, where I’d been getting some rest. It boggled my mind that I could have failed to realize it the second I got up, but no amount of standing there puzzling over it would do me any good. After all, Palinchron was walking in the distance, and if I didn’t catch up, I was fairly sure he’d just leave me in the dust without mercy. So I quickly marched down this hallway, which I knew I was supposed to be familiar with, but felt totally new to me.

As I walked, I realized that I wasn’t operating at a hundred percent. I felt languid, as though I’d been asleep for days and days...and I was in a trancelike state of mind, like I was treading on air. I could even truthfully say that I still felt like I was in a dream. I kept shaking my head as I followed in Palinchron’s wake.

After climbing some stairs, I made it to the threshold of a certain room. Palinchron was standing in front of the entrance, beckoning me inside. I opened the door to find a chamber far more spacious than that medical office. At a glance, it was around five times bigger. Several bookshelves lined the wall, lending the room an intellectual air. On the far opposite side lay one large bed. Atop it sat a young girl with black hair. She was staring out the window, through the swaying curtains.

Ah, of course. This girl is the girl I swore to...

“Your sister, Mar-Mar, is also doing good,” came Palinchron’s voice from behind me. “Bet you’re relieved, huh, Kanami?”

My...sister? Yes, yes of course. This black-haired girl is my little sister. The most important person to me. I have to protect her even if it costs me my life. The sister who our dearly departed mother entrusted to me. And her name... Her name’s Maria.

“Uh, yeah...I’m so relieved that Maria’s safe and sound too.”

For some reason, saying the name *Maria* sent a shooting pain through my head.

“Yep, the fire was pretty big, but we’re okay. In fact, it seems not one person got hurt.”

As he spoke, I gradually snapped out of my half-slumber more and more. *That’s right. Palinchron saved Maria and me from that fire.*

I was slipping out of my trance, the memories coming back to me. One after the other, my misadventures in this fantasy world surged back into my mind. This was the second time Palinchron had saved me. When the two of us had first stumbled into this unfamiliar world, he had been there to save us from the perils of the Dungeon. That was the first time. The second time was when he had rescued us from the great big fire in town. I could remember seeing my house burning to the ground. That memory alone, I remembered vividly.

I was surprised, however, to hear that no one had gotten hurt. I could have sworn that the fire had yielded one or two casualties.

“Kanami? You’ve come to see me?” She looked my way.

“Yep, it’s me. You seem like you’re already over it, Maria.”

“I guess you could say that, but...”

As we conversed, a sense of relief so deep that it was almost strange enveloped me.

“Got any injuries?”

“No, no injuries, but...” She put a hand to her head. “For some reason, my head hurts.”

That was nothing out of the ordinary for her. Ever since she was young, her body had been frail, and she had spent many a day in the hospital. That hadn’t improved once she’d come to this world. In fact, the sudden change in environment may have made it even worse.

Just then, I noticed the accessory she was wearing on her arm. It was the bangle that Palinchron had given her in order to mitigate all the inconveniences

she would've faced as an outworlder. As long as we had our bangles on, we could conform to the environments this world threw at us, and we'd have no trouble following the language either. Apparently, my bangle also worked to stabilize my magic energy, which had a tendency to flare up wildly.

We had asked Palinchron how much our two bangles had cost, but he never said. They couldn't have been cheap, that was for sure. And there was yet more that we owed him for. Maria's eyes were artificial. As she had lost them in the fire, our host had prepared a pair for her. I could tell at a glance how expensive they must have been, considering their sheer perfection.

I've gotta keep doing my best if I ever want to repay Palinchron for his kindness. I was thinking that as I stroked Maria's head and laid her down. "If your head's hurting, you can rest a bit longer."

"Okay. Thank you very much, Kanami."

She blushed and let herself be laid down. As one might expect, she wasn't feeling so great after all. In fact, it looked to me like she was running a fever. She had always had a chronic tendency to develop fevers.

I gripped her hand out of worry until Palinchron interrupted from behind.

"Mind leaving your heartwarming sibling reunion at that? We've got a ton of things to do today."

"Things to do? Sorry, Palinchron, remind me: what are we doing today?"

"Today's the day you're set to enroll in Epic Seeker. You know, your guild? That fire almost made us forget, but since you appear to be fit as a fiddle, we'll do it as planned."

"Oh, right, I forgot."

I remembered now. I needed to cover the costs of Maria's medical expenses, so I had to make money. Enter Palinchron, who had referred me to this guild hustle a little while ago.

Epic Seeker was a guild officially recognized by the government of Laoravia, one of the nations within the Dungeon Alliance. And given my skills, I had the chops to work as one of their number, or so I was told.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Maria. “You’re going to be joining the guild.”

“You bet,” said Palinchron. “You two rascals do need to earn some money while you’re in this world. And I figured the best way to do that is for you to become part of my guild. Not only will you rake in some decent scratch, you’ll also gain connections. And best of all, you’ll be under Laoravia’s protection, which is a sweet deal for you two. It’s the ideal setup to get Mar-Mar the care she needs at the pace she needs, wouldn’t you say?”

As far as gigs went, it was perfect. “Thank you, Palinchron. Thanks to you, we can make a living in this world.”

“Now, now, let’s not get assured of ourselves *too* quickly,” he replied. “We’ll be having you take the entrance exam. We won’t let you in sight unseen just ‘cause you’re you. If you don’t pass the test, there’s no deal.”

“That goes without saying. And you don’t have to spare me any sympathy when judging me either.” I couldn’t ask for better.

Palinchron grinned at how dripping with determination I sounded. “Over here.”

After bidding Maria goodbye, I followed after him so as to take the exam to be a part of Epic Seeker and obtain a place where we could eke out a life in this parallel world.



The walls were made of stone, and the ceiling was atrium-style. A circular space cut out from the surrounding area was blanketed by softish sand. This was the training grounds of Epic Seeker, and it was about the size of a school’s grounds. Around thirty individual members of the guild, male and female, young and old, were gathered there. Some were toting swords bigger than they were, while others were carrying staffs or wands and clad in old-fashioned robes.

I was being stared at by thirty gazes, in a cold sweat right next to Palinchron, who, after seeing that everybody was present and saying a few words of greeting, pushed me forward.

“All right, Kanami, introduce yourself.”

“Er, um, my name is Aikawa Kanami. I’m a Level 14 ice mage. And I use a sword too, I guess. It’s nice to meet you...” I said, speaking so that they could all hear me.

The guild members reacted in a variety of ways. Some listened earnestly, while others weren’t paying attention. That being said, a lot of faces lit up when I mentioned my level.

“Level 14, at your age? Looks like Palinchron’s nabbed us a capable kid again.”

“And he’s polite too,” said one of the women. “Not to mention handsome. The burn mark on his neck’s a bit of a shame, though.”

“A mage who uses a sword, huh? I dunno. He might be chasing two rabbits there.”

They were not shy about their appraisals, and that didn’t feel great. It was like I was a piece of meat on display, and I prayed for it to be over soon. As I scanned everyone’s reactions, I noticed someone reacting in a conspicuous and odd way. A girl with long hair as wavy as the sea was goggling at me. I could tell from the horns poking out of her pretty hair that she was a semifer. She also had a tail sticking out from under her thick, tribal-style garb, removing all doubt.

“Huh? Mr. Sieg?” she said as she stared at me with amazement, her mouth agape.

“Oh, you’re here too, Snow...” said Palinchron. “Sorry,” he added to me, “go greet the guild members.” Then he headed over to the semifer girl, whose name was evidently Snow, to talk to her. He was one of the guild’s top members, so perhaps he had some kind of message or information for her.

As I was watching Palinchron and Snow discuss something at length, one of the other guild members approached me. “Hey there, Kanami. It’s nice to meet you too.”

I couldn’t very well keep looking to the side now. I promptly replied, trying to make as good of an impression as possible. “Thank you. I look forward to working with you.”

The other guild members saw that as their cue to approach me as well.

“Hiya, Kanami,” said one woman. “My name is Tayly. I’m also a party leader.”

“Ah, don’t go stealing a march on me. Listen, boy, I’m gonna teach ya the sword later. Don’t waste your time with magic. Actually, just join my party while you’re at it.”

“Whoa there, stop tryin’ to wedge somebody with magic energy into your meathead mold...”

“Welcome, Kanami!”

A mage with a cheery expression, a giant swordsman, a young man with a bow at his back—they were dressed like the setup for some walks-into-a-bar joke. I mean, I’d known I was in a fantasy world, but when they sidled up this close, it was enough to give me a bit of a start.

“Aha ha,” I said, forcing a smile. “I look forward to working with all of you...” I was a tad worried that my face looked too stiff.

“All right, everybody; settle down,” said Palinchron, clapping his hands to attract their attention as he walked closer to me.

It seemed he had finished saying whatever he needed to say to the semifer named Snow. The girl had moved even farther away, and now she was sitting in the shade. I wanted to go greet her too if possible, and not just because she was so easy on the eyes. For some reason, I got the feeling that talking to her was important. Strangely enough, I could have sworn I had already met her someplace.

“Kanami’s entrance exam isn’t over yet,” Palinchron continued. “Don’t you think you’re being a little hasty, fellas?”

Now that he’d started talking about my test, all thoughts about the girl flew away and I focused my mind. For the sake of my little sister as well as myself, I couldn’t afford to fail.

“Oh c’mon, Palinchron,” said the giant swordsman. “None of the folks you’ve brought here have ever failed the test. Let’s just skip that fluff. Put him right in my party, would ya?”

Judging from where the man was standing and what he’d just said, I figured

he must bear a fairly high position. And the scars all over his body signaled that he was no pushover.

“We can’t know that for sure, can we?” answered Palinchron, never breaking his stride even as more heckling came his way. “In any case, I have an important announcement to make, so let’s pipe down for now.”

When I had first heard the guild was under direct government administration, I’d imagined a stuffier, more rigid atmosphere than this. The air here was very cozy.

“Whatever, just get it over with,” said a woman holding a staff as she smiled at me. “Just so you know, I’m taking him for *my* party.”

Palinchron ignored their bickering over whose party I’d be in. “I hate to break it to you, but Kanami’s not joining anybody’s party.”

At that, the guild members started talking among themselves with puzzled looks, and they all asked him to explain himself. Palinchron, however, did things at his own pace. When he replied, it was quite concise, and he explained his reasoning with relish.

“I’ll tell you why. It’s because Kanami’s gonna be Epic Seeker’s guildmaster.”

It took a beat for what he had said to sink in with the crowd. After a few seconds of silence, the training grounds were inundated by surprised outbursts. And the first to utter anything was me.

“Wait, what?!”

“Wait, hold up a sec,” said another guild member. “You’re taking the joke too far, Palinchron!”

“What in blazes?! What do ya mean he’s gonna be guildmaster?!”

I felt the same way. It sounded like nothing more than a bad prank to me. But Palinchron was as unruffled as ever.

“Kanami’s the *hero* handpicked by me and my fellow submaster, Rayle. Just as we planned from the outset, we’ll have a great hero of legend like Kanami take up the post at the very top of Epic Seeker.”

That was the second time he had definitively declared that he was aiming to

make me guildmaster. And to top it off, he had even cast me as a “great hero.” Talk about hyperbole.

“You outta your mind?” asked the giant swordsman, who stood at the head of the crowd, glaring at him.

When it was clear that Palinchron was not, in fact, joking, the air started to get chillier. The atmosphere was tense, and things threatened to break down at the drop of a pin.

“Kanami’s strong, and he’s got a winning personality. But more importantly, he’s got the qualities of a hero. As such, it’s only proper that we should make him guildmaster. If anybody’s got a problem with that, feel free to get flattened by the lad. ‘Cause instead of the entrance exam, we’re doing a round-robin tournament.”

Palinchron’s provocation only stirred more bloodlust in his audience. Every one of them glared white-hot daggers at us. I could scarcely handle the pressure these veterans and powerhouses were throwing at me.

“Palinchron, what’re you talking about?! Are you stupid or something?!”

Upon seeing me so confused and against the idea, a portion of the pressure died down.

One woman calmly took a step forward and offered her two cents. “I acknowledge his talents. I can tell just by looking at him that he’s competent. And I acknowledge that in the future, he may just stand above me. But to make him guildmaster from the jump is simply absurd, Palinchron.”

“There’s no way a guild that’s forced to work under a master who was thrust upon them will function properly...”

They must have concluded that if they let things come to a boil, a fight would break out, so they attempted to get Palinchron to change his mind with reason and logic. Reason and logic that Palinchron paid no heed to.

“Epic Seeker is always absurd and unreasonable. And I think you’ll all fall in line one way or another, seeing as Kanami’s the very person we’ve been so eagerly waiting for.”

He had no intention of backing down, and that was the spark that lit the powder keg. The whole lot of them made the preparations they needed to persuade him not with words but by force, gripping their respective weapons and taking a step forward as they shot him baleful stares.

“Don’t look at me that way. If any of you can manage to give Kanami a nick in the tournament that’ll be starting shortly, I’ll change my mind.”

“No taking that back.”

“Don’t look down on us!”

“If that boy winds up dead, it’s on you!”

They backed away from him as they issued their pointed remarks. Since they were each members of a larger organization, they didn’t defy Palinchron, who was above them in rank. But it was clear that they intended to vent their displeasure by means of the tournament. I had braced myself for a test, but I’d had no inkling that something like *this* would unfold.

“Hold on!” I said. “Wait, Palinchron, just hold on! I never agreed to this! They’re totally right. Me being made guildmaster from out of nowhere is ridiculous!”

“Wait, but didn’t you say you’d join the guild?”

“I mean, yeah, but as a normal member!”

“Well, I never said you’d be joining as a member. The whole time we were talking about it, I always meant to make you guildmaster.”

“Excuse me?! You... You tricked me!”

“Hey, don’t give people the wrong idea. I never lied to you...although people do call me a swindler all the time.”

Palinchron didn’t appear to mind being called a liar. He set about making the arrangements for the tournament as he fended off my attempts to talk him down, drawing lines in the sand with his scabbard and creating quick and simple field markers. When he finished, he turned to face me and pleaded with me, his expression the most earnest it had been that day.

“Please, Kanami. Please be guildmaster for me. The real stuff is yet to come.

This doesn't even register as a *trial* yet. Knowing you, I'm confident you can overcome hairier trials than this."

In the face of such earnestness, I had no words. I wanted to repay the debt I owed him in some form, and moreover, I couldn't refuse such a genuine request. All I could do was heave a sigh and nod reluctantly.

"All right, fine. I'll fight in the tournament...but when it's over, if the others aren't convinced, then please let the guildmaster thing go."

"Sounds good. Guess we've reached a compromise. But do me a favor: don't go easy on them."

"I don't want to insult them, so I won't hold back. For the most part..."

Upon my caving in, Palinchron went to the edge of the grounds and fetched me a blade that seemed to be for the purposes of training. He flung it at me and I caught it.

"*Wintermension*," I muttered.

I deployed the spell that was my specialty, then mustered my resolve and stepped onto the battlefield. The sight of the bulging veins on the foreheads of the guild members left me feeling dejected.

"Wish I could've gotten an office job...like filing documents or something," I grumbled as I unsheathed my sword, knowing that dream was not to be.



My first bout was against a hot-blooded female swordfighter. She was on the younger side compared to her fellow members.

"He doesn't warrant the party leader taking part," she told the hulking swordsman before joining me on the battlefield.

Using my menu-sight, I perused the rapier wielder's stats. She was at Level 12, and her sole skill was Swordplay. A pure swordfighter was no match for me.

As always, my abilities were practically cheating. I could only see the status menus of this world's living things, but even so, that gave me more than enough of an unfair advantage. Having ascertained the girl's strengths, I leisurely held my sword at the ready. If I wanted to, I could dispel all of my support magic and

she'd still pose no challenge for me. While she was at a level where her physical capabilities were relatively high, there was nothing about her that was particularly noteworthy.

"Right then: Battle 1," said Palinchron. "Start!"

At the signal, my opponent rushed me. "Raaaaaah!"

For the time being, I reckoned I'd keep to my promise—no holding back. First, I bumped the bottom of her sword's hilt with the bottom of mine to disarm her without wounding her hand. At the same time, I swept her legs and snatched her sword out of the air with my left hand before thrusting both blades right before her eyes as she lay on the ground. Checkmate. The chasm between our speed and dexterity was just too great. Taking her weapon from her had proved a breeze.

"Huh? Wait, what... What happened?"

"So, I win, right?" I asked Palinchron.

"Yep, that's a win in your column any way you slice it. Right then, neeext."

The guild members were now wearing grim expressions, and no one immediately volunteered. They'd borne witness to one facet of my power; they must have come to understand this would be no walk in the park.

Just thinking about the duels to come made me feel gloomy. I took the poor girl by the hand and helped her up. "You okay?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah. I'm fine," she replied, still in a daze as she let me pull her back to her feet. It must have finally sunk in that she'd lost. She stared at my face. "So this... This is the stuff of the 'hero' that Palinchron and Mr. Rayle chose?"

Her words had a bizarre zeal to them. A chill ran down my spine, so I used *Dimension: Calculash* to avoid her gaze. Then I hurried away from her. Since I wanted this tournament business over with quickly, I waited on the battlefield for the next challenger, who turned out to be another female fighter. In this world of levels and magic, there was no real difference between the strength of men and women when it came to fighting prowess. On the other hand, I did prefer male opponents—I couldn't help but find it difficult to point blades at

members of the opposite sex.

【STATUS】

NAME: Tayly Linkar

HP: 212/222

MP: 201/205

CLASS: Mage

LEVEL 19

STR 4.41

VIT 5.15

DEX 3.32

AGI 3.21

INT 7.21

MAG 11.09

APT 1.33

INNATE SKILLS: Wind Magic 1.67

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Magical Combat 1.12

Her menu and her outfit made it clear: I was fighting a trueborn mage now. Yet her physical capabilities were by no means inferior to the swordfighter I had fought before her. I didn't doubt that this Tayly person was a member of high standing in Epic Seeker. Presumably, after watching my fight with the rapier girl, the others had realized they couldn't hold back against me. With a few brief words, Ms. Tayly convinced her fellow challengers to let her take me on, and then she entered the proverbial ring.

I felt bad for her. Considering our stats, it'd be a miracle if she so much as touched me. What's more, a pure magic build was especially ineffective against me.

“Aaand,” said Palinchron, “start!”

I closed the distance between us. Naturally, Ms. Tayly, being a mage, tried to craft a spell and clinch the battle before I could get near her. But my *Wintermension* wouldn’t let that happen. The spell she formulated shifted askew, releasing nothing more than the most attenuated of winds.

“Huh?! My spell!”

I put my blade to her throat. “Er, do you still want to fight, or...?”

A pause. “I surrender,” she replied, a terribly grim look on her face.

The giant swordsman spoke to her as she left the arena. “Hey, what happened in there? You couldn’t use your magic?”

“He has powerful inhibitor magic. A second and it was over, so that’s all I know.”

The giant swordsman silenced the rest of the group with a few words before entering the makeshift arena. Just like Ms. Tayly, he clearly held a great amount of sway.

【STATUS】

NAME: Vohlzark Aldo

HP: 340/351

MP: 0/0

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 20

STR 10.40

VIT 5.85

DEX 8.26

AGI 10.31

INT 7.09

MAG 0.00

APT 1.12

INNATE SKILLS: Defiant 1.21

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.56

From the look of it, Mr. Vohlzark boasted the highest level among all the challengers. Inferring from the glances the people around him gave him, he was the most trusted of the long-serving veteran swordfighters, or of similar status. He radiated that sort of imposing air of dignity.

Mr. Vohlzark slung a strikingly huge longsword across his back and spoke to me. “Sorry, kid, but I’m going all out. I’ve got nothing against you personally. In fact, beating you will serve to teach ya a valuable lesson. The very idea of you becoming guildmaster so abruptly is bound to stoke resentment.”

Belying his scarred and colossal frame, his words were gentle and compassionate. His menu told me that his INT was on par with the mage I had just battled. I surmised he was a man of intellect.

“You’re a kind soul. Thank you, sir.” I bowed slightly. I was grateful toward him for showing so much consideration for the newbie who’d raised so many hackles.

Mr. Vohlzark heaved a sigh. “If it weren’t for how unreasonable that idiot submaster’s being, I’d be welcoming you with open arms,” he said as he closed the distance between us.

Palinchron took that as his cue. “Start!” he said gleefully.

At that, Mr. Vohlzark started running. He was faster than his hulking frame suggested. It felt like I was being rushed by some huge bull or bear. In a flash, he drew close, then swung his enormous sword at me from the side.

If I blocked his blow with the sword I was holding, my blade alone would break, so I distanced myself and evaded the attack by a nose.

“Tch! You won’t dodge this one!”

In order to break my sword, he swung his about like a raging storm. I could sense that on the whole, he wasn’t going easy on me. A direct hit would

instantly kill any normal person. Yet at the same time, I didn't sense a scrap of bloodlust from him. It seemed he was attacking me in this way because he'd concluded that I could take it. I could sense that this was the moment—if I sustained an “accidental” injury and ended this exam here and now, that'd suit me just fine.

Before we'd begun, I'd thought that against stalwarts who were so experienced, I'd at least get nicked at some point. But at this rate, I might actually end up actually beating them all without a scratch. I had shut down a top-class mage like Ms. Tayly completely, and the highest-level sword fighter had acknowledged my strength. That should be more than enough to prove I was qualified to at least join the guild as a normal member. Besides, at this rate, even if I entered the guild forcibly, it'd only incur their ire, which didn't help me going forward. I had done my duty toward Palinchron. So I chose the spell for the job.

“I'm going to add a little magic, if you don't mind. Spellcast: *Form*.”

“Tch.” But Mr. Vohlzark didn't flinch. He kept on attacking. “I'll smash right through your tricky nonsense!”

As I made the magic bubbles adhere to him, he increased his speed to greater heights and swung his sword. However, the bubbles transmitted the information regarding his sword's trajectory in more exact detail. There was no way his blade could ever hit me now. As I dodged his blows, I got a precise handle on his habits, allowing me to predict his movements. Using that information, I let his thunderous flurry of giant sword swings graze me lightly on the cheek. A thin bead of blood dripped down.

“Ah, you grazed me,” I said after promptly distancing myself. Palinchron had said that all they had to do was land a single hit.

But Mr. Vohlzark gritted his teeth in frustration, and after heaving a sigh, he replied, “No, don't count that ‘wound.’ Chalk it up as an unqualified loss for me.”

That was all he offered before unhurriedly leaving the battlefield. I could tell from his demeanor that he had realized I'd sustained the cut on purpose. I had done it that way to safeguard the man's pride, but I might have only damaged it

that much more gravely instead. I wanted him to forgive me, given that for the sake of my future livelihood, I could hardly afford to beat everybody so one-sidedly.

“Vohlzark acknowledged his defeat, so Kanami wins,” declared Palinchron delightedly.

“Palinchron!” I protested. “You said that if I sustained a single wound, it’d be over. So it’s—”

“That bastard! No wonder Palinchron was talking so big!” said one of the members, interrupting me.

The others piped up too. “Oh, this looks fun. I’m tryin’ my hand next!”

“Not before me!”

“The party leaders both lost, huh? How fascinating!”

For some reason, the crowd was getting fired up after the third battle. It could be the case that a lot of them were already the types who didn’t shy away from a fight. But it was more than that. There was an odd glint in their probing eyes.

Palinchron laughed. “They’re members of a guild. Fighting is their livelihood. There’s no way they’d let this end after one little nick! I just said that to rile ’em up.”

“Damn straight!” said one of many who echoed Palinchron’s sentiment. “Ya can’t end it now! I haven’t gotten a go yet!”

“Are you kidding, hon? That’s barely even a flesh wound,” said one woman. “As long as you can still fight, of course we’re going to do battle.”

“Yo, you fellas mind if I go next?”

My face stiffened. These people were chomping at the bit.

“Hold on a sec, ya galoots!” shouted Mr. Vohlzark. “Glenn’s sister! You go first!”

All eyes were immediately trained on the semifer girl. For a second, the grounds were silent. In that time, she gently shook her head.

“No, thank you. There’s no way I could possibly win.”

“Are you serious?” replied Mr. Vohlzark.

A pause. “Yes. I’m serious.”

“I see.” He took a spot and sat down. “Do as you please, people. I’ll be watching.”

Palinchron watched him with a smile. “Looks like we’ve got a party leader’s permission! Now then, shall we resume?!”

With that, the guild members started waiting their turns outside the battlefield.

“Wait, no, I’m fighting *everybody*?”

I had no choice. I’d be beating all of them while in a cold sweat.



In the end, I couldn’t throw any of my duels. Mr. Vohlzark’s sharp eyes were watching the entire time, and if I’d held back too clearly, Palinchron would have had something to say about it. All I could do was use loads of discretion in order to move this along without much fuss.

“All right, folks,” said Palinchron, “that’s a wrap for today. Now then, since none of you were able to beat him, it’s good and settled—Kanami *will* be the new guildmaster of Epic Seeker!”

I ended up defeating them all without taking almost any damage to speak of, so he declared me guildmaster without reservation.

“Hold on, Palinchron! Gimme another go at him! I feel like I might *touch* him this time!”

“No can do. It’s already dark out and time’s a finite resource. You’re all dismissed!”

A handful of them interjected, but Palinchron brought the tournament to a close anyway. Afterward, he communicated administrative information to them before the crowd finally broke up. The vast majority came up to me to have a few words before leaving the training grounds.

“Gotta say, Kanami, you really are silly strong,” said one man amicably. “Mind

dueling me again tomorrow?”

“Huh? Sure, sir, that’s fine.”

“You’re always so stiff and formal, Kanami. I don’t need ya speakin’ all polite to me.”

“Thanks...gotcha. From now on, I’ll speak casually.”

I sensed no particular dissatisfaction on his part about my becoming guildmaster. Maybe in the eyes of rough-and-tumble fighters or adventurers like him, strength was the deciding factor in whether they resisted somebody standing above them or not.

“Ah, kid,” said one mage with a smile, “teach me some magic later, okay?”

“Uh, okay, ma’am.”

Next, a middle-aged swordfighter slapped me on the shoulder. “Maybe your skills as guildmaster will come in time. Then again, I bet the folks around ya will help ya out, so don’t sweat it.”

I exhaled. “I’ll give it my all.”

Of course, not everyone was so obliging. Some also approached me with stern expressions.

“Listen here, chum, you haven’t earned my approval yet, got it?”

“Ah, yes, of course. I think that’s a perfectly natural reaction.”

“I’m gonna challenge ya another five times, so say your prayers.”

But before he left, the guy flashed me a smile. And here I’d thought I’d finally encountered somebody *normal*. Nope. Instead, it was the way a little kid reacted after finding a worthy rival.

Ultimately, while a variety of wry comments were made to me, almost no one came up to me to express blatant malice or spite. At the very least, this wasn’t the attitude one might expect them to show somebody who had waltzed right into the top spot of the organization from out of nowhere. I replied to them in turn with my forced smile, the alarming gap between them and normal people clear as day to me.

Once I was done speaking with the many members, the only ones left in the training grounds were Palinchron and the semifer girl, who was staring vacantly up at the dark night sky.

“Isn’t this...you know, weird?” I asked Palinchron right away.

“Things are looking up, huh, Kanami? You just got a huge promotion.”

“The personnel affairs of our organization frighten me,” I replied. “Not only that, but since they’re giving me such a warm welcome, I doubly can’t believe it.”

“Well, this is the one group where this kind of absurdity is tolerated. It’d never fly in any other guild.”

“I did reckon that any guild you’re in couldn’t be a run-of-the-mill organization, but how on earth...”

I still couldn’t believe it. I’d shown them how strong I was throughout the tournament, sure, but even so, what reason did they have to be so accepting? It was a phenomenon that would never occur in my world. Was it just the result of a difference in culture between my world and theirs? But even if their culture didn’t fuss over the little things and put stock solely in strength, their red-carpet welcome was still beyond the norm.

“It’s in the name: Epic Seeker. Our goal as a guild is to search for epics. For tales of derring-do.”

“So already, it’s not a normal guild.”

“Guilds that work under the government first need to decide on a plan of action that’s in service to the state in some way. One might, for example, seek to maintain public order in Laoravia. Another might try to acquire treasure for Laoravia or train promising new talent for the country. The policy of our guild is to find, quote, unquote, ‘heroes’ in service of Laoravia. Of course, thanks to that daft objective, only eccentrics gather under our banner. Then again, another reason for that is the fact that I basically do all the interviews.”

“Yeah, that *would* pull in lotsa weirdos.”

“The members of the guild may mouth off, but they’re all the kind of wide-

eyed dreamer wackos who are eagerly awaiting a swashbuckling, righteous hero type. That, coupled with Laoravia's belief in meritocracy, means no one's gonna speak ill of someone like you, who boasts such overwhelming strength. What happened today is this guild's *raison d'être*. And it was with an eye for this very day that I gathered the members I did. I pretty much needed it to go decently smoothly."

He seemed to be taking enjoyment in it. Some part of him was *proud*, not unlike a kid bragging about a cool toy of theirs. And I'd gotten a similar vibe from the guild members too. For better or worse, this guild's group was childlike overall.

"Be a hero for us, Kanami. You can make use of this organization. Let's get your name out there."

"Is that what you wish for?"

The ever-alooof Palinchron was now showing me a rare serious expression. "Hmm, my 'wish'? I guess if I had to call it something, I'd say it's my *pastime*. I wanna come face-to-face with a hero of legend. And I see one in you. There's the fact that you're an *outworlder*, but there's also the fact that you have heroic qualities, so I believe in you."

"You're expecting too much of me. I don't even know what I'm supposed to do to be a 'hero.'"

As far as I was concerned, "heroes" of that sort existed solely within fairy tales. In modern society, just about the only heroic figures people looked up to were sports stars. I didn't have a clear picture of what Palinchron and the rest meant by it.

"Oh, don't worry, the preparations have already been made. A big important personage in a big important country crafted some *fun* plans. And I do think I'll mimic it. From what I recall, the plan goes a little something like this: *After gladly taking the role of guildmaster,*" he said in theatrical tones, *"Kanami uses his unparalleled strength to break new ground in the Dungeon, extend the Pathway, and inherit the title of strongest diver from Glenn. At a later date, he'll take first place at the Brawl. After making his name known throughout the continent, he'll give folks a hand in various locales as a hero as he travels back*

to Laoravia, returning in triumph. When the time is ripe, he'll participate in the war in the north, the advent of the great and merciful hero, the living legend, to the front lines lauded by the supreme commanders fighting there. Yeah, that's the gist of it."

The plan was preposterous and idiotic. "Um, what? Count me out. Especially the war bit. No way in hell I'm having anything to do with a war!"

"Ha ha. I was mostly joking, laddie. I guess the only bit I'm not joking about was the Dungeon-clearing part. In the Dungeon, you won't face animosity from anybody, and you'll be able to get stronger at your own pace. And being strong's no detriment to you, for your sake and for your sister's."

"Well, I do plan on taking on the Dungeon, so that I'll do."

This world contained a labyrinthine entity known as the Dungeon. It was the type you saw all the time in video games—the deeper you go, the stronger the enemies. And that conveniently made it well suited to building up one's strength.

"If you've got any energy to spare, I'd like you to extend the Pathway as well. It'd be helping out Laoravia and the guild, among others. If that's too much, there's always vanquishing the Guardian of Floor 30. If you rack up glory and results for Epic Seeker, you'll hear no complaints from me."

"Sure, if I've got the energy. I do want to contribute to Laoravia in some way for taking me and Maria under its guardianship."

"Also, if you win the Brawl for us, that'd be another nice contribution. Laoravia's been lagging behind the other four countries for years and years now. Our hero activities across the lands and our supreme commander in the War in the North are *some* of the things we're laughed at for."

"You'd better be joking. I'm happy if I can just protect the little pocket of the world around me. I'd rather die than have to deal with conflicts between nations."

"Keh heh, is that right? Okay, I got the memo. Then again, everything I told you is nothing more than a plan. As things stand for you now, give learning the ropes of being guildmaster your undivided attention. And regarding the

Dungeon, don't think about extending the Pathway. You can just focus on getting stronger."

"Yeah. I'm not thrilled about the personnel affairs, but if I'm gonna be doing it, then I've gotta do it right and learn how to be a proper guildmaster. Otherwise, I wouldn't be doing right by its members..."

Palinchron's expression turned a tad serious. "Right. If you don't take over soon, it'll be too late."

"Too late? Ah, come to think of it, this country called for you to be a commander, right?"

Going by the earnest look on his face, I presumed Palinchron was worried. I had heard that he'd soon have to part from the Dungeon Alliance. He must have wanted to pass the baton to me before he was forced to leave.

"It is what it is. I did as I pleased for a spell, and now they're calling me back by force. There was more I'd have liked to do in the Alliance, but it can't be helped."

Most would view receiving an appointment from their nation as an honor. Palinchron, on the other hand, seemed to hate the idea from the bottom of his heart.

"I see. So, soon enough, I won't be seeing you anymore, huh?"

"Once I'm gone, have Snow help you out. She's a long-serving submaster."

"Long-serving submaster?"

He pointed at the semifer girl who was gazing at the sky in a corner of the grounds. "She's been serving as a submaster for six years. She's probably more knowledgeable about Epic Seeker than I am. C'mon, Snow, introduce yourself."

The young woman came up next to me and offered a hand. A very pretty hand. A feminine, pale, and soft-looking hand.

Epic Seeker's guildmaster role was unoccupied, effectively consisting of a trio of submasters. Two of those were Palinchron and Mr. Rayle, both of whom were influential adults with power and intelligence, which meant that this girl was on par with them. I gently gripped her hand in mine.

“I’m Snow Walker, a dragonewt. Nice to meet you, Guildmaster Kanami.”

“Er, nice to meet you, Snow...or should I call you Snowy?”

Going by appearances, she looked younger than me, allowing me to refer to her that way. But now that I knew she’d been a submaster for six years, I wasn’t confident that she was as young as she looked.

“We’re probably around the same age,” said Snow. “Caring about such things is a pain, so you can call me whatever you like.”

“Thanks. All right, I’ll go with Snow. And you can call me whatever you like. No need for the polite register.”

“Then I’ll call you Kanami. And I’ll speak casually too.”

It seemed she was indeed as young as she looked, which meant that she’d been a submaster since before she was ten years old.

“Kanami, Snow, I want you two to work together to run Epic Seeker so that the guild will be okay in my and Rayle’s absence.”

“So what you’re saying is, operate the guild, the two of us. You’re honestly going to have us do it? When we’re this young?”



Just imagining a scenario where both Palinchron and Mr. Rayle were absent made me grimace.

“You’ll be fine,” he said lightheartedly. “Everybody knows how capable you are. And your family’s social status means that if push comes to shove, nobody can complain. As for you, Kanami, they’ve all more or less deemed you acceptable in the space of a day. Nope, there shouldn’t be any issues.”

We both glared at him. It was all well and good if *he* was having fun, but getting hit with this unreasonable request was making *us* all kinds of worried.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said, taking to his heels. “I leave it all to you, Snow. Just like I promised, all you have to do is be there to support Kanami. I’ve been looking forward to you two working together for a very long time.”

Then he left Snow with some parting words that were pregnant with meaning.

“If you just abide by that, then you can do whatever you want after. You can go hog wild.”

With that, he exited the grounds, leaving me and Snow under the dark and quiet night sky.



Using the stars as our light, Snow and I crafted spells at the training grounds. We knew now that we’d be working together for a long time, so we had decided to spend the rest of the day learning about each other’s powers.

Snow put a hand on a boulder that was on the ground. The next moment, the boulder shook a little, with small fractures appearing. “This magic’s my forte,” she said languidly.

She caused the already cracked boulder to shake more, then split it in half down the middle. Since I had *Dimension* up, I could tell that her magical specialty was all about vibrations.

“You’re making the boulder vibrate?”

“Yeah. My elements are void and fire. Plus, if I use the characteristics of my magic energy along with ancient magic, I can do something a bit more

interesting.”

Snow took several magic stones out from inside the breast of her clothing, charged them with magic energy, then scattered them around the immediate area. She murmured quietly, and those murmurs resounded across the grounds, piping in her voice from the magic gems like so many audio speakers: *“If we combine this with your magic, it’ll make for a wonder of a weapon. That’s what Palinchron told me.”*

“Wow. You’re making sound come out of the gems by controlling vibrations?”

“Yeah. By infusing my adhesive magic energy into the magic gems, I can reproduce voices as a practical application of ancient magic. Thanks to my being able to do this, I’ve been through a lot.”

She lightly snapped her fingers and the gems’ vibrations stopped.

“Can you do it from afar too?”

“I can. This is how I’ll be providing support for you. As per my promise to Palinchron.”

The freakish power behind her abilities had me sweating. This world had few methods of communication. If someone wanted to contact somebody far away, they had to set up a ley line between the two points. Even then, no transmission through a ley line would be this smooth and uninterrupted. From what I remembered, ley lines were mainly for the conveyance of magic energy, and they were as yet unable to transmit audio itself. In other words, Snow was able to personally use a technology that was multiple tech-stages above anything else. In a time of carrier pigeons, she alone had a cell phone.

“With this magic in our arsenal,” I said, “I’m thinking we can do all sorts of fun stuff. So you’re gonna use that to help me out?”

A pause, as usual with her. “Yeah. I’ll support you.” She nodded. Her sleepy eyes opened a little bit wider, and she took a tone that impressed upon me that she meant business. “I’m going to keep my promise to Palinchron. But as per that promise, I’m gonna be free afterward. I’ll do what I wanna do.”

“Yeah, of cour—”

I tried to agree, figuring she would start negotiations regarding her freedom within the guild, but then she continued with something I wasn't expecting.

"Up until recently, you called yourself not Aikawa Kanami, but Siegfried Vizzita. Most likely, your memories of that time were erased through Palinchron's mind magic, and I'd be surprised if that bangle isn't actually the keystone for a magic formula. You should destroy it immediately."

I was astonished, both by the name she had mentioned and the idea that my memories had been erased. "Huh? Er, uh...wha? What do you mean?"

"In any case, that bangle is the dodgiest thing. You weren't wearing it back then, after all." She sidled up to me and put a hand on it.

"Wait, hold on! I need this thing! I can't be without it!" I brushed her hand away and put some distance between us. The bangle existed to stabilize my magic energy, and it also helped me to understand the language. Since I had been told more than once to have it on all times, there was no way I was going to remove it.

That's right—no matter what, I mustn't remove this thing. It's too precious to me.

"Those're all lies. You're being toyed with by Palinchron too," she said, her expression stern.

I had no idea what she was saying. Toyed with? What did that mean? "Sorry, Snow. I don't understand what you're telling me. As such, I can't believe it."

At that, she lowered the hand she'd stretched out to me and murmured quietly, "I see."

It was a feeble little murmur. I sensed none of the firm resolve from before. I felt bad—maybe I'd shot her down too forcefully.

"Er, it's just...this bangle is really important to me, so I can't remove it. Plus, if you dump that kinda thing on me out of nowhere..."

"It's fine. But if and when the time comes when you can believe me, destroy that bangle. I think that if you do, you'll gain the chance to regain your true self."

Snow didn't try to force it. She was telling me what she thought, but there was no urgency or passion on her part. Just like her namesake, her personality hardly ran hot.

"I did the bare minimum required of me. I warned you...so don't forget that."

"All right, got it." I nodded. I had no problem with that, seeing as I could tell from her expression that she'd said it out of concern for me.

She and I were still facing each other, neither of us speaking until at last Snow broke the silence.

"I can't be assed to talk any more about this. Let's not do the checking-each-other's-magic thing anymore after today either."

"Yeah, let's not. Guess it's about time to wrap this up, huh?"

"Come with me. I'll show you to your room."

"Huh? Ah, right."

I followed after her, exiting the training grounds. Come to think of it, Palinchron hadn't told me where I'd be staying the night. In fact, I hadn't heard anything about what was to happen after I entered the guild. It appeared the task of explaining all that had been entrusted to Snow.

On my way to my room, I asked about the stuff that was on my mind. "So, uh, who told you my name was 'Siegfried Vizzita'?"

"You did," she said, pointing at me.

But I had no such recollection. This was the first day I'd ever seen her. I hadn't met all that many people since we'd stumbled into this world; I couldn't imagine I would forget the faces of the few I had...not to mention how distinct this girl in particular looked.

"Then do you know what the words Siegfried and Vizzita mean?"

"What they mean? All I know is that it's your name."

"Oh, all right."

Siegfried was the name of a famous folkloric hero back in my world, and Vizzita was meant to be tellingly similar to the English word visitor. The name

would scream “I’m an outworlder.” But only, of course, to people like me, who knew about stuff in my world. It didn’t seem as though Snow had any inkling of that.

Now I was sure there was no chance that Snow knew about my world. She’d simply heard the name “Siegfried Vizzita” from somewhere. But where? As I pondered who on earth she could have heard that name from, she came to a halt in front of a room.

“We’re here.”

She entered the chamber, and I followed her in. It was on the big side, with minimal furniture and only the barest signs of being lived in. For a new room prepared for me, it contained a fair amount of things, particularly small accessory-type items. It looked like a girl’s quarters.

“This is my room?”

“Nope, it’s mine.”

Evidently, my powers of observation hadn’t failed me.

“Why’d you take me to your room?”

“I was told to have you sleep here. The guildmaster’s room isn’t ready yet.”

“There’s... There’s no way I...” I put a hand to my head. I was pretty sure this was Palinchron’s decision, and I inwardly cursed his name.

“I thought you’d say that. If you’ve got a problem with it, I’ll sleep on the roof.”

“On the roof? I could never let you do that for my sake. I’ll just sleep in the hallway.”

“I knew you’d say that too. I can sleep anywhere, but you’d never agree to it. Urgh, talk about a pain... Let’s compromise.”

“Compromise?”

Snow hadn’t been lying when she’d said this was a pain in the neck for her, because she certainly seemed put-upon as she approached. She reached out a hand and tried to touch me, but I detected a surge of abnormal magic energy

from it, which caused me to take a great leap back.

“What the?!”

“Damn.”

“What do you mean, ‘damn’? You just tried to cast a spell on me, didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t be assed, so I tried to catch you off guard and knock you out. But it failed. It sucks because when we first met, I was stronger than you.”

Snow heaved a sigh before throwing off her bulky outerwear and rolling onto bed. She was now in her undergarments, despite my still being there. She had on something akin to a camisole, and her healthy-looking thighs were completely bare.

The sheer suddenness of it made my breath catch. The girl before my eyes was a looker, and I’d thought that since we had first met. Her skin was as white as her name, and her very long blue hair flowed over it, reminding me of the horizon dividing sea and sky. Her eyes were a light pink in color, like cherry blossoms. Looking at her eyes felt like a cool breeze. All in all, she possessed the charm and allure of Mother Nature, like the quiet rolling waves of the great oceans. Most enticing of all were her proportions, which could put any model to shame. Her voluptuous breasts were the biggest out of anyone I’d met that day, and since she wasn’t wearing a silly little thing like a bra (as if that was perfectly normal), I could clearly make out their shape.

She was excessively nonchalant and indifferent. I averted my eyes at once.

“I’ll go sleep in the hallway. If I’ve got a roof over my head and a blanket, I’ll be fine.”

“That’ll just make me feel sorry for you. At least sleep in a corner of the room.”

“Tell you what, I’ll go sleep in my sister’s room. I’m sure this whole thing is just Palinchron having a laugh at my expense anyway.”

“It is? You know, it might just be. In that case, you go do that. But don’t forget that I *did* follow his orders and invited you into my room. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it. I won’t forget... All right, goodnight, Snow.”

“Yep. Goodnight.”

As I exited her room, I felt a tad creeped out by how oddly understanding she was being. She never tried to push her opinion on me, and whenever things could turn into an argument, she immediately caved.

I brooded over the nature of Snow Walker on my way to Maria’s room. The moonlight was pouring through the hallway windows, and I looked outside. A waning moon was hanging in the sky. It was no different from the moon in my world; it too waxed and waned. And due to that, the concepts of the calendar and time measurement were close to what I was familiar with. Put human beings under the same sky and they’ll conceive pretty similar ideas.

That coincidence also creeped me out a little. Everything was crafted to such heights of perfection that it felt like I was dancing in the palm of somebody’s hand, and that was far from pleasant.

Actually, come to think of it, today’s been nothing but uncomfortable.

An anxiety I couldn’t describe had been lurking in the shadows behind me the whole time. The unease I’d felt this morning had never abated. Not while I was fighting, nor while I was chatting. That nagging doubt that I had something backwards. That I was forgetting something. It was a horrid sensation of offness, like I’d buttoned up my shirt wrong, and it refused to go away.

This was the unpleasant feeling I was enduring as I reached my sister’s room.

“Hey Maria, it’s me. I’m coming in.”

“Kanami?” Her expression perked up. “Welcome back.”

Even seeing my beloved baby sister was doing little to dispel the cloud inside me, but I could hardly show her some grim look on my face. I chalked it all up to my being in a different world, and then I took a kind and affectionate tone with her.

“Is your headache gone, Maria?”

“No. It’s gotten a little better, but there’s still this faint pain I can’t shake. Plus, I feel kind of, well, *strange*. Like there’s something I have all wrong... It feels somewhat unpleasant.”

I was surprised. She was going through the same thing I was.

“We’re in an unfamiliar world. It can’t be helped. For now, don’t dwell too much on it. Take it nice and easy and rest up.”

“Sure.”

My sister suffered from a weak constitution, so I needed to give her as much rest and relaxation as I could. I stroked her head.

“Question, Maria: I haven’t got a place to sleep tonight. Mind if I use your room?”

“What? Sure, of course. In fact, I’d like it if you stayed here the whole time.”

“Gotcha. Good. In that case, I’ll be borrowing that chair over there.”

“That *chair*? No way! Now that you’re here, sleep in bed with me. The bed’s plenty big, and since we’re brother and sister, there’s no issue!”

“Wait, but—”

“Please, Kanami.”

Her tone was firm, and she looked worried. It could be the case that, in truth, she wanted me to be with her because anxiety was eating her alive. We were siblings. There was nothing weird about sleeping in the same bed if it was for a sense of security. While I did get the sense that we were a bit too old to be sharing a bed, extraordinary times called for extraordinary measures, so I figured I’d close my eyes to it.

“Guess I might as well.”



“Great!” she said, smiling happily.

I threw myself onto the bed beside my precious little sister, and she gripped my hand adoringly.

“Your hand’s cold to the touch. It feels nice.”

She relaxed, the tension leaving her body. It was then that I realized she’d been tense and on her toes the entire time I hadn’t been with her. And of course she had. She’d been tossed into another world, lost her eyes, and waited for her brother in the dark... How could her heart find any relief? There was no question that until my touch soothed her nerves, she hadn’t felt any peace of mind, not even for a second.

I resolved to continue sharing a bed with Maria even after I received my room as guildmaster. I’d never leave her side again. I would be there for her. And if I wasn’t wrong, I’d made a promise to that effect in the past...

As I tried to remember what exactly I’d promised, I closed my eyes and gave my body over to the land of sleep. I had the peace of mind that falling asleep beside family offered. And yet that nagging unease was still present. Now that we were together, brother and sister, I was supposed to be happy. There was something I couldn’t put my finger on.

I shook my head a little and banished the thoughts from my mind. *Let’s just get some shut-eye for now. First things first; I’ve gotta carve out a secure place for us in this world.*

I was going to earn money to cover Maria’s medical expenses while consolidating my standing in Laoravia. And to accomplish that, I’d need to shed blood, sweat, and tears starting the next day. I didn’t have the time to sit and worry.

I kept repeating that in my head, gripping Maria’s hand tight as I fell asleep.

Chapter 2: For You Who'll See No Recompense

Early the next morning, Snow came to wake me up. Seeing us siblings sleeping in the same bed, she smiled. It was a mysterious little smile. Was she shocked? Envious? Reminiscing? All three at once? In any case, that might have been the first time I'd ever seen her smile.

After she was done bidding Maria a good morning, she wasted no time taking me out of there. It seemed as though she would tell me all about my guild work quite early in the day.

She took me to the office prepared for the guildmaster, where she full-on drummed into me the fundamentals of the organization. The morning of day one was spent solely on boning up; my work as guildmaster began in earnest, starting around noon.

Ten or so members gathered at the training grounds to check on the plans for the day. At first, Palinchron took the wheel, but then it fell to me to issue the orders regarding the Epic Seeker's business that day. I, of course, tried to decline, but Palinchron said that if I did it with Snow's help, it'd be a piece of cake. Then he immediately left, leaving the guildmaster (i.e., me), my submaster Snow, and the assembled guild members.

Snow and I tried to think of the most efficient way to run the guild using the cards we'd been dealt. Otherwise, we wouldn't be doing right by the members in attendance. And then, after a lot of thought, we hit upon a solution.



A mountain of papers, reports, applications, and the like towered in front of me. My quill was dancing frenetically across the documents. I affirmed the flow of guild resources, improved the management of funds, and reviewed the stationing of our personnel. And to do that, I updated the required papers in turn.

While I was at my desk doing all this paperwork, I simultaneously gave out

instructions for the fieldwork. My overpowered, downright unfair dimensional magic allowed me to grasp the situation out in the field even while I was at our home base. Moreover, at my current level, my INT stat was now among the highest of all humanity, enabling me to do both tasks at the same time.

“Kanami, the orders for Tayly’s party,” muttered Snow quietly. She was right beside me, providing support.

In response, I organized the information that *Dimension* had picked up for me, zeroing in on the real-time feed I was getting of Ms. Tayly’s party chasing after a robber several kilometers to HQ’s north-northeast.

“Yep, I see ‘em. Let’s see...Ms. Tayly should turn at the next left and stand by at the third bend in the road. I’d appreciate it if the other members keep pursuing the target. It’ll take twenty—no, seventeen seconds for the target to run right into Ms. Tayly. Tell her to intercept the robber with her magic but to be careful too. Then the target’ll be outflanked in a pincer attack.”

“Okay. I’ll tell them.” Snow disinterestedly spoke into the magic gem in her hand, relaying what I’d said. Through the gem, she was now in contact with Ms. Tayly and her party, who were kilometers away from us. My hand didn’t stop writing, continuing to put the paperwork in order even as I listened to verify the accuracy of her message to them. Needless to say, I also checked to see if the party had successfully captured the robber, never pausing from doing the paperwork in the meantime.

Dimension informed me of what was happening. The robber was taken aback when they found Ms. Tayly standing right in front of them, and the others came to cut off any avenue of escape before summarily arresting the offender.

“How’d it go?” asked Snow.

“Went without a hitch. The target was kept in place by Ms. Tayly’s magic, and then the members had them surrounded. Capture complete. With that, Ms. Tayly’s party is done with their commission. It ended faster than I thought.”

“Of course it did. There’s no way the robber had any idea there could be somebody who had a grasp of the entire town.”

“But isn’t Palinchron able to do something similar?”

“If you’re talking about Palinchron’s Spellrite, you’re wrong. It’s hampered by all sorts of harsh restrictions. Besides, it’s not as accurate as your magic is. It can’t do all *this*.”

“I see.”

I’d heard that Palinchron was one of the most prominent users of detection magic on the continent, but it seemed that my dimensional magic was more precise and accurate than his abilities allowed for.

“I won’t mince words,” said Snow, “this is crazy. Palinchron wanted us to do this?”

“Looks like it. Apparently, after hearing about what you and I can do, he came up with this combo. I’m glad it went well. Through this, I can do something guildmastery in form, if not in substance.”

“No, I’d say this makes you many times more competent than your average guildmaster. I have to hand it to you, Master...”

“Snow, please stop calling me that. I dunno why, but being called that by a girl like you gets to me. Could you call me by my name instead?”

A pause. “Uh-huh. Roger that.”

When she saw that it really did bother me, she nodded. On the whole, she was rather meek and pliable. She could even be called weak-willed.

“Ah, another robber,” I said. *Dimension* caught a crime in progress at the edge of its area of effect.

Another pause (as was common with her). “Urgh. Again?”

“Mr. Vohlzark and his people are nearby, so tell them to handle it. Let’s score some brownie points.”

“That sounds like work.”

“C’mon, Snow, we may be on the clock, but we’ve gotta catch the robber for the sake of the people who call Laoravia home too.”

“Hmm. Look, if it’s a pain, it’s a pain. And it’s not something anybody’s commissioned the guild for, so...”

While she was rather meek, she was also *extremely* work-shy. She didn't like putting her all into anything, she hated getting tired, and she slacked off whenever possible—to a downright absurd extent.

"A pain? All you have to do is repeat what I said, don't you?"

"I thought a job where all I have to do is parrot stuff would be easy street, but it's surprisingly tiresome."

"Hey, don't forget that I'm the one doing all the filing that you're supposed to be doing. I'm happy to stop helping you, you know?"

"You're killing me here."

"Just tell them already."

Leveraging the fact that I was shouldering some of her work, I got Snow to start speaking into her gem, albeit with a look of resignation. Mr. Vohlzark was walking through town when he heard her message, and he replied.

I took *Dimension* and turned it into *Layered Dimension*, focusing it on the immediate area around him so that I could pick up on the movements of his lips and the vibrations of his voice. From what he was saying, he had the energy to take down the brigand. Looking at their stats, I knew I had nothing to worry about. The thief was low-level and Mr. Vohlzark had enough HP. A direct confrontation shouldn't be a problem.

"Good, he said he'll do it. Now then, tell him to head toward the market at Lot 67. When he's close enough, I'll give him more detailed navigation. Incidentally, the target's Level 5 and there's nothing to take note of, so ask him to arrest the brigand head-on."

"I'll tell him." She repeated my instructions.

Having received my orders through the magic gem, the hulk of a man zipped toward the criminal, getting closer and closer. I kept track of the movements of both pursuer and target through *Dimension*, the gap between them closing like two chess pieces on the game board. Before long, the two bumped into each other and the brigand was apprehended. It couldn't have been clearer who was stronger between them, and the battle ended in a flash. Mr. Vohlzark took the rogue to the store they had victimized, and the proprietor burst into tears of joy

at the return of the stolen goods. Judging by those tears, if the items had remained stolen, the damage to the shopkeeper's livelihood might have been grave. I was happy to have prevented such a tragedy.

Then the robber was taken to a government-run public safety office, and that was the end of it. The whole thing had taken a matter of minutes, but we'd rescued yet another citizen of Laoravia.

"Phew... the shopkeeper's expressing his joy..."

"Is he now."

It seemed Snow wasn't able to identify with my relief. She was looking up at the sky through the window, indifference written on her face. Whenever she didn't have anything to do, she had a habit of basking in the sun like that.

"If you're free, I'd like you to help me with the paperwork and such."

"It's okay. Thanks to you, enough of it's already been done that I won't get yelled at."

"Ah, okay, so that's your standard for what's good enough."

"I'm not like you. I don't like doing everything that's in my power to the best of my ability."

Over the course of the day, I'd gotten a grasp of Snow's personality. She was of the opinion that she wasn't compatible with me as guildmaster, and it wasn't as though I didn't understand where she was coming from. Back in my world and when I had gone to school, I'd had exactly the same stance as her. Being in this world was entirely to blame for my working so hard now. If not for how tough it was to get by in this environment, chances were high I'd be behaving the same way.

"I mean, sure, but if you aren't there to watch me, I won't be able to rest easy. After all, I'm a newbie, and there's always the possibility I'm operating under the wrong assumptions."

"That's Palinchron's fault for allocating us like this. We should have resigned ourselves the moment an outsider started doing the filing."

"That's true. Giving a newbie all these important documents to sort through

on his first day is all kinds of crazy.”

“Exactly. And as such, I can’t be blamed. And since I can’t be blamed, I won’t put in any more effort than I am now.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

I didn’t chide her. I merely faced Paperwork Mountain again in silence. And that was because simply by communicating to people through her magic gems, she was doing the work of dozens.

The colors outside the window were getting a touch of red as the sun started descending. The paperwork I’d been doing since noon was just about over with too, and the guild parties that were scattered about had completed their respective tasks. I reckoned I had done a decent job for my first day as guildmaster. I mustered the resolve to finish up the remaining paperwork and buckled down, but just as I was about to be done with it at last, I detected somebody entering the Epic Seeker headquarters.

Now that the sun was setting, almost all of the members had gone home for the day, Ms. Tayly among them. I was holding her report on the mission she had cleared earlier.

After realizing that someone had started conversing with Palinchron over by the entranceway, I left Snow behind and headed toward the two. I wanted to report to them the fruits of the day’s labor and, if possible, get their appraisals of me straight from the horse’s mouth.

I walked through the interior of Epic Seeker’s home base, arriving at a place where I could hear Palinchron and Ms. Tayly talk.

“So whaddya think? Kanami’s outstanding as guildmaster, ain’t he?”

“He is. More so than even you. We received accurate info at scary fast speeds. He’s basically completely negated the need for the intel-gathering process. Thanks to that, we wrapped up the commission that had a seven-day deadline in mere hours. It almost feels like *cheating*.”

“If the guys over in the suzerain land knew about either Kanami or Snow, they’d do anything to get their hands on such shining talents. You’ve seen how well their skills combine. Isn’t that only natural?”

“It’s only natural, he says... But they still lack experience. If they didn’t have connections, few would know of them.”

“What they lack in connections and experience, the guild members can make up for with their own. Those two are straight-edged. They’ll listen to what their elders have to say. And don’t worry about widening their circles; I’m already teaching them lots.”

“You’re putting an awful lot of effort into his success. I see you’re serious with regard to Kanami. I’ve never seen you this antsy, Palinchron.”

“Heh heh, if I look antsy, I’ve still got a ways to go. Hey, I just wanna go to the suzerain land worry-free, that’s all.”

It was a bad habit of mine. Whenever *Dimensions* was active, I turned into an eavesdropper without even meaning to. I walked over to the two at a quick pace, partly to avoid eavesdropping more than I already had.

“Palinchron, I’ve basically finished all the paperwork-related stuff.”

“Oh hey, if it ain’t Kanami. All right, so how much of it is left?”

“How much is left? Er, well, basically nothing...”

Apart from the slight amount I’d left for Snow’s sake, I’d completed absolutely all of the documents I’d been handed.

Palinchron looked flabbergasted. “Nothing? Did you see the size of that heap of papers?”

“Yep, and I did it all. You told me that doing it was the guildmaster’s job, didn’t you? So I got it all over with today.”

“Wait, hold on. Something’s off! There’s no way you could finish it all that easily! Sure, there were documents you just had to give a look-see, but there were also others that involved super tedious income and expenditure calculations!”

It was true; there were such documents. But I was already done knocking the numbers around—the guild logistics and its attendant costs, the personnel expenses for everyone, the details of balancing earnings and expenditures, *etc.*

“Maybe it’s because the math I’m using is different? Bookkeeping and math

are both strong suits of mine.”

“You... You’re not joking?”

“Plus, using *Layered Dimension*, I can really play nasty and look at multiple documents at the same time. Also, now that I’ve leveled up, I’ve got the feeling that I’m able to think about multiple things at the same time too.”

I’d recently started to notice how clearly my brain power had increased compared to when I was back on Earth. I wasn’t just talking about the speed of my thoughts either. The very *way* my thinking worked had changed. One facet of that change was the segmentation of my thought streams, allowing me to multitask.

“Could it be that Snow put her all into helping you with it?”

“Er, not really. I’d say she barely helped me with it at all.”

In fact, I’d done Snow’s share of the work for her. She’d earnestly informed me about all sorts of stuff that morning, but only so she could foist everything on me. She’d been loafing around since noon.

“It’s true, that’s insanely fast even if Snow gave you a hand with it... Sure, you may have leveled up, but that shouldn’t be reason enough for you to be able to pull that off... On the other hand, I guess it’s maybe not impossible, given the special traits of your magic energy? Or maybe it’s a quality of dimensional magic...or maybe it’s the price you paid?”

“In any case, I’m done. I can call it a day now, right?”

“Ah, yeah, sorry. In fact, considering all the work you did today, you can call it a *week*.”

“What? That was seven days’ worth?” I asked, surprised.

At first, I’d been taken aback by the quantity of papers, but I’d tackled it thinking it was a reasonable amount of material for one day at a mid-size organization. The fact that it was actually a week’s worth of work felt underwhelming.

“Palinchron,” said Ms. Tayly, “maybe it’s not magic or what have you. Maybe it’s Kanami himself who’s a bit...peculiar?”

“Don’t say it out loud; I’m stunned too.”

The two of them looked at me like I had two heads. I smiled wryly. “Uh, so, I guess I should just focus on helping out the members then?”

“Actually, it looks like the jobs assigned for the week are finished for the most part too. Tayly’s given us her report, and with that, everyone’s quests have been accomplished...thanks to your assistance, Kanami.”

“Uh...isn’t that too little work?” I asked honestly. I didn’t know what I was going to do the next day.

“It’s true that the work I gave you is on the low side; it’s your first week as guildmaster, after all. But still...it wasn’t *that* little work. If anything, it was the average amount for a guild.”

“It... It was?”

I myself was starting to notice just how consequential this was—the sheer grandness of my capabilities and the sheer scope of my ability to command whenever I had Snow’s magic to help me. It seemed it gave rise to a state of affairs so out of the ordinary that it sped up the guild’s workings by a factor of seven.

Palinchron looked sullen. “I’ll talk it over with Laoravia and bring you more work to do next week. Until then, go ahead and clear some more of the Dungeon. That’ll contribute to the guild too, so far as it goes.”

“Roger that,” I said, nodding.

“What about us, Palinchron?” said Ms. Tayly.

“Just like always, you can use your spare time any way you like. You can take on quests through public organizations, and you can go wherever you want with your party.”

“Got it.”

From the look of it, I’d gotten too enthusiastic with it being my first day on the job, and now nobody in Epic Seeker had any work to do. Once we were done discussing the policy going forward, we decided to disperse, and I made my way to the training grounds, where the guild members who had nothing

planned were hanging out. I'd gone there to apologize for being such an eager beaver, but they told me there was no need to say sorry. Almost all of them seemed to think there was nothing better than wrapping up their work early. Far from criticizing me, more people than not praised me for the high precision of my orders.

I spent my time there deepening my bond with the guild members. With some, I accepted requests for rematches. With others, we taught each other about magic. In doing so, I closed the distance between me and them, a little at a time.

When night came, I bade Snow goodnight, ate dinner with Maria, and shared a bed with her again. And that was how my first day as guildmaster ended. I couldn't have hoped for a smoother start.



On my second day of guild life, without any work to do (on account of my being too revved up the day prior), I found myself standing before the entrance to the Dungeon.

Snow had said she would "spend the day sky-gazing," so I'd forced her to accompany me. Otherwise, she would have just been screwing around doing nothing. Besides, Palinchron had told us to work as a unit.

"All right, it's time to Dungeon dive."

"Ugh, what a hassle."

"Snow, this is another of the guild's tasks. Palinchron told me to either extend the Pathway or take down a Guardian."

"Yeah, but he didn't give you a deadline. Why don't we just phone it in?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say 'phone it in,' but I don't intend to go all out either. For the most part, I plan to look for treasure while hunting easy monsters here and there."

"Hmm. There's a chance that monsters you consider easy enemies are ones I view as a pain."

"You're good, Snow. I mean it. You can just phone it in. I'm gonna do most

everything myself. All you have to do is watch from behind.”

As usual, I convinced her not to flake out on me. To be honest, I didn’t expect all that much from a lazy bones like her, but she did harbor a minimum sense of responsibility for me, so if I was in danger, she’d most likely step in. She was my insurance in case the shit hit the fan, so to speak.

“Oh? I’m just watching? That’s good. I’m happy with that.”

“Okay, great. Now then, let’s go in.”

【PARTY】

Snow Walker has joined.

I entered the Dungeon alongside Snow as the notification hit my eyes.

There we were, in the damp, dark corridors. That musty blood smell, those paths with the characteristic points of luminescence... Part of me was feeling *nostalgic*. I was back in the Dungeon. For some reason, all it had taken was that fire to make me miss the place terribly.

“Kanami, something wrong?”

I’d halted in my tracks at some point. “No, it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

I shook off that emotion that was useless for Dungeon diving and continued down the hallway. In the past, I’d... I’d reached Floor 24. I remembered.

Exploring Floor 24 had proven it was a harsh floor, so I had chosen to level grind at Floor 19 instead. That was my latest memory. But the memory was like an old, blurry, black-and-white photo. There were dark spots in all the most pivotal parts, so I was having trouble excavating the memory. Maybe the vagueness of my memories from around that point in time was due to the shock of the fire.

But I couldn’t complain. I pulled myself together and determined a plan of action for our dive. My companion was Level 16, and her stats weren’t much different from mine. That being said, in terms of endurance, she probably had

me beat by a few ranks. She also had a rich selection of magic she'd acquired, and her well was fathomless.

【STATUS】

NAME: Snow Walker

HP: 530/533

MP: 229/240

CLASS: Scout

LEVEL 16

STR 10.22

VIT 10.02

DEX 5.24

AGI 5.43

INT 7.92

MAG 10.86

APT 2.62

INNATE SKILLS: Draconic Protection 1.09, Optimal Moves 1.89, Ancient Magic 2.04

Mind's Eye 1.07, Blood Magic 1.00

ACQUIRED SKILLS: None

Our objective for the day was to grind at Level 19 or thereabouts, then reestablish the *Connection* portal at Floor 20. Thanks to the fire, the registration of all of my *Connection* doors had been dispelled, forcing me to go in from Level 1 again. It was a pain, but it couldn't be helped. I figured I'd zip straight to Floor 20.

Since the Pathway reached all the way to Floor 23, the way there was a breeze. Furthermore, for divers on our level, the single-digit floors presented no

threats. After a few hours of walking, we were able to reach Floor 10 without a hitch.

When we entered Floor 10, we were taken aback by its dreariness.

“Wait, huh? There’s nothing here.”

“Just a little while ago, there was a sea of fire in here. Looks like it’s true—the Guardian of Floor 10 really is dead.”

“Really? If that’s true, that’s amazing. It’d take a bona fide *hero* to take down a Guardian, wouldn’t it? I wonder what the person who did it is like?”

I didn’t know much, but even I knew that the entities called Guardians were terribly strong. They were boss monsters that not even parties composed of the strongest divers could beat. They were the stuff of legends for all who ventured into the Dungeon.

“Amazing is right, though I’m pretty sure it must’ve been you who did it.”

“Huh? Me? Why?”

“Never mind. I’m just talking to myself.”

“You say that, but you said it so that I could hear, didn’t you?”

“I can’t be assed to say any more. Let’s keep going.”

I sighed, nodding reluctantly. “All right, fine.”

Whenever Snow said a topic of conversation was a pain, there could be no continuing it. That had been driven home for me the day prior while we were working together. As such, I didn’t press her. Whatever she was talking about was probably connected to what she’d said about my memories on the day we met. It wasn’t something I wanted to hear over and over.

We silently walked across the now-barren Floor 10. No vestige of the blazing fire that once characterized the room was anywhere to be seen. Likely because of that jump between then and now, it felt all the more hollow. It was so empty, it practically screamed that those majestic and pompous flames would never return. It had nothing to do with me and yet...it felt so melancholic for some reason.

That strange emotion enveloped me as I set up a magic gateway in a corner of the room.

“Spellcast: *Connection*.”

I took a camo-cloth from my inventory and shrouded the door with it so that it wouldn't stand out.

“This is dimensional magic?”

“Yeah. Now I'll be able to come and go from my office at the guild.”

“But if you leave it like this, other divers will use it, no?”

“Ugh, you're right. Let's do it this way. Spellcast: *Ice*.”

I used ice magic to lightly freeze the portal. The *Connection* doorway was brittle and crumbled easily. Normally, one wouldn't be able to freeze it solid, but as I was the one who had cast the spell, I had a flawless grasp of its structure, so I was able to freeze it without destroying it.

Because I had woven the spell while visualizing something different from the typical *Ice*, it behooved me to give it a new name: *Ice Lock*.

“You froze it?” asked Snow.

“If someone tries to melt the ice, the door will break. The only one who can melt it and still be able to use it is me, since I was the one who cast both spells. Guess I'll name this one *Ice Lock*.”

“Weird name. But I suppose it's better than nothing?”

“Either way, putting a door on Floor 10 isn't particularly useful. Let's set one up on Floor 20 good and quick. Your average diver can't reach Floor 20, so I can rest easier if that's where the portal is.”

“Oof. Can't we just call it a day here?”

“Nope. Let's go, Snow.”

“Urgh.”

With that, we ventured farther into the Dungeon.



We were walking down the Pathway on Floor 14, on our way to Floor 20, when it happened.

“The hell is that?”

I spotted a monster traveling at high-speed within *Dimension’s* range, stopping us in our tracks. It moved at velocities that outstripped the monsters of Floor 14. Figuring it must be a formidable one, I promptly used Analyze from afar.

【MONSTER】Line Skitter: Rank 1

Contrary to my expectations, it was weirdly low-level. Now it was out of place on Floor 14 in a whole different way. It looked like a small mouse that was glowing blue. But it was no normal glow.

Curious, I decided to chase after it. Snow, who stood behind me, looked like she could fall asleep at any moment. I let her be and walked in the direction of the Line Skitter without her. However, since it was running around without settling in a specific area, getting closer to it was no mean feat. The more I gave chase, though, the more I came to understand the rules and patterns governing its running path. I now knew for sure that no amount of walking would ever lead to an encounter with it. Left with no other choice, I made Snow wait for me on the Pathway so that I could go out on the hunt. Snow couldn’t keep up with my all-out running speed—a peculiarity born of our stats. My stats specialized in speed, while hers were focused on endurance.

After warning her not to fall asleep on the Pathway, I blasted off in pursuit of the Line Skitter. Predicting which corridors it would dart down, I gradually closed the distance by repeatedly heading it off. After a few minutes of that, I succeeded in coming face-to-face with the fleet-footed creature. I then retrieved my sword from my inventory and slashed at it to see what would happen. The second I did, the Line Skitter picked up its pace.

“What the?!”

That one swing was the only one I got. The thing easily dodged it and zipped right past me, disappearing down the shadowy corridor. Initially, I tried to chase

after it, but then I remembered it was speedy enough to evade my sword and I stopped in my tracks. In all likelihood, its top speed outstripped my own. There was no doubt about it now—this was a special miniboss-type creature. A “bonus monster,” if you would. At least, that was the feeling I got.

Realizing that simply chasing after it would yield no results, I was forced to put the sword back in my inventory. This was starting to get exciting.

I searched my arsenal of spells and my inventory for a path to victory. The spell that usually made me the most confident, *Wintermension*, was a no-go for this. That spell was for intercepting enemies that were coming at me. It did very little to impede an enemy that was fleeing *from* me. The same went for *Blizzardmension*. While it did apply a deceleration effect, it’d be exceedingly difficult to get the Line Skitter within its range. Sure, I could spend more magic energy to enlarge its area of effect, but it’d probably be a long shot regardless. I also had *Ice Arrow* for a long-range attack, but given how fast the target was, I wasn’t confident I could hit it, even with the help of *Dimension: Calculash*. As such, my one remaining option was a spell that was more of a trap.

I took some water out of my inventory and created a large pool of water in the path I knew the Line Skitter would cross. Then I placed one pocket of *Snowmension* over it. Needless to say, I didn’t make it burst just yet. Since the creature raced across the floor, the chances were high it would fall for the trap. And since it was only Rank 1, I figured even a trap this cheap and fast might get the job done.

After making five such puddles, I ascertained the Line Skitter’s position and chased after it like I had before; I was corralling it toward the group of traps I’d laid. I had to be as fast as possible. The crux of the water trap lay in *Snowmension*. If a separate monster caused *Snowmension* to activate, the trap would go to waste.

As I chased the thing around and around, it finally stepped inside the area with the trap. I devoted my full attention to getting the timing for activating the trap exactly right. And the instant that the Line Skitter stepped in the water, I made *Snowmension* burst open. The cold air popped out of its sphere, freezing the water in a flash—and of course, the monster’s legs with it.

I used *Dimension* to confirm that I'd captured my prey before hurrying over to it. I saw it there, squeaking as it struggled to extricate itself from the ice. It looked as though this monster was all speed and no power. My heart panged for it slightly, but I reminded myself repeatedly that this was just the law of the jungle and sliced the Line Skitter's body with my blade.

【TITLE UNLOCKED: Brightline Sprint】

+0.05 to AGI.

Then I used Analyze on the magic gem drop.

【CRESCENT PECTOLAZRI】

An aggregation of magic energy that emits a flash of light.

A rare drop from the cursed monster of unmatched speed.

That description only underlined the fact that it was a rare gem. It was a relief to know that the reward was commensurate with the effort I expended. Having accomplished what I'd set out to do, I made my way back to where Snow was—to find her with her eyes closed on the edge of the Pathway...despite how pointedly I'd cautioned her. She wasn't snoring, which was the least one might expect, but it still chagrined me.

"Snow, I *told* you not to fall asleep."

"Mrhmm. Huh, wha? Oh, I'm awake, I'm awake."

"Oh yeah? Even though you were slow on the uptake just now?"

"Don't worry about it. Never mind that—did you kill the thing you saw?" she asked, trying to change the subject. She was such a dyed-in-the-wool lazybones that it was clearly no use admonishing her.

"Yep, I caught it in a trap. Look at what it dropped."

"Oh, wow. This thing's so rare that in any given year, it's not guaranteed that

even one will make the rounds in the whole of the Dungeon Alliance. It's a Crescent Pectolazri, if I'm not wrong?"

"Yeah, you're right. I worked my ass off for it."

"It's not a given that you'll get a drop upon killing one of those things. That's why they're so few and far between. Nice that it did drop for you, huh, Kanami?"

"Is that right? Guess luck was on my side!"

And I'd been all the luckier considering how coincidental it was that I'd detected the Line Skitter through *Dimension* to begin with.

"All righty, now that you've grabbed yourself a goodie, what say we get a move on?" she said, a faux show of enthusiasm.

It couldn't have been more obvious that she just didn't want to get told off again after she'd caught those Zs on the Pathway earlier.

I sighed. "Yeah, you're right. Let's keep going."

If I'd had my way, I'd have lectured her for a good hour or so. It wasn't unheard of for Dungeon monsters to brave the Pathway, there was always a chance she'd get attacked by other divers, and there were any number of situations she might not see coming. But Snow being the way she was, it was highly likely it would all fall on deaf ears. I pondered ways to rectify her personality as we walked down the corridor. And so, after a spot of good fortune, we pressed farther into the Dungeon.



I'd told Snow that she didn't have to do any fighting, but that promise went out the window at around the halfway point of Floor 19. Unforeseen situations were unavoidable in the Dungeon, and now that we were surrounded by monsters, even Snow had no choice but to engage.

We were up against Carmine Minotaurs, which were denizens of Floor 19, but Snow dispatched them with ease. Thanks to the boosts granted to her as a member of the dragonewt race, she was even stronger than her STR stat let on, and she borrowed two large weapons that were larger than her from me, which

she brandished in battle. She was so rough with them, however, that she was tearing through the weapons like candy. All the same, her overwhelming display of strength convinced me that I didn't need to worry about her. She was definitely a submaster of a guild under the control of a nation's government for a reason.

Since I no longer had to worry about my comrade behind me, our Dungeon diving got even faster. We progressed to Floor 20, which was another drab, lifeless space in the vein of Floor 10. I wasted no time setting up a *Connection* gateway in a corner of the room, just like I'd done on the tenth floor. With that, we could always take a shortcut to the twentieth.

"All right, good. We've finished marking Floor 20 now too. Mission accomplished."

"Good, let's go back, then. Time to call it a day and rock on home!"

"We're not calling it a day, but we can head back. I'm thinking I might get someone in Epic Seeker to cast a heal spell."

"A heal spell? You mean you wanna work me even more?"

"Like you're working that much now. Let's get moving."

Through *Connection*, we traveled to the office at Epic Seeker HQ. Using *Dimension*, I searched for a member who could cast a healing spell. Since I'd demolished all the work for the week the day prior, it was easy to find someone with time on their hands.

I called out to a member with a command of holy magic and had them heal my wounds. Not that I'd struggled very much; they were all just scratches to begin with. The mage who healed me grinned as they did so, which creeped me out. I asked them why, and they replied that healing the wounds of the strong was what made them get out of bed in the morning. As might be expected of an Epic Seeker healer, they clearly had some screws loose.

After confirming that Snow and I had recovered our HP, I made to dive right back into the Dungeon, but Snow had something to say about it.

"Please, I need a break."

“No can do. We’re in perfect shape again. There’s no reason not to go.”

“If we don’t take any breaks, it’ll take a *mental* toll on us. Oh, I know! Take out the Crescent Pectolazri.”

I retrieved it from my inventory and showed it to her. “What do you need with this thing?”

“Let’s take it to our blacksmith. If it’s workable, we can ask them to make it into a new weapon for you. With a gem this rare, I figure it’ll turn out interesting.”

“Oh, does Epic Seeker have a resident blacksmith? That does sound intriguing.”

I could agree with the need to upgrade our weapons. I’d worn out some swords, and Snow had been a tornado of wear and tear on the weapons. At first, I’d thought relying on mass-produced stuff would be fine, but in the long run, I might need some more expensive, one-of-a-kind items with greater staying power.

“All right, let’s go,” said Snow. “I’ll have them make all sorts of stuff. And I’ll be right there watching.”

“Right there sleeping, more like,” I said with a strained smile.

And so we headed for the atelier located at the edge of Epic Seeker HQ.



“Er...hello, coming through,” I said, entering the atelier, from which black smoke was rising.

The building looked big from the outside, but the inside was smaller than I expected. Work tools littered the space, making it quite cramped, and there were several timeworn workbenches and furnaces installed. It was sweltering hot in the room, and the air quality was poor, what with all the soot and dust. This wasn’t a place where one wished to stick around for very long.

“Huh? Whazzat?” asked a long-haired man who was gazing at a sword in the back of the workroom. “A customer, is that it? Er, what business have you?”

“I came bringing various magic gems. Could you make something for me?”

“Ah, yes, yes, I see. Yes, that’s fine. Ain’t got anything to do anyway.”

He put down the sword he’d been looking at and approached me while brushing up his long locks. With his face now bared, I was taken aback by the sheer number of scars carved into it. One of his eyes was permanently shut, and both his ears had been cut off. There were also burn scars all over his face. It was painful just looking at it.

“Uh, it’s a...it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Ack, sorry, did I startle ya? I don’t blame ya. First time can be a doozy—wait, hold on, you’re our guildmaster, ain’t ya? Ya didn’t have to waste your time coming to this filthy hole. Ya coulda called me and I’d have come, ya know.”

“That’s all right, I’m the one with business, so it’s only fair I be the one to make the trip. And it’s not as though I’m here to order you as your guildmaster. I came here for personal reasons, just as a guy named Kanami. Your name’s, er...Mr. Alibers?”

“Alibers Riverth. You remembered! Even though I didn’t duel ya during that round-robin.”

“I memorized everyone’s names like my life depended on it.”

We introduced ourselves as we shook hands. I had a little look at Mr. Alibers’s skills.

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Holy Magic 1.34

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Elemental Magic 0.23, Smithing 0.89, Swordplay 0.07

His Smithing skill wasn’t terribly high. If anything, he was more blessed in the combat department. He wasn’t very high-level, yet his magic power was top-notch. If somebody had told me he was a Dungeon-diving mage and not a blacksmith, I’d have believed them. The chances were high that he had indeed been a diver in the past but had switched to being a blacksmith after sustaining

his injuries, causing a drop in his combat-relevant skills over time.

“Now then, Master, what sorta stuff’d ya bring me today?”

“I brought a gem that Snow told me is rare.”

I fetched the gem from my inventory. And while I was at it, I showed him all the stuff I thought might be rare from among the drops I’d accumulated. At the assortment of magic gems laid out on the workbench, Mr. Alibers got a gleam in his eye.

“Well, I’ll be! You’ve got stuff ya seldom ever see, even in government money-changers’ shops.”

“I’ve been accumulating a stockpile of them this whole time. Would you be able to use one or more of these to make me a sturdy, durable weapon?”

“You bet I can. With this much to work with, I can make basically anything.”

“If you could, please; thank you. It’s been a pain because my weapons keep breaking on me.”

“I don’t wanna imagine what monsters your weapons are breaking against. I do repair broken weapons as well, ya know? If ya bring ’em to me, I might be able to make use o’ them.”

“Really, sir?”

“Most o’ the time, though, it’s cheaper to buy new than to repair.”

“Hmm. I’ll take them out for you.”

Overjoyed that I could get weapons repaired someplace so close by, I fetched my damaged weapons from my inventory. I did so in full view of Mr. Alibers, as I had no intention of hiding my inventory ability from the people I’d be collaborating with. And since he expressed surprise, I gave him a light explanation.

As I was taking out various items, I found a broken sword I had no recollection of. The edge of the blade was warped. The sword looked old, and the blade looked as though it had melted from being stuck into magma.

【TREASURED BLADE OF THE ARRACE CLAN - DAMAGED】

Attack Power 1

It essentially had the same attack power as swinging an iron rod. It did, however, contain the word “treasured” in its name. If one were to go off the name alone, it would seem like a fine sword indeed.

I couldn't really remember how I'd got my hands on that one. Not that it was uncommon for me to shove valuables left behind in the Dungeon into my inventory. I'd probably picked it up during a dive. I didn't give it too much thought; I just put the damaged sword on the table for Mr. Alibers.

“I think that's all of them.”

“Well, that is a lot.”

“Ha ha, sorry about that.”

“Now then, let me have a look-see.”

I decided to survey the weapons alongside Mr. Alibers. If I came to understand what made a weapon repairable or not, it would come in handy for future Dungeon dives. Snow, meanwhile, was sitting on the floor in a corner of the room, grasping her knees, and she was beginning to nod off.

“From what I can see, out of the weapons here, the swords are in the best shape. If they're sharpened, they can more or less see action again. But I'm thinking these huge weapons are a lost cause. The bases are warped and the blades're battered. Best bet's to melt 'em down and turn 'em into materials.”

“I see.”

It seemed that the weapons Snow had used were in particularly bad shape.

“Which leaves us with...hmm, huh? Could this one be...” Mr. Alibers took the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan in his hand.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it's just this one was forged by a skilled artisan. It's made o' rare ore, so the maker's signature oughta be engraved on it, but...it's in such terrible

condition that I can't see one."

"Uh, I think it had the word 'Arrace' on it before," I said, disclosing the information my menu-sight told me in the hopes that it would help him repair it.

"Arrace? Ya mean *those* Arraces? But I feel like that's different from the signature..."

"What does Arrace mean?"

"What? Well, I mean, I'm guessing it's Arrace, as in the big noble clan. They churn out droves o' outstanding swordfighters, and it's the noble house with that famous Blademaster, Sir Fenrir Arrace, in it."

"Wow. That's crazy."

As he answered my question, he never took his eye off the blade. Clearly, he had a keen interest in the curious sight of this high-quality sword.

"Hrm. Unfortunately, I ain't good enough to repair this. The ore's too special."

"In that case, you can just melt it down into raw materials." To me, it was only a sword I had found on the road. Yet the moment I said that, a chill ran down my spine for some reason. I wondered why.

"No, you oughta keep it with ya. It may be impossible for me, but there's still hope if ya visit a blacksmith in Whoseyards."

"Huh. There is?"

It wasn't as though I had any particular attachment to the blade. I would've been fine if he'd turned it into materials, but in his eyes, that would have been a waste.

"The other thing that jumped out at me is this gem here. A Crescent Pectolazri, if I recall. If ya sell it, you could spend the next three years high on the hog. Ya sure ya want me to take it?"

"What?! Three years?!"

Its sheer value had me stupefied. After all, one of my goals was to cover

Maria's medical expenses. If I sold the gem, it would resolve that problem completely.

"Then again, if ya use it, you can create something just as valuable. Coat a sword with it and you can make it nice and sturdy. But personally, I think it'd make more sense to make it into a magic item that leverages the gem, like a ring or necklace."

"A sturdy weapon is more of a necessity for me than a magic item would be, so..."

"Well, looking at this small-scale disaster scene, I know where you're coming from. And that certainly helps *me* out 'cause making weapons is more in my nature. Right then, if it's okay with you, I suppose I'll be taking the broken weapons and the gems it's reasonable to take."

"Go right ahead."

Mr. Alibers and I made a record of the weapons and gems that were part of our transaction. We also decided on a delivery date. When I requested that a sturdy weapon be made for me as soon as possible, he gave it a little thought before making a proposal.

"If I'm to do it fast, it'd be ideal to increase my manpower. With more workers, the quality won't suffer. If I invite a blacksmith I know who works in town, it'll go that much faster. But if we do it that way, it'll cost ya a fair bit more."

"That's okay. In the long run, it'll be cheaper than tearing through weapon after weapon. Please do it as fast as you can."

"Got it. Then I guess this is how much I'll ask o' ya... I'll turn the gems I don't use into money at a money-changer's for ya too. Ya seem busy, is why."

"Thanks. You're helping me out a ton."

"Now then, I'll prepare your weapons in no time. Here's the contract. As for the details and market prices, ask Snow over there about 'em. She may seem dopey, but she knows her stuff when it comes to that sorta thing. If I'm rippin' ya off, don't worry, you can come here and complain to me."

“She does? Okay, understood.”

My eyes shifted to Snow, who was lying in the corner. I’d been thinking of asking one of the other two submasters, Palinchron or Mr. Rayle, about that kind of thing, but I guessed Snow was knowledgeable enough too.

“And now, we get into the most important topic of all.”

“The most important topic, sir?”

“Yep. We haven’t decided on the number-one most vital aspect of making a weapon.”

And here I had thought we’d talked about basically everything. But from where the blacksmith was standing, we had yet to settle on something so essential that he called it our chief concern.

“The most important? What on Earth might that be?”

“I’m talking about its *design!*”

I exhaled. “Its design?”

“That’s right! The look o’ the thing! The decoration! That’s more crucial than anything! Beauty beats craftsmanship! If the sword’s easy on the eyes, that’ll reflect in your gorgeous command of the blade, won’t it?!”

Oh. He’s like that.

I’d figured him for a serious person, but then again, he was right at home at Epic Seeker. His trains of thought were not on the right tracks.

“I’m trusting these weapons with my life, sir. Please focus more on the craftsmanship than on appearances.”

“That’s all the more reason! The moment you breathe your last, as your blood sprays through the air, if your sword looks too drab, you can’t call that a satisfying death, can ya?! The death of a hero’s gotta be *beautiful!*”

“Sir, the point of the weapon is to make sure I *don’t* die. I’m not sparing the moment I die any thought.”

“And that’s a bad thing, Master! While the things ya do when you’re alive are important, the way ya die’s even more important!”

“What I do while I’m alive is more important. I don’t care about what it looks like, so please make me something simple and sturdy and nothing too artsy.”

“Ya can’t mean that! Giving badass swordfighters badass swords to use is my purpose in life!”

“Consider this an order from your guildmaster. Please focus on making it durable.”

“Ha ha, hate to break it to ya, but that don’t work in Epic Seeker. We violate orders on a daily basis! Especially if following orders would make things less epic!”

“In that case, forget I said anything.”

“No, no, I’d hate that! I’m seconds away from being a part of the making of the guildmaster’s sword!”

“Then take the job seriously. I don’t want to have to take my business to some far-off atelier when there’s one so close by.”

“Urgh, then there’s nothing else for it, is there? What if I made something sturdy and *then* paid attention to the decorative part?”

“If all the decorative part does is make the sword a tad heavier, I’m willing to make that compromise. But I won’t pay you for that bit.”

“It can’t be helped. I’ll pay outta pocket for that part, and I’ll manage somehow.”

“Pay out of pocket? Can’t you just concede on making it ‘cool’? Is there really no other option?”

“Nope, none.”

“Seriously?”

Mr. Alibers unfurled some thick paper onto the workbench, after which he began drawing an artist’s impression with his quill.

“If you’ve got any requests, let me hear ’em. Personally, I’m thinking of making a simple straight edge with an underlying tone of white. That way I can make it nice and durable. Then I’ll apply some silverwork and engrave some

letters into it with melted green gemstone. Whaddya think?”

I was captivated by the superb design he’d put onto the page. “I can’t say your obsession hasn’t borne fruit... That being said, if we’re going by what I prefer, I’d make the letters blue rather than green. Gives it a more invigorating feel.”

“So you prefer a cleaner look. Roger that. I’ll take that into account.”

“The other considerations are cohesiveness and gracefulness. A sword that lacks balance is hard to use, so please make it symmetrical.”

“Hrm, personally, I’m more of a fan of asymmetry, but oh well. I’ll make up for it with the decorative bits.”

Envisioning the end result, we knocked our preferences against each other in a lively exchange of ideas. It seemed that Mr. Alibers’s passion had sucked me in too, because I’d gotten excited myself. I could tell that the game-loving personality at my core was floating up to the surface. Mr. Alibers and I discussed the weapons for a long time, and before I knew it, the sun had set. After we’d exhausted everything we wanted to say, we bade each other goodbye with satisfied smiles on our faces.

“Be seeing ya, Master. This’ll be my first big job in a while, so forgive me if I get fired up.”

“Thank you, sir. Snow, we’re done now. Let’s go.”

I grabbed Snow, who was lying in the corner, by the scruff of her neck. The long conversation, which she’d had no interest in, had lulled her into a sound sleep. Mr. Alibers smiled slightly at the sight, and I smiled wryly back at him as I dragged her out of the atelier. With the work he would be doing, diving past Floor 20, which we were going to do starting the next day, should be easier. To be honest, today’s dive was more of a diversion than anything else. It was no exaggeration to say that the true test of our mettle lay beyond the twentieth floor.

After leaving the smith, Snow and I went into town. In order to prepare for the real dive to come, I went shopping and even stopped by a church. I was now Level 15, and as usual, I put my bonus points into magic. The number of

opportunities I had to use *Dimension* had ratcheted up, and I couldn't think of a better option, especially since it would increase my accuracy and precision.

In a reverie about the new swords I would get, I went back to the room where Maria was waiting for me and drew my second day on the job to a close.

Chapter 3: Reunion

Snow entered the office that was my place of work.

“Kanami,” she said as she handed me the paperwork in her hands. “Today, Epic Seeker’s on guard duty.”

“What? Guard duty?”

“The Brawl’s gonna begin soon. And that means that idiots will be coming in from outside the country. Public safety will probably take a hit. They said the stars aligned, so we should lend a hand.”

“I see. So we got them to throw a steady stint of work our way. What period of time?”

“I’m told that each guild will be taking turns working security. Our turn lasts from midday today to tonight only.”

“That’s it, huh? For now, we need to hurry and summon everybody. Snow, if you could.”

“Uh-huh.” She held up a magic gem, muttering into it to contact the guild members.

“That really is super convenient, that gem thing.”

“For the time being, I told them to get here by noon.”

“That’s all I need. Let’s decide on where they’ll be stationed by the time they arrive.”

“Do your best, Kanami!”

“Yes, yes.”

As if it was only natural, Snow started basking in the sun, sitting in a chair by the window. She clearly had no desire to help whatsoever. As I knew she disliked work that required fine details like this, I didn’t bother asking. I simply proceeded to do the work without her. To be honest, it was faster to do it alone

than to receive half-assed “help.” My thinking speed was far beyond that of ordinary people anyway.

“It’s another beautiful day,” Snow commented, looking up at the sky through the window. She seemed very comfy, relishing this stretch of not doing anything in particular.

My hand didn’t stop as I gazed at her. I continued deciding on the areas each member would be in charge of. A little while later, the members who had heard the summons started entering one after another. While it wasn’t everyone, a reasonably large number of people showed up.

I launched right into a thorough explanation of the situation and told them that I would be sending them to their posts starting at noon. And thus began the day’s guild activities.



Just like on my first day, I expanded *Dimension* across the city from my position in my office. What differed from my first day was the amount of work to be done. There were no documents on the desk. And since the members were simply policing their respective areas without a specific objective, there was no need to issue any instructions, so I had time to kill and then some.

Snow was humming a tune as she lazed around nearby. This situation had to be heaven for her. She looked like she was on Cloud Nine.

“We’ve got free time in spades, huh, Snow?”

“Free time is so wonderful. Also, I refuse to dive.”

I’d been thinking of asking her to accompany me for another dive, but she preemptively declined.

“Yeah, let’s not do the Dungeon today. Instead, would it be okay to ask you a few personal questions? You know, to kill time?” I asked, expecting to be shot down.

“Sure, I don’t mind. Just chatting isn’t a drag,” she replied, to my surprise.

I reckoned a great way to use this time was to build up a smooth and harmonious relationship of cooperation with her. First, I asked her something

that had been on my mind the whole time.

“You’ve got a super famous big brother, right? Could you tell me more about him?”

Snow Walker’s brother, Glenn Walker. The strongest Dungeon diver in human history. He didn’t have to be related to her for me to be plenty interested in the man. His title was enough.

“He’s no one special. He’s pretty—no, he’s *way* useless. Or rather, we’re not that close, so I don’t know or care,” she said biting of her own brother.

“From the way you call the guy known to be humanity’s strongest ‘useless,’ it sounds to me like you *are* close.”

“Hmm, I dunno about that. I do talk to him, but I wouldn’t say we’re close. When we talk, it’s always just me telling him off for the stuff that makes him a good-for-nothing.”

“As a big brother myself, that makes me pity him a little. Poor Mr. Glenn Walker...”

“We’re not even blood-related, so I think it’s safe to say we aren’t close.”

“Oh, really? You’re not blood-related?”

“We’re adopted. The Walker Clan has a custom of mixing superior stock.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that. Er, the Walker Clan—that’s one of the leading noble houses of Laoravia, right?”

“Yep. The whole house is a pain. Thanks to Palinchron and Glenn, the blowback I’m getting petered out, but as a rule, they’re bossy and annoying.”

“Why? What do they tell you to do?”

“They keep telling me to make the Walker name known throughout the world like my brother. They openly stated that’s the reason they took me in.”

“Damn, now that’s an insatiable lust for fame.”

“Recently, they’ve been nagging me to get married. Before I knew it, I was betrothed to some dude I don’t even know.”

“Like one of those political marriages? I’ve never met anyone affected by one

before.”

“Maybe if I make a name for myself as one of the submasters of Epic Seeker, they’ll let me be. Probably not, though,” she murmured, her expression turning depressed.

“Wait, you’re telling me you don’t wanna get married? Knowing you, I figured you’d want to get hitched to a rich person so you could kick back and relax.”

“I do need money...but getting married to a high-ranking noble wouldn’t make life any easier. It’s too much of a hassle.”

“Well, if you’re against it, I think you ought to be clear and refuse his hand. If you don’t speak up, I think you’ll regret it.”

“If I say no, it’d turn into a whole big thing. It’ll be tedious either way...and since that’s the case, better to just do nothing. It’s not like I’ve got a choice anyway.”

“What do you mean, you’ve got no choice?”

“Try as I might, it’s all pointless in the end.”

That was the moment I sensed just how warped Snow’s view of life was. She was so checked out that she’d even given up on her own marriage. In fact, to my eyes, she’d given up on *life*. Nothing on the planet mattered to her, hence how noncommittal she was and how slow she was to react to the world. No wonder she always wanted to slack off. It was heartbreaking. Some part of my soul was screaming that I couldn’t let her be so resigned to her fate.

“So, tell me, what’s made you this apathetic? Is it something that happened to you in the past?”

“Boy, you’re really stabbing straight to the heart of things,” she said, taken aback. She chuckled despite herself.

“Sorry,” I replied. “I know I’m overstepping. It’s just that since we’re partners, I wanna get to know you sooner rather than later. I get the feeling that if I don’t, that’s something I’ll regret.” Something inside me that I couldn’t identify compelled me to keep flapping my gums.

“Oh well, I don’t really mind. Not if it’s you.”

“If I recall correctly, you’ve been a submaster of Epic Seeker since you were a little kid, right? Was it around then that something happened?”

“Back in the day, I still had the innocence of a little kid. I was enthusiastic about doing guild work, and I had fun every day, because back then, I had my dreams.”

“Wow, you being enthusiastic? I’m having trouble picturing that.”

“In those days, I’d only failed once, so I had hope. But after messing up more times than I could count, giving it my all started feeling stupid and ridiculous. And that’s how I got this way. That’s literally it.”

“So it was a big string of failures. I see.”

When she said the words “failed” and “messing up,” her expression turned sour. That was the first unguarded facial expression the always-phoning-it-in Snow had ever shown me. And for some reason, I got the feeling that I understood where she was coming from. At least somewhat.

“Yeah. That’s why I just can’t be assed anymore. The more frantic I got, the more of an idiot I felt like. If I genuinely try and then fail, I’ll feel like total shit. And I just don’t wanna go through that anymore,” she said, a humorless smile pasted onto her face.

On an intellectual level, I knew I was supposed to tell her she was wrong, but my heart wouldn’t let me. And that was because I knew what she was talking about. I could sympathize. Most of all, I hesitated to take her to task after she had been willing to divulge the unvarnished truth about herself.

“Color me a little surprised. I didn’t think you were the type to be so open, Snow. Guess I just had to ask.”

“Actually, it’s because I think we’re birds of a feather. I know that you messed up big time too, Kanami.”

“I messed up big time? What do you—ackh?!” I’d detected something through *Dimension*.

“What’s wrong, Kanami?”

On the very edge of *Dimension*’s ambit, I spotted some folks about to get into

a quarrel with a member of Epic Seeker. Two girls had approached our guild member and were sounding off at them.

“Someone’s flaring up at one of our people.”

“Wait, they’re accosting a guild member? Not just one of the townsfolk?”

I intensified *Dimension* into *Layered Dimension* so that I could get a better grasp of the situation. The two girls were *abnormal*. That was the adjective that jumped out at me before any other. That was how unusual they were. They both had flowing blonde hair like golden sand in the wind. One had her long hair in a braid hanging down her back. Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t just blonde; she also had hairs that were closer to silver. It had a wondrous glow to it, a tangle of glittering gold and silver. And her body was beyond the ordinary too. Her face was so pretty that it looked inhuman, and her golden eyes were out-of-this-world gorgeous. Then, there were her absolutely perfect proportions. She was like an embodiment of beauty, surpassing the heights of feminine allure so utterly that it was nigh monstrous.

“There’s a girl who’s, like, *scary* pretty.”

“Scary pretty?”

The other girl was anomalous in her own right. She was on the short side, and she wore her hair short, with a ponytail in the back. She was androgynous and could pass for a handsome boy as well. Needless to say, she was also frighteningly beautiful. In terms of feminine beauty, the other girl had her beat, but the second one did have an androgynous charm all her own. Could the pair maybe be sisters?

“Yeah. She’s pretty but scary. And there are actually two girls like that.”

“Could they by any chance be...”

“Whoa, who *are* they?! There’s abnormal and then there’s *this!*”

That was how eye-popping their stats were.

【STATUS】

NAME: Lastiara Whoseyards

HP: 708/709

MP: 325/325

CLASS: None

LEVEL 16

STR 11.73

VIT 11.12

DEX 7.14

AGI 8.40

INT 12.98

MAG 9.13

APT 4.00

CONDITION: None

INNATE SKILLS: Weapon Combat 2.14, Swordplay 2.03,
Pseudo-Divine Eyes 1.00

Magical Combat 2.27, Bloodknack 5.00, Holy Magic 1.03

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Book Reading 0.52, Doll Body 1.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 179/182

MP: 821/831

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 11

STR 6.32

VIT 5.39

DEX 3.02

AGI 3.18

INT 9.99

MAG 45.12

APT 5.00

CONDITION: Protection 1.00

INNATE SKILLS: Holy Magic 3.80, Divine Protection 3.08, Condemn 2.00, Concentration 2.05,

Elemental Magic 2.10, Overprotection 2.12, Life Support 2.24, Targeting 2.03

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 0.10

???: ???

Nonstandard APT and skills, and numbers that were an order of magnitude higher than average on top of that. The thought that these two girls, this Lastiara and Diablo, had come anywhere near the members of my guild dismayed me. After all, if they ever got serious, our people would be slaughtered, helpless to stop them. And judging by what I was seeing, the chances were high that a fight was imminent.

“Snow, come out here! Now! They’re so strong that only we can stand against them!”

“I...guess I have to, huh?”

She got to her feet without grumbling—she knew this was no trifling matter. After checking that she was coming with me, I jumped out the window.

While running across the rooftops, I had Snow, who was behind me, contact the other guild members nearby through the magic gems, telling them to gather. I wasn’t planning on having those members fight, but they could give off an intimidating aura just by encircling the strangers. For the sake of the guild member that the two superstrong girls were harassing, the gears in my head whirled at their very fastest as I issued orders.

I ran with all my might, hoping that a fight wouldn't break out before I got there. By the time I arrived, the members of Epic Seeker and the two girls had moved to a back alley so as not to cause a commotion. In the darkness of that alleyway, the taller girl was yelling at the members who had surrounded them.

"Oh c'mon! Just take me to where Palinchron is already!"

I hurried into the alley. "Wait! If you've got something to say, I'll hear you out! I'm the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, Aikawa Kanami!"

Just as I'd been aiming for, the girls shifted their attention away from the guild members to me. And then their eyes opened wide, like they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"Huh? Wait, what? Sieg?!"

The braided girl looked befuddled as she turned to face me.

"Palinchron's one of my subordinates! If you've got business with him, I'll tell him for you, so I'll thank you to step away from my guild members!"

The androgynous girl in the back was the next to speak. "Sieg?! It's me! Dia!"

Dia. Must be short for Diablo. But something's weird. Despite me telling them my name's Aikawa Kanami, they keep calling me "Sieg." The same name that Snow mentioned.

"Got it. So your name's Dia, then. In any case, do me the favor of stepping away from them."

While there were a bunch of things that stuck out to me as concerning, priority number one was securing my people's safety. The braided girl complied and put some distance between them and herself, visibly pondering as she did so. The girl who went by Dia, on the other hand, started walking toward me. "Sieg! What're you talking about?! C'mon, let's just go back together!"

"Go back?"

I had no idea what this Diablo Sith person was on about. She got my very name wrong, so it couldn't be helped.

"What've you been doing this whole time?! If you aren't hurt, why didn't you come to Greeard?!"

“Stop right there! Dia, was it?! Don’t come any closer!”

This Diablo Sith was well past the ordinary; I fetched a sword from my inventory and stood at the ready. At the sight of it, she froze. At first, I’d thought she’d seized up with fear, but I was mistaken. She pointed at it and muttered.

“Huh? Sieg... What happened to my sword?”

“Your sword? Hold on. I honestly haven’t got a clue what you’re saying. For starters, my name isn’t ‘Sieg’ or whatever. Are you mistaking me for someone else?”

With a stiff smile and a not exactly composed expression, she sidled up to me. “Mistaking you for someone else? How could I possibly not know you, Sieg? I’m the one who’s got no idea what you’re saying. C’mon, buddy—enough joking around! It’s a pretty nasty joke too! Without you, I... I...”

Trembling at the bizarre vibe she was giving off, I shouted on the spur of the moment. “I... I’m telling you, stop right there!”

Her abilities, words, and actions were all extremely threatening. And the way her eyes had gradually begun to lose their glow gave me chills.

“Ha, ha ha,” she said, gazing at me with hollow eyes. “Why are you pretending not to know me? And why that sword? Why *my* sword? Tell me, won’t you? What’s wrong? Are you leaving me to the wolves?”

She was smiling, but her eyes were overflowing with sorrow. It looked like she was in a state of confusion, faced with a truth she had trouble accepting.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know you,” I answered honestly after ascertaining that the guild members had fled to the safe zone. “I don’t know anything. I’ve never met a girl that’s anything like you before, to begin with.”

She was grimacing something fierce now. “Huh?”

The thought of this powder keg of a girl falling into a state of shock had me in a cold sweat. I replied gently and tenderly in hopes of defusing the situation. “I’m not whoever Sieg is. I’m Aikawa Kanami. With that in mind, I’d like to hear what you have to say. Otherwise, I’ll remain unable to grasp what you’re

saying.”

In response, she crumpled to her knees, clearly not of sound mind.

“Augh...not...not again, surely? Ah...am I getting tossed aside *again*?”

“Calm down. Please. I never said I wouldn’t hear you out. If you could just take your time and explain your situation—”

She sobbed loudly before hunching over and shedding tears.

“Hic...hic...wahhhhhh!!!”

“What, huh? Why are you crying? Hey, please don’t cry! Look, I’ve got no animosity toward you. And I’m gonna stow my sword away. See?”

Diablo Sith’s sudden wailing bewildered me. Her stats had made me assume that she had ample emotional fortitude to go with her raw power, but it was the exact opposite. Her heart was so brittle, in fact, that it made me feel like a fool for rushing over in such a panicked frenzy.

“Oh, would you look at that, you went and made her cry. Bad boy!” The braided girl who had been watching from behind, Lastiara Whoseyards, walked forward to pat Diablo Sith on the head.

“I made her cry?! I’m totally lost here! Who or what *are* you two?!”



“Who or what? Good question.”

Unlike Diablo Sith, she seemed to be calm. She chose her words carefully.

“We’re your comrades,” she said. “Companions.”

The way she said that we were companions without any reservation struck me as so beautiful. At first, I thought it was because of her inhuman good looks, but that wasn’t it. It wasn’t skin-deep beauty. It was the verve of her voice, her lack of hesitation or doubt. And the weightiness of what she said. That was what cast her in such a beautiful light. She possessed the solemnity of someone who had found the meaning of life after many long years. In the face of her nobility and her beauty, I started blushing.

“Companions?” I stammered out.

I couldn’t make heads or tails of that response. There was no way we could be that close. This was the first time I’d ever met them. How could it be otherwise? And yet Lastiara Whoseyards looked me straight in the eye and, without lying, called us companions. It was like a scene out of a fairy tale but even more magical. It was like a painting displayed in a museum but even more sublime. She had a mystical aura to her. So much so that she might have even been able to successfully pass off black as white.

I could feel my heart beating faster. My cheeks turned red. What was this unidentified emotion getting me so worked up?

“Yep. I got the gist of your situation too. I can see these things, after all. So let me ask not Sieg but you, Kanami, a question. Tell me—what’s become of Mar-Mar?”

That strange heat inside me froze over in an instant. “Wha? What’s Maria got to do with this?”

“Not to repeat myself, but she’s a comrade. She’s important to me.”

I was more than surprised to hear her name. I was also frightened. There were few who knew it. As we were from another world, we hadn’t been here for very long, which was one reason. The second reason was that, as a rule, I had decided I should be the one who stood at the center of the stage. So how

did this girl know about my sister, who was hiding behind the curtains?

My sister was more precious to me than my own skin. Realizing that she might be in danger, I raised my voice despite myself. “Comrade?! How would you two know my sister that way?!”

“Your...sister? Hmm. The mind manipulation you’re under’s gonna be a real headache, Siegy boy.”

I remembered who else I’d heard about mind manipulation and the name “Sieg” from before. And I knew that that person was hiding out of sight behind me.

“For crying out loud, who is this Sieg?! Snow! What’s this Sieg thing about?!”

“D-Don’t bring me into this, please!” she stammered, emerging from behind her cover with a distressed look on her face.

Lastiara Whoseyards saw her face. “Snow?” she said, puzzled. “Snow Walker? What’re you doing here?”

“It’s... I... I don’t want to get on your bad side. Hey, Kanami, c’mon, repeat back what I said! The thing I told you to remember!”

It wasn’t like Snow for her speech not to be languid. It seemed she was scared of the freakishly strong girl.

“Repeat what you said?”

“The night of the day you entered the guild!”

I remembered. That was the day Snow had said I was “Sieg,” the same as what this Lastiara Whoseyards was saying.

“Er, you mean when you said Palinchron is controlling me?”

“And there you have it,” said Snow rapidly. “I warned him. I’m not to blame here. If anything, I’m doing my best to guide him.”

Lastiara put a hand to her mouth and thought it over. “Hmm.”

It couldn’t be clearer now. The two knew each other. And they were privy to something I wasn’t.

“Sorry, but I find you guilty,” Lastiara answered. “Say what you will, but at the

end of the day, you're just using Sieg to play hooky from life."

"Aww..."

Smiling, Lastiara Whoseyards took a step forward, and Snow took a step back.

"Hey, don't ignore me!" I shouted. "Wait! I won't let you lay a hand on Snow!"

Sensing that Snow was afraid, I stood between the two and brandished my blade.

"Okay, I see you. Huh. So you'd defend Snow and point a sword at me, hmm? Okay, all right. How dashing of you. You sure do like constantly getting new girls to defend, don't you? That's great. You're just like a *hero*."

I got the feeling that the moment I had turned my back to Snow, the magic energy that Lastiara Whoseyards was emitting had magnified. Her smile was still there, but I could make out a vein bulging in her forehead.

Not to be outdone, I stirred up my own magic energy in opposition to hers. "I keep telling you. I'm Aikawa Kanami! Ka-na-mi! I'm the guildmaster of Epic Seeker! And I refuse to allow anyone to lay a hand on one of my guild members!"

I converted *Dimension* into its combat-focused version, *Dimension: Calculash*, picking up information on the situation in my surroundings. If the girl drew closer to Snow, I would step forward to apprehend her without holding back. In addition, I'd ordered the guild members in the back to assemble, and they came to me.

In response, Lastiara Whoseyards allayed her potent magic energy and heaved a sigh. "I suppose that with this many in the way, I'm on the back foot. Can't say I expected to see your stats grow by that much. Breaking the spell on you's a tall order when I have to be careful about this and that while doing it. And if Dia gets fired up and goes all out, there goes the neighborhood. Urgh, what to do, what to do..."

The members of Epic Seeker weren't low-level by any means. Nearly all of them were battle-specialized beasts in their own right. But despite being the object of hostility from the fierce fighters surrounding her, Lastiara pondered

things with a cool head. Her composure was somewhat alarming in itself.

While I was standing guard, watching her every move, the other girl who had been crying got to her feet. As she wiped her tears with her sleeve, she edged over to her companion.

“*Hic...* Hey, Lastiara...Sieg’s just being controlled, right? Everything he said’s a lie, right? That’s what this is, right? In... In that case, we need to save him! We need to save Sieg! If I don’t save him, I’ll be tormented by it!”

That first “I” was the brash version used by brash boys, which she’d been using this whole time. The second “I” was the more neutral version.

“Ah, augh, Sieg... I’ll do anything, sacrifice anything to save—”

“Rah!” Lastiara Whoseyards hit Diablo Sith with a chop of her hand, rendering her unconscious.

“Ow!”

She then scooped her up in a princess carry. “I have a hunch that if we fight here, we’ll be playing into Palinchron’s hands, so we’re retreating for now. Just for now, mind you.” She smiled a faint, embarrassed smile and continued. “Sieg, you’re the reason I was able to become *me*. I was so happy...so now it’s my turn. Yours truly is gonna be the one to save you. I’m sure of it.”

What she’d said was so nice. And her tone of voice was so soft and weak that it belied her intimidating stats. I couldn’t fathom the contents of her heart. I didn’t even know the “Sieg” they were talking about, so of course I had no reply for her.

At the sight of me being speechless, she grinned and shot me a parting remark. “Well, all that aside, if you take anything away from today, remember this: when the dust has settled and it’s all over, you’re gonna have to go along with whatever Dia wants a good hundred times or so. Plus, I’m pretty angry myself... Anyway, ta-ta for today!”

With that, she instantly sprang meters and meters into the air despite holding someone in her arms. She kicked off the wall of a building and ascended to the roof before dashing across the rooftops.

“Whoa, she’s fast!”

I was about to chase after her, but I hesitated. In all likelihood, I was the only one there who could keep pace with her; even Snow probably couldn’t. And if I chased them, it would inevitably turn into a fight. Against such bottomless wells of pure prowess, I was hardly keen to prod the hornets’ nest.

As such, I simply tracked them through *Layered Dimension*, but they slipped outside the range of my tracking near where Greeard—the border of the country to the southeast—lay.



The rest of our guard duty went without a hitch. While the occasional ill-mannered or uncivil person did pop up, none of them were anyone the guild members couldn’t handle. None were strong enough to force us to rush to the scene like the two girls from before.

As I watched the guild members split up from my place in my office, I thought about those girls. Who or what were they, and what were they after? Currently, Snow and Palinchron probably had the scoop.

I tried asking Snow first, but all she said was, “What I told you that night is literally everything.” As for those girls, she said they were “just acquaintances” and resolutely stopped at that. That was maybe partly due to the fact that she “couldn’t be assed,” but to my eyes, it looked as though she really didn’t know much more about them. So I decided to stop grilling Snow. Instead, I’d wait for the next candidate, Palinchron, in my office.

Snow, for her part, also recommended I ask Palinchron. However, I wasn’t a huge fan of how she started nodding off right after she made that suggestion. I sighed and continued to turn it all over in my mind.

I dare say I’ll bump into those two again. And someday I’ll have to fight them. That was the premonition I got. And I had to prepare for that eventuality. *In order to lay the groundwork, I...*

“You look stressed, Kanami.”

Palinchron strode right into my office. Snow, who had been sleeping by the window, sprang to her feet at the sudden visit. Awkwardly, she started to

pretend she was setting about doing some work.

“You could at least knock, Palinchron. You gave Snow a fright.”

“To you, Kanami, isn’t someone entering this building akin to a knock on the door?”

“Sure, but still.”

Palinchron knew my abilities better than anyone else. In fact, he knew a lot about a lot of things. I got straight to the point.

“Palinchron, are you hiding something from me?” I asked bluntly.

“Oh, did Snow tell you something?” he replied, not flustered at all.

“She did too, but I met some folks who called me Sieg in town earlier. And they were looking for you.”

“Well, that was quick. They’re already here, huh?” Palinchron smiled happily. Part of him even seemed nostalgic.

“Answer me. Who is Sieg? Are you hiding something?”

“I can’t answer that, buddy. Even if I told you I’m not hiding anything, I can’t prove it. Nobody can prove that they’re on the up and up. If somebody’s hiding something, why would they ever admit it?” he replied, flippant as ever.

“I mean, yeah, but...”

It was true. Asking the person I suspected directly meant nothing. Even so, I wanted to ask him. I owed him my life, and he was one of the few adults I could trust. It was for that very reason that I figured I wanted to hear it from his mouth—no, that was the reason I figured Palinchron and I would have to butt heads.

Seeing me staring at him, his expression turned serious. “Kanami. Is it all really that important?”

“Of... Of course it is.”

“Aren’t you happy right now?”

“Happy?”

“Mar-Mar is on the road to recovery. You’re starting to earn respect as guildmaster, and your Dungeon diving with Snow is going smoothly. If you stick to this path, you’ll want for nothing. A fulfilling life awaits you. Mar-Mar gets to be with her beloved big brother and you get to be with your beloved little sister. A life of bliss for you both. Right now, your and Mar-Mar’s desires have without a doubt been realized. And yet you’d still look for lies?”

I’d never seen that expression on his face before. There was no hint of amusement there. It was serious business through and through.

“I... I...”

I felt like my brain was melting into a sweet-smelling syrup. *It’s just as he says. All of my desires have been granted. All of the things I wanted back in my world came true after I came to this world. My sister is alive and beside me. She’s on the mend. I’ve got a job that’s worth doing, and I lead a comfortable life. All of my comrades are good people, and I’ve even got someone I can call my partner. I can’t think of a single negative. I’m happy. I’m really happy.*

I should be happy.

I should be, but...

But my heart just couldn’t rest easy. Every cell in my body was screaming that sticking to this path was a bad idea. Something lying in the corner of my mind was rejecting this, and it wouldn’t allow me to look the other way.

“Even so,” I said, translating that something into concrete words, “I need to uncover any lies there may be, I think. They say lies never truly help. And though I don’t know why, I do think that’s true. If I lose the happiness I have now due to learning the truth, I know I’ll just pursue happiness again, so...I wanna know the truth and nothing but the truth.”

Palinchron’s expression was respectful. “Even if the lies are out of kindness?”

I nodded immediately. “Even if.”

This wasn’t a conclusion I’d come to by thinking about it rationally. Instead, it was naked instinct that steered me. Logic didn’t have me in its cage now, and that felt so invigorating. And I got the feeling that that briskness was proof the instinctive answer was the right one.

“Keh heh. That’s Kanami for you. I expected no less,” he said, singing my praise for some reason.

I had no idea what about me he was complimenting, but in any case, it seemed I’d struck a chord or two in his heart.

“So if you know something, Palinchron, tell me...please.”

“But I don’t need to come out and tell you. You’re going to figure it out soon enough anyway.”

I knew Palinchron was that kind of guy, but right now, it was just annoying. I could almost feel his words coiling around me and gnawing at my body, and I grew uneasy.

That’s right. I feel like something has its tendrils around me...

“I have it arranged so that you’ll find out in no time. You don’t gotta worry,” he continued with a sunny look on his face, and with the sort of steely conviction that told me he thought that’d have anybody convinced.

I wavered. I could feel that *something* from before crawl back inside me. *You know what? If Palinchron can assert that so definitively, then I don’t have to follow up—*

“All right, that’s that problem solved. Now then, I need to hurry up with my preparations for heading to Laoravia proper. If I don’t hurry on outta here, I’ll end up bumping into folks I’d *really* rather not.”

No.

No, I thought, tearing the something inside me back out of its hole. That something, a different something lying in the recesses of my heart, rejected Palinchron’s response.

That’s not cutting it. He hasn’t told me a thing yet!

“Wait, hold on, Palinchron! Give me a clear answer!” I shouted, stopping him before he could exit the room.

He scratched his head, a harried look on his face. “I figured you wouldn’t take that lying down. Your ability to put up a fight is as crazy as ever, Kanami.”

“What’re you talking about? Never mind that, just tell me alr—”

“All right, you got me. In that case, it can’t be helped. What say we strike a deal?”

“Strike a deal? Why should I have to—”

“If you take down the Guardian of Floor 30, I’ll tell you, Kanami,” he said with an expression that screamed, *Now here’s an idea*. “I’ll tell you about ‘Sieg’ and the girls you met today. I’ll tell you everything. Those are the terms of the deal. As you know, I’m a twisted sorta guy who never does anything for free. Deals, however, I’ll honor. If there’s something you want outta me, prepare something equivalent in exchange and see where it takes you.”

“But...I mean, I can’t just beat a Guardian like that. No one’s ever even been to Floor 30.”

“Oh no, my friend. It’s an exceedingly fair proposal. Not only will it be to everybody’s benefit, but the difficulty level isn’t even all that high. As you are now, you’ll hardly break a sweat.”

Clearly, in his eyes, this was the ultimate concession. The fact that he wasn’t being long-winded and equivocal and was instead laying out a deal was proof of that. Everybody in Epic Seeker knew that Palinchron was only ever honest when it came to quid pro quo.

With that, he made to go out the door. I figured it would be unwise to get into it further, so I just watched him. I’d gotten him, Palinchron, to make me a pledge. I couldn’t deny that he’d done so to buy himself time, but for the time being, things were moving forward. If I incurred his disfavor, he’d call off that deal and I’d be left with nothing at all. I wouldn’t be able to ask him anything. Besides, Maria and I owed him our lives. And it wouldn’t be right to further bother our savior...

Our...savior?

Snow stared at me, frozen in place, not pursuing him, with a puzzled look on her face. “You’re not gonna go after him?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s okay. Palinchron set up a trade-off for us...and the guy can be trusted when it comes to a deal, if nothing else, so...”

“If you say so,” she said, looking none too pleased. She wasn’t on board with how that had gone. As for why she wasn’t on board, I understood the reason, albeit only vaguely. I just couldn’t *acknowledge* it to myself. There was still something I was lacking—something I needed to learn or find before I could accept it. I needed the right conditions. I needed more information. I needed to be in the correct state of mind. I had nothing but holes in need of filling.

I took my time exiting my office. Snow must have thought that meant we were going our separate ways for the day because she exited through the window and headed for her room.

I was feeling a tad fatigued. I walked on unsteady feet and made for the room where Maria waited. The sun was already down, and it was pitch-dark out, yet Maria rubbed her sleepy eyes; she had been staying up for my return.

“Hello, Kanami,” said the baby sister I loved so dearly.

She smiled the greatest of smiles, and it was a blissful sight, yet the sense of discomfort I’d felt since that day continued to plague me. My head was throbbing.

“Hi, Maria. How’re you feeling?”

“I’ve recuperated a great deal. I can even move—”

“Any headaches? Is your head hurting maybe?”

Those girls had called Maria their companion as well, and Palinchron had said more than a few words about her too. I had to be sure she wasn’t experiencing what I was.

“A headache? Well, actually, yes, it hurts a little bit, but...”

“All right, then, tell me, are you familiar with the names ‘Lastiara Whoseyards’ and ‘Diablo Sith’?”

“Where did that come from? I’ve never heard those names before.”

“I... I see.”

To my eyes, it looked like she honestly didn’t know them. That being said, she *was* suffering from a headache. Maybe it was the same sort of headache I had.

Little by little, the picture was getting less fuzzy. It felt like I was completing a crossword puzzle, inching closer and closer to the truth. But I still didn't have the whole solution. I'd only just begun to fill in the blanks of my knowledge. What I was seeing was the shadow of the full story, so I couldn't be sure.

As expected, for now, Palinchron's deal seemed like the quickest and easiest way. Moreover, by holding up my end of the bargain, I'd also be working toward a plan of defense against those two absurdly powerful girls in case we had to fight. With that in mind, I was forced to level grind either way. And if a Guardian lay in wait at the end of that level grinding path, it wasn't a bad idea to make it my guiding goalpost.

Long story short, I decided to go along with our little agreement, and Palinchron must have understood that. To be honest, I did feel like I was dancing in the palm of his hand, but with no other options, I set my mind to tackling Floor 30.

"Kanami, is something wrong? Who are those people?"

"Nah, it's nothing. I was just wondering."

"Okay..."

"No need to worry. Never mind that; if you've got a headache, you should hit the hay."

"Ah, right!" She happily scooped over to invite me into bed.

"You... You wanna keep sleeping in the same bed, huh? I figured..."

"We're brother and sister. It's only natural."

A pause. "Okay, got it."

I knew she was feeling lonely and disheartened, but I wasn't quite used to it. If I refused, I knew it would make her sad, so I had no choice but to agree. As such, I closed my eyes with my hand in hers like always.

Even as I felt the warmth of Maria's body next to me, I turned it all over in my head: What I understood at the moment. What I didn't. What I had my suspicions about. What I was lacking. What was important to me. And the more I thought about these things, the worse my migraine got. Regardless, I had no

intention of shutting off my brain, because I knew that if I stopped, I'd regret it down the road. No matter what stabbing pain befell me, I didn't stop thinking until the moment I fell asleep.



“Long story short, if I pop in and kill the Guardian of Floor 30, the issue will be resolved. Palinchron may be Palinchron, but he's not one to break a promise.”

“He won't break the promise outright, but he's not above smooth talking his way *around* it.”

“You're right. The chances are high he'll do that.”

After checking to see that I didn't have any guild work for the next few days, Snow and I had gone to Floor 20. Because of the *Connection* shortcut between my office and that floor, we had plenty of time on our hands.

“There's no use getting anxious about it. One way or another, I've gotta Dungeon dive at some point. There's the deal with Palinchron, but I need to get stronger in order to be able to fight those girls too. And the Dungeon's ideal for level grinding.”

“If you get strong enough to trounce those two, you'll never need to worry about anyone, I'll give you that.”

“Of course, all you have to do is give me the whole story yourself.”

“I have given you the whole story. I told you everything it was incumbent on me to say on day one. The rest is up to you to decide and act upon. It's not like I know that much either.”

“Gotcha. Sorry I keep asking. It's crystal clear that you're on my side. Right, then—time to get back on my feet and do some diving. Today we're aiming for the depths.”

“Kay, well, I'll just follow you.”

“That's fine by me. Just by having you around, I feel a whole lot safer.”

As long as she was in tow, she would help me out, despite what she insisted. The day before had demonstrated that.

Together, we descended the stairs leading to Floor 21. Our plan of action remained unchanged. The end goal had simply gone from Floor 20 to Floor 30.

For the floors up to Floor 23, where the Pathway ended, the work was easy. We only had to follow the road to get to the next floor. While giant monsters occasionally penetrated the Pathway, they didn't pose much of a threat.

As expected of Floor 21, a four-legged monster called a Fury pounced on me. I intercepted it without breaking a sweat. Furies had given me trouble not too long ago, but now they were a cakewalk. Last time, I had been Level 12. Now I was Level 15. All of my abilities had grown by leaps and bounds. It took me mere seconds to kill the creature.

Stuck with multiple swords everywhere, the Fury collapsed, turning into light and disappearing. The swords that had once pierced its hide clattered to the floor. I picked up the swords and the magic gem drop. Some of the blades were still usable, while others had gotten chipped. I threw them all back into my inventory. Thanks to Mr. Alibers, I now had the prospect of getting more use out of them, so I had to collect them.

"I'm pretty sure the Fury called for reinforcements, so let's pick up the pace a bit."

"Okay, sure."

It appeared Snow also knew of Furies' special ability, judging by how she'd taken it for granted that we should start running, I could tell she had a wealth of experience.

As we ran, I asked her a question. "Come to think of it, what's the deepest point you've reached?"

A pause. "Floor 20."

"Floor 20? You seem to know your stuff about the Furies of Floor 21, though."

"I know it's easy to forget, but I *am* an academy student, so I'm reasonably well-informed. Plus, my brother's told me about stuff too."

"Ah, okay, I see."

Upon reflection, I realized that since Snow had the strongest diver as a

brother, it made sense that she was well-acquainted with Dungeon stuff. Information from the mouth of the strongest diver was a priceless treasure.

While we traveled, I asked Snow more about the Dungeon. Some monsters tried getting in our way en route, but they were no match for me anymore.

Floor 22 was much the same. While it was harder than Floor 21, we were able to advance thanks to Snow's magic. She saw I was having difficulty with the Rio Eagles' attacks from above, so she came to my aid using non-elemental magic. By causing a wide area to quake, the birds lost their sense of balance and were unable to maintain altitude, allowing me to make short work of them by simply slicing and dicing them.

Eventually, we reached the end of the Pathway, midway through Floor 23.

"Here's where the Pathway cuts off," said Snow. "What're you gonna do now?"

"It's okay. I've been here before, so I know the way. Before, I..."

Before? I've come here alone in the past?

I knew that had to be the case. Otherwise, it didn't make sense. I remembered beating the boss named Flame Squall on Floor 23. But something stuck out to me a little.

I beat a monster like Flame Squall at Level 12? By myself?

"Something wrong?"

"No, I... No, this level's just so hot."

"Yeah. I guess it's a little hot in here. I'm fine, though."

"A little? It's crazy hot in here."

"I'm a dragonewt, so this is nothing for me."

"So it's the genetic gap... That's so unfair."

"Them's the breaks."

Looking closer, I saw that Snow didn't have a bead of sweat on her, which made the strengths of the dragonewt race clear as day. Their bodies were built differently from us humans, enabling them to be unaffected by the harshest

environments. I envied her.

We continued through the floor. Although we'd left the Pathway, the entrance to Floor 24 wasn't very far at all. It had to be because I'd been here once before. That was why I was progressing so smoothly.

In time, we reached the lava zone that was Floor 24. This was where easy street ended.

"Snow. I've never made it past midway through this floor. This is where things get real."

"Okay."

"Be careful around the lava. Lizard monsters are hiding inside it."

"I know that."

It seemed that Glenn Walker had reached this floor before too. She didn't need to be told; she was keeping her distance from the lava.

"The heat here's really unbearable. Oh, I know. Spellcast: *Freeze*."

When I attempted to quell the heat in the vicinity using *Freeze*, something felt anomalous. My magic energy was flowing *too* fluidly. My ice spell was operating so smoothly that it shocked even me.

"Wait, huh?"

"You're freezing me too?" Snow asked.

In its utter efficiency, *Freeze* had affected the temperature in an area of effect that included Snow where she stood, not just my immediate vicinity.

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to. It's just, my ice magic is running super well. Maybe it's easier to use against hot temperatures, or I dunno what." Not even I could make heads or tails of this phenomenon. I didn't know how to put it into words. It was truly all in the feel of it. On an intuitive, emotional level, my understanding of heat...or, no, of *fire*, had deepened. Was that why?

I could grasp in fine detail how the atoms were vibrating. And for some reason, my body knew how to suppress that vibration. It was a strange sensation—I got the gut feeling that at some point, I'd quelled something much,

much hotter than even this lava floor.

“It’s like, I have a super easy time cooling heat sources, I guess?”

“Is that so. Good, then. That’s not a bad power to have.”

“Sure, yeah, but...”

I continued through Floor 24, grappling with this new mystery all the while. I was using *Freeze*, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t using *Dimension* as well. In effect, it was like I had a very thin version of *Wintermension* up. And on Floor 24, *Wintermension* displayed a level of strength heretofore unseen. Last time around, *Dimension* hadn’t been able to penetrate the interior of the lava. *Wintermension*, on the other hand, was able to extend its perception field into the lava. The monsters hiding inside the stuff might as well have been right in front of my eyes for all the good it did them. I distinctly saw a Poison Salamander emerge from it behind us. It leaped out and its claws flashed in the air, sure it had taken us by surprise. I spun around, and in the same motion, I fetched a sword from my inventory and speared its head from afar.

“GWAH!”

The monster breathed its last, its claws never reaching their target.

“Huh?” said Snow, who didn’t know what had just happened.

“Looks like in exchange for them being able to swim in lava, their overall stats are on the low side. I was able to one-and-done it.” I put the sword and the magic gem drop into my inventory.

“A monster was behind us?”

“Yep. But you don’t gotta worry. I won’t let any of them near you.”

“Hrm. A monster whose approach even I can’t sense, huh? All right, I’ll stick by your side. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. We’ll make it work.”

“If you do, you’ll be doing me a favor too.”

She started walking right behind me. It couldn’t be clearer that, if anything came up, she intended to foist the enemy on me.

We ventured deeper and deeper, *Dimension* keeping a watchful eye on the

inside of the lava as well.

“Spellcast: *Layered Dimension*.”

In order to find the staircase, I’d intensified the spell. It was the same principle as when I extended *Dimension* to encompass the town for my guild work. I was stretching my perception field thinner but wider. Of course, here in the Dungeon, where there was a lot of magic energy that got in the way, it was harder to spread out *Dimension* than it was back on the surface. However, perhaps thanks to my experience doing it on the surface, I managed to spot the staircase leading to Floor 25. I also came to understand Floor 24’s special areas, bosses, and the like.

One object stood out to me as peculiar—one didn’t see many man-made artifacts in the Dungeon, after all. It was an altar. Somehow, one or more people had built an altar that was surrounded by lava. And at the center of the altar lay a sword.

“Did you find it? The staircase?” asked Snow, who had inferred what I was doing.

“Yep, found it. And I found something weird along with it.”

“Something weird?”

“Like an altar. It’s more toward the other side of the floor, and it’s got a sword on it.”

“An altar and a sword. Oh, I see.”

“You see? Do you know something?”

A pause. “I do. But explaining it’s a pain.”

“Oh c’mon, tell me.”

I wasn’t about to let this one slide. In the Dungeon, information was life-or-death. And since Snow knew that, she grudgingly relented and started quietly explaining.

“In all likelihood, it’s a Dungeon drop.”

“Drop? Like the magic gems that the monsters drop?”

“Right, like that. The Dungeon re-drops items from the past. It’s called Re-collection. Divers don’t make it past Floor 23, so drops like that lie untouched.”

“So the Dungeon itself is dropping items?”

“This place is the legacy of the past to begin with, spat up by the land itself. The Dungeon serves the role of a circulatory organ, bundling the memories and magic energy that accumulated in the earth and regurgitating them. That’s what they taught us at the academy.”

“That’s news to me. Never would’ve guessed that the Dungeon had that kinda function.”

“Even at the academy, not many know. At any rate, I think that altar’s a relic from the past. And just maybe, that sword’s a famous blade from history.”

“It’s all Greek to me, but it looks like that’s the most important bit for me. I’ll try analyzing the sword from over here.”

An intriguing tidbit, to say the least. In my own way, I pondered the existence of the Dungeon. From what Snow had told me, I could no longer assume that this Dungeon was simply a natural fixture of the world. *“It’s a fantasy world, so a Dungeon like this is just there”* wasn’t on the table anymore. The place had to have been made by someone for a specific purpose. If a person made it, it would explain why the Dungeon was so convenient for humans—it was constructed to be that way. So who was it? Who had created the Dungeon?

One of my trains of thought chewed on that question while I used Analyze via *Dimension* on the sword on the altar.

【RUKH BRINGER】

Attack Power 7. Mind Taint +2.00.

“Well?”

“Looks like it’s a rare item, that’s for sure. But it seems risky too.”

“Are you gonna pick it up?”

“Guess I might as well. It could be worth money.”

Snow and I walked to the spooky and suspicious altar. Several Poison Salamanders attacked us on our way there, but as I could detect them while they were still inside the lava, they were easy kills for me. After a few minutes, we reached the altar, which was encircled by flowing lava rivers.

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have been able to get closer due to the lava, but at present, my physical prowess was such that I could probably make the jump. The river was less than ten meters across. Even so, back in my world, that would be close to the world record. To think I thought of that distance as a cinch...I was frightening *myself* a little.

"All right, I'm gonna jump over and get it."

"See you later." Needless to say, Snow didn't make the leap.

After checking that the lava was devoid of threats, I got a running start and jumped. As expected, I succeeded in clearing it without difficulty.

I approached the altar and surveyed the blade. Seeing it up close, I could tell the magic energy dwelling in the sword was nothing to sneeze at. To my eyes, it was around the amount of magic energy possessed by a mid-level mage. And above all, the sword was gorgeous to behold. Its shape was unique, eschewing beauty of function for a mono-black design. It had a slight harshness to it, but that too had a tasteful flair. It did nothing to detract from its beauty. Then there was the beautiful purple energy that colored the beautiful blade. It didn't harm the jet-black blade's sense of wholeness, though, instead serving as a complementary purple accent. The sword Mr. Alibers and I had come up with was also wonderful, but this type of blade wasn't bad either.

And man, how great would it look if some bright red blood were trickling down that black blade...

"Shock!"

A shock wave of magic energy came at me from behind. I hopped to the side and only barely dodged the attack.

"Snow?" I stammered. "What're you doing?"

"Bro, the sword was possessing you," she said nonchalantly as she formulated another spell. "I figured I'd hit you to bring you back to your senses."

“Possessed? Me?”

“The sword’s energy was starting to seep into your body. And that’d be very, very bad.”

I put Snow’s remarks in a corner of my mind and reexamined the sword. The energy of it was not unlike a sinister animus, and it was writhing in its attempt to raid my body. Just by looking, I was able to see that, far from the “beautiful” magic energy I’d viewed it as moments ago, it was nothing any human being should ever touch.

I saw this obviously evil sword as beautiful?

“Yeah... Yeah, that’s pretty bad.”

“When you approached it, it showed its true colors. What do we do? Leave it be? If you wield it, I think it’ll turn you into a murderer.”

“Nah, I’ll take it. That way, I’m preventing someone else from taking it and becoming a murderer. If I’m not wrong, my magic should allow me to hold it, so...”

“Well, I can’t say I’m down with that. I feel like if you wield it, you’ll become the world’s number one threat.”

“I won’t actually use the thing, so don’t worry. I’m gonna defang it from a safe distance. Spellcast: *Wintermension*.”

“Be careful. Don’t forget that if you screw this up, I’ll be your first victim. So do watch out.”

I ignored her and deployed my magic. I was undertaking this retrieval because I was confident I could do it, of course. With *Wintermension*, I could affect an object’s magic energy even from a distance away.

From my spot several meters removed, I repressed the sword-energy that was trying to edge closer, slowly walking up to the blade as I did so, one step at a time so that the sword-energy never touched me. After a few minutes, I finally arrived right in front of it. This was where the true battle began. I didn’t let my guard down, continuing to keep the sword’s energy away from me as I cast *Ice*. Naturally, my target was the sword itself. It must have sensed the

danger because it undulated its energy in an attempt to rebuff my spell. However, *Wintermension* suppressed that energy and prevented it from countering my magic.

A few seconds later, the sword was covered in ice. Carefully, meticulously, I placed it into my inventory.

“Phew.” I wiped my sweat away. Sealing complete. I jumped back over the lava and returned to Snow. “I’m back.”

“Well done. Don’t take it inside the Dungeon, okay?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Not gonna lie, I’m worried. Why don’t you just destroy the thing here and now?”

“Nah, I think that if we end up destroying it, we should get Mr. Alibers or other folks who can use holy magic to take it apart. It could make for raw materials for something else, after all. And there’s a chance it goes for a small fortune too.”

“True. I do think that if you can disassemble it, it’ll sell. But that’s cold comfort.”

It was rare for Snow to argue the point instead of caving immediately. That was how uneasy it was making her. I had no choice but to bring the blade back out of my inventory.

“If you insist, I guess I’ll break it.”

“Yeah, let’s. Leave it to me.”

Snow grabbed the lump of ice that Rukh Bringer was encased in and cast her vibration magic at close range, snapping the sword in two. In that moment, I could feel the fiendish energy formerly flowing out of it gradually abate. It might have lost its value as a magic sword, but in exchange, we’d secured some peace of mind.

“Good, that’s settled. Thanks, Kanami.” She gave me the twin pieces of sword.

“I was in the wrong for risking so much trying to take the thing. You don’t gotta thank me.”

Snow smiled faintly. Then she pointed to the depths and said, “Right, then. Shall we?”

I thought I heard some verve in her voice. It looked to me as though she’d mustered some honest-to-goodness enthusiasm, however meager.

“Yep,” I replied, hurriedly resuming our dive in the hopes of keeping that small flame inside her from going out.



Perhaps due to my having stumbled on Rukh Bringer moments prior, we started paying close attention to the Dungeon’s item drops as we progressed, but we didn’t really encounter any rare ones on that sword’s level. While we did occasionally discover Dungeon drops, they were almost all old equipment or accessories devoid of magic energy.

We cleared Floors 24 and 25 as we collected items of that nature, which wasn’t hard considering I could pinpoint the location of the staircase through *Dimension*. Nor were the enemies that attacked us much of a threat. Incidentally, the rivers on Floor 25 flowed not with lava but with boiling water, and the steam blocked our field of vision like so much mist. That being said, my detection magic was strong against vision-occluding attacks. If I made full use of *Dimension* and my menu-sight, nothing could ever get the jump on me. Luckily, the vast majority of the monsters were the type that kept hidden, so it took less than an hour to get to Floor 26.

It was around halfway through Floor 26 that some bumps in the road of our previously smooth Dungeon dive began to arise. And those bumps were Floor 26 monsters: Crystal Golems. As the name suggested, they were moving statues whose whole bodies were made of crystal. This crystal, however, were far harder than ordinary. Their hides were so hard, in fact, that even a hit from me and Snow couldn’t even crack them. Moreover, their high defense against magic meant that I couldn’t land a finishing blow no matter how long we fought.

“Dammit! They’re just too damn tough!”

I tossed aside the fifth sword I’d inadvertently damaged and retrieved a sixth weapon. Since I was running out of swords, I opted for one of the largish

weapons that I'd prepared for use by Snow. Beside me, Snow clobbered our enemy with a magic energy-infused blow.

"Impulse Smash!"

I had *Dimension* up, which afforded me a grasp of the workings of the magic attack that Snow had cast. Her hulking axe collided with the monster's crystal hide, sparks flying. Amplifying the force of the impact via magic generated yet greater destructive power. It was a blunt attack, but it seemed to be effective against our opponent. At long last, cracks formed on the sturdy crystal.

"My attacks aren't working!" I said. "I'm just wasting weapons! Snow, please, do this for me!"

I swung with a sword that was too big for me and struck the golem. It didn't deal any damage, but it was enough to knock it off-balance.

"Do you know how tiring this is?! Impulse Smash!"

Snow brought her huge axe down against the off-balance golem, hitting it where the cracks were and finally shattering it.

"We...that took forever. Hff, hff..."

"Hff, hff..."

We were gasping for breath as the golem turned into light and faded away. I reviewed our current situation as I picked up its gem drop.

"Kanami," she stammered, "you got any weapons left?"

"I'm not out of weapons, but at this pace, I may run out before we reach Floor 27."

"Now that it's kinda stopped being quick and simple, I'm thinking I maybe wanna go home."

"No, we're still okay for now. The bastards are hard but they move slow. We just need to ignore 'em."

Snow kept insisting on going back, and in truth, thanks to *Connection*, there was a way for her to do so by herself. However, letting her head home would be a problem for me. So long as there were enemies I couldn't put an end to

without her help, I wanted to avoid progressing solo.

“Urgh,” said Snow. “I don’t wanna have to go up twenty-six whole floors by myself!”

“Hey, don’t go home without me. If things get really dicey, I’ll get us home using *Connection*.”

“I really am pretty beat.”

“I see you’ve still got plenty of HP and MP left though.”

“Don’t be a slave to the numbers, Kanami. You’ll misread the heart of things.”

“Yeah, good point. I’ll be careful. That said, you’ve still got some steam left. That, I know.”

“Wait, huh? Aww c’mon.”

Snow had only cast a spell a handful of times. There was no way she didn’t have lots of juice left in the tank.

“For the time being, let’s go a bit deep— Damn!”

Dimension had picked up on approaching monsters. Multiple Crystal Golems were drawing closer and closer. I instantly calculated a different route to the next floor, grabbing Snow by the hand and striding off.

“Snow, we’ve got more crystal things on our asses. Let’s change route.”

“Guess for Floor 26, we’ve got no choice but to keep fleeing.”

Snow squeezed my hand and quickened her pace; it seemed she shared my sentiment of not wanting to fight those things. While they shelled out a lot of EXP, the golems were nowhere near worth the effort. Even just containing them burned through weapons, and killing them outright unavoidably required MP expenditure. They were a massive pain in the ass. Evading encounters with them, however, was easy. They were slow at the best of times, but they were even slower than they were patrolling the Dungeon. With *Dimension* on my side, we’d never run into another one.

We ended up taking a slightly roundabout path, but that was preferable to getting into fights that weren’t worth the effort. In the end, we made it to the

staircase leading to Floor 27 without having to fight any more of them, and we hurried down the steps.

Floor 27 gave a cool and refreshing vibe, the opposite of the lava zone spanning the floors around Floor 25. The first thing I did was take a look at what materials were in the corridor walls. I thrust a sword into the nearly transparent sky-blue stone, and a high-pitched clanking sound reverberated. My blade got a chip in it, but the wall didn't.

"Is this the same stuff the Crystal Golems are made of?"

"It does look like crystal."

But then, it couldn't have actually been crystal. No crystal I knew of was this hard. It had to be a different mineral that was magical in nature and was just *called* crystal. And the fact that this magical mineral was what these walls were made of left me in a less than pleasant cold sweat.

"If the corridors are 'crystal'..."

"The monsters are too?"

The chances were high. As a rule, the monsters on a given floor were tailored to the features of that floor. The floor had a river? Aquatic monsters. Lots of trees? Insect monsters. Hot and muggy? Fire monsters. Our experience thus far had confirmed that association.

I expanded *Dimension*, and while I probed for the next floor, I observed the monsters of Floor 27 at the same time. I detected some humanoid-shaped beings of crystal prowling the halls. Just as expected, there were more Crystal Golems to contend with here. And that wasn't all either. Unlike Floor 26, there was a great variety of monsters here, and needless to say, they were all made of crystal as well. There were spiders and ants and things crawling around too. It was nothing but monsters that promised to be a hassle. The biggest issue was how light they were. The Crystal Golems were sluggish, but the smaller crystal monsters were fast on their feet. We wouldn't be able to flee quite as easily as on the previous floor.

"Yikes. It's nothing but monsters that look both hard-skinned and fast."

"It's settled; we're going back. Let's go home. C'mon, let's go."

“No, we’re diving a little bit deeper. We’ll keep going until your MP hits the low zone.”

“Does that mean we’ll be focusing on fighting using my magic?”

“I’ll fight too, but you’re probably gonna have to be the one who finishes the things.”

“I... I’m gonna collapse from overwork!”

“If you do, I’ll toss you through my portal, so don’t worry.”

“You’re evil. You’re evil, Guildmaster.”

“Oh, like you’re gonna collapse anyway. You’re nowhere near that tapped out.”

I led her by the hand and together, we resumed our dive. I decided to put some feelers out by looking at the menu of a nearby monster and found a crystal ant that was around a meter in overall length. I swooped down on it with my sword.

【MONSTER】Crystal Ant: Rank 26

Going by its name, I concluded it was a crystal golem that exhibited ant-like behaviors. Its relatively small frame lit a scant ember of hope inside me—maybe as long as it wasn’t as big as one of those proper golems, my sword could damage it. But the blade bounced back in vain, accompanied by that familiar high-pitched clank.

“Damn!”

I’d spared none of my strength, and yet I couldn’t quite pierce the Crystal Ant’s hide. However, unlike with the golem of Floor 26, it did leave some cracks, so I knew that, at least when it came to defense power, it was inferior to a Crystal Golem.

The ant unleashed a shrill cry at me and bared its fangs. Its distinct howl reminded me of the monsters of Floors 21 and 22, which attacked using strength in numbers. They loosed a similar cry when they called for backup. I

continued the offensive as I ascertained the position of monsters a little bit away via *Dimension*. Just as I'd thought, the ants that had heard the first ant's summons had promptly started zipping toward us.

"Oh shit, the other ants in the area are gathering around us too!"

"What?!"

I had no other choice but to retrieve the big axe that would normally be for Snow's use from my inventory. Mustering all my strength, I slammed the Crystal Ant into the wall. Had it been a golem, that wouldn't have put a single crack in it, but this thing's defensive power was slightly lower, and the difference in the hardness of the wall compared to the previous floor had an impact. The Crystal Ant that hit the wall now bore cracks in its body, and it turned sluggish. When Snow struck it, it shattered to pieces. Killing it had taken less time than expected, but we hardly had room to relax. A sizable drove of ants was now heading our way.

I glanced at the great axe in my hands. A single attack and it was already chipped. The blade of Snow's weapon was smashed, rendering it into a mere cudgel of sorts.

"End of the line, huh? Snow, let's go back to Floor 26 for now."

"Yeah, let's."

If we kept on fighting without a strategy, it'd burn through the weapons in my inventory in no time flat. Now that we knew that, we chose to go back the way we came. We ran, dodging the ants' fervent onslaught and arriving at Floor 26, where all the monsters were slow-moving. We took a breather.

"Maybe that's the farthest we can go today?"

"Let's go home," stammered Snow unhesitatingly.

If we strained ourselves, we could probably pass through Floor 27, but I settled for learning the characteristics of Floor 27 for next time.

"Spellcast: *Connection*."

Snow and I were both at full HP. What we'd lost instead of life points was a ton of usable weapons. Lesson learned—this was a whole new way my party

and I could be forced to retreat. With that, we drew the day's dive to a close.



"I see ya smashed up another small raft of swords again, Master."

"The monsters are hard-skinned, you see..."

I'd dropped by Mr. Alibers's atelier and showed him all of my damaged weapons. Unlike the last time I had paid him a visit, the place was now a whirlwind of activity. There were multiple other blacksmiths there, none of whom I was familiar with, all at work in the cramped interior. He must have asked for more hands in order to fulfill my request to make it fast.

"Hard-skinned?"

"Yes. The monsters around Floor 26 are made of crystal, which makes them a pain to deal with."

"Floor 26, ya say? Now there's a world we can't even imagine. Oh, I know. Ya got any o' their magic gems?"

"I have a little..." I took the Crystal Golem's gem from my inventory and showed it to him.

"Let's see... I'm guessin' this is a Crystal Golem's gem?"

"You can tell, sir?"

"If I recall correctly, I think the monster what appears in the sacred peak in the west is made o' the same material. It's one o' the highest-class minerals out there. 'Raycrystal,' I think it's called. Ya can find some in the Dungeon too."

Apparently, those hard-skinned monsters existed outside of the Dungeon as well.

"I'd like a sword that can cut Raycrystal."

"Another unreasonable ask from our guildmaster...is what I'd like to say, but in point o' fact, all ya gotta do is wait a bit longer and that problem's solved."

"Wait, what?"

"The weapon ya commissioned us to make will cut 'em. Crescent Pectolazri's even more outstandin' as a mineral than Raycrystal. It contains an order o'

magnitude more magic energy.”

“That’s a relief. So how long is it going to take for it to be completed?”

“We’ve got a hefty budget, which I’m usin’ to get this many smiths on the job. It’ll be finished by tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night? Okay, got it.”

I was pleased to hear that the date of completion was closer than I might’ve guessed. I had no knowledge of iron smelting, but I was under no illusion that forging a sword was easy. Maybe they were forging it by the graces of magi-tech. Maybe the blacksmiths here were just that skilled.

“You free today?”

“Apart from needing to get some rest later, I’m free.”

“In that case, can you tell me about your Dungeon dive?”

“You want to hear about *me*? How come?”

“If ya clue us in on problems ya encountered in the Dungeon, or stuff it’d be good to take into it, I can make that stuff, lest my hands get too idle. Also, I just wanna hear the stories you’ve got to tell on a personal level, you bein’ a hero and all.”

“I’m no hero, but sharing information is definitely necessary.”

I’d be relying on Mr. Alibers’s help a lot going forward, so deepening my bond with him would give me an easier time of my dives. I nodded and started getting into what happened during my sessions exploring the Dungeon. Snow had accompanied me to the entrance of the atelier, but then she’d said she would go home to sleep and left me there. She must have figured Mr. Alibers and I would end the day with another long conversation, and since she wasn’t wrong, I hadn’t stopped her.

“Hmm. I see,” he said. “So ya procured some fire-element gems in the lava zone. If the heat’s a concern, I’ll make ya some magic items that impede the heat. Luckily, we’ve got ourselves a whole bevy o’ fire-element gems.”

“You’re a lifesaver. If I haven’t given you enough of them, I can go hunt for more.”

“That’s okay; there’s no need for that many. I’ll just make ya a simple necklace. What I’d love to make ya is a full suit o’ armor or a shield that looks good on ya, but I reckon it wouldn’t fit with your fightin’ style.”

“Thank you, but I’d like to avoid using anything too heavy.”

“And ya know, it’d probably help if ya had items that’ll help ya cope with lakes and marshes and the like. I’ll use my own discretion.”

“You’re a lifesaver. I mean it.”

“What else, what else... Ah, right. Ya oughta get a log someplace. Snow can use it as her weapon. If she’s gonna break her weapon anyway, ya oughta have her fight usin’ a log. Plus, from what I hear, blunt-force attacks are more effective against crystal monsters.”

After that, I picked up my newly repaired weapons and headed to where I could acquire some logs. The outskirts of the Dungeon Alliance were still developing, so timber was cheap. For the time being, I bought about a hundred logs, stowing them into my inventory. I was a little worried that they’d be too big, but they fit without a hitch.

That was all the preparations I could do for the moment, so I wasted no time returning to Maria’s room. My Dungeon report card for the day: I had reached the twenty-seventh floor. As I pondered a strategy for the next dive, another day passed.

Chapter 4: Some Quick and Easy Guild Work

Early the next morning, Snow and I went to a church to do our prayers in order to convert the EXP we'd accumulated into a proper level-up. I was now Level 16, and Snow was Level 17.

Come nighttime, our new weapons would be complete. I knew that without the weapons, we'd just be wasting gear on Floor 27. While we wondered how to occupy our time until sundown, we tried to return to the guild. However, when I saw the crowd at the entrance, I stopped. If I remembered correctly, there shouldn't have been any guild work today, and yet...

"Did something happen?" I asked the crowd as their Guildmaster.

The eyes of the people gathered by the entrance fell on me. Our gazes met, and I was amazed at the high-level members of the crowd. I didn't need my menu-sight to be able to tell. The quality of the magic energy spilling out of their bodies spoke to their strength. Perhaps because my level had risen and the accuracy of my dimensional magic had increased, I got the feeling that my understanding of the magic energy in the air had likewise improved.

From among the crowd, a man with particularly potent magic energy stepped forward.

"That face. Am I correct in assuming you're the guildmaster of Epic Seeker?"

"Uh, yes, I am."

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm the guildmaster of Supreme, Elmirahd Siddark. Nice to meet you."

The man with the excess of magic energy proffered a hand. I used Analyze as I gripped it.

【STATUS】

NAME: Elmirahd Siddark

HP: 200/201

MP: 299/299

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 20

STR 4.79

VIT 2.81

DEX 4.12

AGI 7.29

INT 7.19

MAG 18.09

APT 1.67

INNATE SKILLS: Elemental Magic 1.92

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Magical Combat 1.88, Swordplay 0.89

He was indisputably a man of extraordinary talent. Elemental magic was his innate skill, and his magic power was a cut above. In addition, his level and skills were high for his age; he must have been working hard from early on. His blond hair flowed freely down to his shoulders, and his almond-shaped eyes stood out. His attire was the garb of nobility, and his bearing was firm and resolute. The overall impression I got was one of cunning.

【STATUS】

NAME: Elmishd Sidark

LEVEL: 20

STR 4.79 VIT 2.81 DEX 4.12 A

INNATE SKILLS: Elemental M

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Medical



“Er, my name is Aikawa Kanami. I’m inexperienced and I don’t know my left from my right, but it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Don’t know your left from your right, you say? Well, that’s fine.”

After letting go of my hand, he instantly distanced himself physically. I could sense that I’d hurt his feelings a little. Perhaps I’d unwittingly acted rude just now. I was an outworlder, after all. There was every possibility I was being a train wreck. In order to ask whether I’d made some kind of breach of etiquette, I turned to Snow, who had a pained look on her face.

“Lord Siddark?” she murmured.

She’d called him a lord; clearly, this was a man of extremely high status.

“Long time no see, Snow. You can call me El, just like at the academy.”

“Oh no, this isn’t a place of study, so...”

“We’re close enough, aren’t we? I don’t see any issue with it.”

“Okay, understood.”

They’d been classmates at their academy, it would seem. I didn’t know the proper way to interact with this important-looking guy, so I took a step back, intending to leave it to her. Mr. Siddark watched me do so without comment, but Snow shot me a reproachful look: *Don’t run away*.

My eyes replied, *Good luck*. I gave her a beaming smile to see where that got me.

“Now then, Snow,” said Mr. Siddark, ignoring the guildmaster (i.e., me), “I’ve come to Epic Seeker today with a request. As an old-school chum, could I ask you to lend me a hand?”

“A request?”

“Yep. From what I’ve heard, ever since you returned, Epic Seeker’s been making an outstanding showing. In fact, I heard the guild’s been so active that it managed to finish all the tasks the government gave it in a day. And I figured I could use a hand from someone of your caliber.”

“Oh, no, no, I didn’t do any—”

“I know you’re a modest woman. Unlike the dimwitted among us, I’ve assessed your strength accurately. Without you, the guild wouldn’t be able to do anything like finish its work in a day’s time.”

It appeared Mr. Siddark had quite the discerning eye. He could appreciate the usefulness of Snow’s power.

“No, I legitimately didn’t do anything. It’s all thanks to Palinchron Regacy and the new guildmaster.”

“Hm...Palinchron, I can understand. But you’re telling me that gutless man is helping too?”

Gutless? I knew he was disparaging me, but I didn’t know what to say in response. As I was about to nod that I did in fact lack moxie, Snow glared at me: *Show him your nerve. Show him.*

But it wasn’t something you could just demonstrate on a dime. All I could do was shake my head a little. Seeing that, she pouted a tad and turned back around to face Mr. Siddark.

“Kanami’s an excellent guildmaster. Without a doubt.”

“Without a doubt? Color me surprised. I can’t remember the last time I saw you assert something so definitively, with how cautious you are. So you’re saying this man is *that* competent?”

“Yes, seeing as he’s our guildmaster and all. More than anything, he’s also the only partner I’ve deemed worthy.”

Hearing her call me her partner in no uncertain terms, especially given how taciturn she usually was, was a first. I scratched my cheek bashfully. Looking closely, I had a feeling Snow’s face was also a tiny bit red.

Mr. Siddark’s expression turned displeased. “Fine, I get it. If you’re willing to go that far, Snow, then I take it the man is worth testing. And it’s convenient with regard to my request for your collaboration too.”

“You want us to collaborate?”

“I do. A vacancy’s opened up in the plans set forth by Laoravia today. I’d like to fill that vacancy using the guild everyone’s talking about.”

“Please tell us the details of the plan.”

“The plan’s a simple one. It involves doing work on the Pathway on the floors that very recently turned into mere rooms—Floors 10 and 20—by Laoravia’s hand.”

“Construction work on the Pathway? So we’re putting up new barriers in the rooms that have lost their magic energy after losing their Guardians.”

“You’re as perceptive as ever, Snow.”

Back when the violent flames that had once characterized Floor 10 were in the way, the Pathway on that floor was the bare minimum. If I recalled correctly, it was simply a narrow ley line connecting Floors 9 and 11. From the sound of things, they were going to remake the Pathway there, constructing a proper anti-monster barrier. And the Supreme guild was requesting our help in making that happen.

“Let me confer with my guildmaster.”

“All right, sure, go ahead.”

Snow approached me, pulling me down by the hand and, after making sure Mr. Siddark was out of earshot, stomping my foot.

“Ow!”

“Kanami! Why did you step back and abandon me?”

“You guys are school friends, aren’t you? From where I’m standing, I was being thoughtful.”

“I see. So it was the worst kind of unasked-for kindness. Next question: why didn’t you fire back?”

“You mean when I said I have no moxie? That silliness? That’s not the kind of thing you respond to. I get that he’s looking down on me or whatever, but I don’t think anything of it. And it’s probably true that I haven’t got any moxie.”

“You totally do, Kanami!”

“I mean, I don’t really think I do.”

In all my life, no one had told me I had moxie. Snow was the first person to

ever do so.

“Either way, we can’t let him view you with contempt. You’re Epic Seeker’s representative, so you should bite back a *little*.”

“That’s not how I see it. I think snapping back because you don’t wanna get looked down on, or peacocking to save face, is a little misguided. If we show people through our actions, they’ll naturally come to understand. That’s the kind of guildmaster I wanna be.”

“There you go again, being naive. Look, I just can’t bear the fact that he’s looking down on you right now!”

“Thank you,” I stammered. “But doesn’t that just mean we’ll show him what for down the line?”

She said nothing. It wasn’t as though she had no retort. Her expression told me she didn’t agree with that stance. She was definitely dissatisfied with my policy of placidity. She’d simply given up on trying to persuade me.

“Snow, you still discussing?” said Mr. Siddark.

Snow heaved a deep sigh and recovered her composure. “All right, Kanami—are we gonna help out with constructing the Pathway?”

“We’ll collaborate however we’re able to. That’s the duty of the guilds of Laoravia.”

“Okay.” She went back to Mr. Siddark. “It seems our guildmaster accepts your request.”

“That’s good to hear. Thank you, Snow.”

“Thank our guildmaster,” she replied, looking worn out. Her manner of speech was beginning to return to its usual slovenly tone.

“Of course. I very much express my gratitude to the guildmaster and members of Epic Seeker. Now then, I’ll tell you all the details. We haven’t got all the time in the world.”

“Please. Let’s talk inside Epic Seeker.”

Snow took Mr. Siddark and his entourage inside the building. As I watched

her, I was thinking about something that wasn't work-related. *Looks like Snow doesn't slack off when there's a bigwig around. Could there be a way to make use of that for the next dive?*

Then Snow shouted for me to come too. Flustered, I hurried after them onto the Epic Seeker premises.



Our talk with Supreme ended in no time, partly because the plan was perfect from the start, but mostly because Epic Seeker didn't have the authority to butt in with their opinion anyway. That very day, we commenced the plan to construct the Pathway, spearheaded by the Laoravian government.

The group tasked with carrying out the mission gathered in front of the Dungeon, and at Mr. Siddark's command, they swiftly crossed the threshold. The plan called for a select few participants. There was one government official, accompanied by three mages to bolster the Pathway. A handful of elites from each guild were also there as their escorts.

All of the participating guilds constituted Laoravia's flagship force, and on an individual level, those elites boasted prodigious skills—with Mr. Siddark standing atop them as the apex. Supreme was top-class in terms of clout, the power level of the individuals in it, and social standing. As such, it was only natural that he would be the one to take charge of this dive. Even the official that the government had dispatched seemed to be outclassed by him. From what I'd heard, the Siddark clan traced its lineage to the royals of Laoravia, making them nobles of prominence across all five countries of the Dungeon Alliance.

"Wow, that's really something," I said. "So does that make him royalty? Or maybe a duke, I guess?"

"Kanami, baby, how do you not even know that much?"

As we advanced down the Pathway, Ms. Tayly, who was walking next to me, was dumbfounded. Three people from Epic Seeker were participating: me, Snow, and Ms. Tayly. I'd have liked to have brought Mr. Vohlzark too, but it was too sudden and he couldn't make it in time. I was chatting with Ms. Tayly at the back of the group.

“Sorry,” I replied, “I’m from the boonies, you see...”

“Then it can’t be helped. I, Vohlzark, and the rest are here for you. If there’s ever anything you’d like to know, feel free to ask one of us, okay?”

“You’re right. It looks like I’ll have my hands free today, so I’ll ask away.”

“His hands free, he says. You realize we’re inside the Dungeon right now?”

“If we’re headed to Floor 20 with members who are this strong, I don’t think it’s too out there to say I’ll be free.”

“This is the Dungeon. Even with a group like this, one bad stroke of luck and people die.”

“I’m always standing watch, so it’s okay. I won’t let a single person die.”

“A single person... Well, you don’t have to go out of your way to save members of other guilds. With this kind of thing, it’s everyone’s own responsibility to survive.”

“I get that, but...if it looks like somebody’s about to die, I’m sure my body will move of its own accord. Even if that somebody isn’t a member of Epic Seeker.”

She sighed. “You’re a softie. If you do that, you’d need a lot more than just the one life you have.”

“Point taken. Snow tells me that all the time too.”

But that was fine by me. If I didn’t save the people it was in my power to save, I’d probably be crushed under a landslide of regret. As I’d been born and raised in a different world, I had to act in accordance with its values. I’d rescue whomever I could. I’d already steeled my resolve.

The moment that crossed my mind, I was assailed by a strange sense that something was off. The sensation was as though I were confusing two things at the very base of my mind. I *had* steeled my resolve to do *something*, but was that what it was?

No answer presented itself. I kept walking through the Dungeon, a little uneasy now. The people at the front were slaying the monsters, so it was easy for me. The job was essentially just a nice stroll. Incidentally, Snow was at the front of the pack; Mr. Siddark had invited her by his side. I could tell through

Dimension she was in distress, unable to defy a person of such status.

“So, what would you like to ask about, Kanami sweetheart?”

“Good question. I’d like to ask you more about nobles. I didn’t know Mr. Siddark, who I met today, was such a big name. I might have shamed myself a little.”

“Yeah. The problem was that you didn’t know about the House of Siddark. I’ll tell you all the nobles in descending order.” She cleared her throat and switched to teacher mode. “First, there are the royals. These days, the power of the royals is starting to diminish, but even so, they’re still number one. With one exception—in Whoseyards, the church stands above. It’s the one nation where the crown is weak. They’ve got a unique system there. When you go there, it’s the church and not so much the royals you need to be careful about.”

“Understood. Each country has a different culture.”

“Next, you have nobles. Mind you, the only nobles who have real power are the higher-ranked ones. There are cases where mid-level nobles are lower in status than merchants or shopkeepers.”

“Wow. So there are different levels among nobles too.”

“One of the noble clans you need to be careful around is the aforementioned House of Siddark. It’s one of the clans people call the Four Great Houses. For the most part, it’s never a bad idea to bow your head in the presence of a Hellvilleshine, a Siddark, a Walker, or an Arrace.”

“Names memorized. I won’t oppose anyone by those names.”

“Good. And as such, you should be a bit kinder to Snow *Walker* as well.”

“Huh? Aren’t I plenty nice to her?”

“It’s times like these that Snow must be wanting you to have her back and protect her. She *is* a young lady at heart.”

“I am protecting her. I have *Dimension* up as we speak, so she’s safe.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She sighed. “Never mind. Let’s keep going. I’ll tell you about the influential traders, nobles, and other powerful clans that are particularly dangerous.”

Ms. Tayly was probably insinuating that I should do Snow a solid by getting her away from Mr. Siddark. I could tell at a glance that he wasn't Snow's favorite person. But this was one chore she couldn't skip out on. He was too high-status. One could say this was the worst situation there could be in her eyes. However, I figured it would do her some good, so I didn't intend to bail her out barring anything truly untoward. I was hoping it might cure her of some of her work-shyness.

The group progressed across the floor as Ms. Tayly spoke to me. Maybe because we were going down the Pathway for the most part, the fights were few and far between. However, since we had more people than was standard for the Dungeon, monsters did come. I picked up on an enemy's approach via *Dimension*. But since the monster's rank was low and people close to Level 20 were taking care of it, I didn't take the stage. I was just watching from afar to prevent possible accidents. Mr. Siddark, on the other hand, was constantly issuing orders to someone or other. It seemed he was the type who liked taking charge, the exact opposite of Snow. And yet, he also seemed mighty fond of her. I casually asked Ms. Tayly about it.

"That's because Snow is so weak-willed, despite her high social status. She almost never asserts herself. I'm sure that to him, pliable women hailing from respectable stock are the ideal catch."

"Snow is weak-willed? With me, she's always grumbling about what she wants."

"Really? The Snow I know never gives it her all, always doing the bare minimum to get by without a word of protest."

"She's more than willing to foist paperwork and stuff on me. And she's always complaining."

"Well, what do you know...she must have a soft spot for you. She was the same way with her brother Glenn."

"She was?"

"Dear me, that takes me back. When Glenny boy was in Epic Seeker, I held the lowest rank in the guild, but I can still replay the scenes of those two in my head. Picture the outstanding but timid Glenn, with Snow behind him telling

him off for this and that.”

“Sounds like they’re close as siblings. Snow begged to differ, but she must have just been trying to hide her embarrassment, right?”

“Actually, while they *were* close, I’m not so sure about now. Both Glenn and Snow changed as people after a certain incident. If you ask me, they can’t be as close as they once were.”

“A certain incident? Did something happen?”

“You’ll have to ask them. If you hear it from me, it’ll put a damper on the touching drama unfolding between you two.”

“The...touching drama?”

And here I’d thought Ms. Tayly was in the more serious category of the members of Epic Seeker, but it seemed she too was just another member. Like all of them, she was a dreamer with a screw loose somewhere.

“That tale is very important. Instead of that, I’ll give you a more fun tidbit. You asked why Elmirahd Siddark has Snow Walker on his mind. In truth, the story’s simpler than I let on.”

I exhaled.

“Wait for it... they are engaged!” she said, imparting the factoid with glee.

Uh, isn’t that the kind of thing you’d need to ask the person directly?

“Wow... so they’re getting married, huh?”

“Huh. Thought you’d be more shocked. I thought that’d give you a jump.”

I was getting a vague idea that this woman wanted me to be the hero and Snow to be the princess in the tower.

“Well, she did tell me something to that effect before. She’d said her fiancé was from one of the leading houses or whatever, that they were around the same age, and that they’d gone to the same school. Judging by Mr. Siddark’s demeanor, I figured it wasn’t impossible.”

“Ah, I see. So? How’s that make you feel? How does the thought of those two tying the knot sit with you? Why don’t you tell the girl how you feel, hm?”

“I don’t feel a thing. If anything, I think the marriage is a good idea.”

“Um, what? Are you being serious, Kanami darling?”

“I think that at the end of the day, their interests align. Besides, from what I can see, Mr. Siddark doesn’t seem like a bad person. Folks like him may show no mercy to outside enemies, but they’re kind to their own. He’s brimming with pure talent, and he’s got ambition in spades, so Snow’s future is smooth sailing.”

Her face turned stiff. “Yep. I knew it, dear. You’re a bit funny in the head.”

“I’m sorry? What about what I just said was odd? And even if I am, I don’t want to hear that from *you*.”

Ms. Tayly was a romantic with her head in the clouds despite her age. I didn’t need her to talk about *me* being funny in the head.

“Right back at you,” she replied. “Tell me, Kanami, do you not, you know, *like* Snow?”

“I don’t know if I like her. It hasn’t been that long since I met her.”

“But you must have preferences, right? So tell me, is our little Snow to your liking or isn’t she?”

“I’m telling you, I don’t have the time to be thinking about stuff like that. You’re looking at a kid who’s working crazy hard for his sister’s sake.”

“To think you’d bring your sister up right now. It’s just like Palinchron said. You’ve got a sister complex.”

“What makes you say that?”

“If you don’t want to be seen as having a sister complex, then be true to your heart, right here, right now, and tell me!” she said, her expression serious.

I’d never seen her this earnest. The members of Epic Seeker sure picked strange hills to die on. To be frank, I didn’t particularly care if people saw me as having a sister complex. After all, Maria *was*, in fact, my world. That much was certain. But I reckoned I ought to answer Ms. Tayly so as to calm her down.

“All right, then yes. I like Snow. She is pretty, after all.”

“Well, if you’re gonna be so nonchalant about it, that’s kinda unpleasant in itself.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

“Dear me. Were you *always* this dry a person?”

“Huh? I’m being dry?”

Another adjective I’d basically never heard anyone call me before now. I didn’t think I was particularly dry or matter-of-fact. If anything, I was more on the emotional side. Yet upon further reflection, I realized that that back-and-forth might indeed have been a bit unfeeling of me. I’d been so cold to Snow. Was I always this dispassionate? This logic-driven? *It’s almost as though—*

My head hurt. I held my head in my hands and gave Ms. Tayly a forced smile. I managed to keep it from her. Afterward, we continued killing time talking about trivial stuff, and eventually, our group reached Floor 10 without impediment. Needless to say, it took more than twice as much time as a normal dive.

We immediately divided into those who would get some shut-eye and those who would stand watch, and with that, construction commenced. I found the time to drop by the *Connection* portal in the corner of the chamber. Since I’d concealed it using an inconspicuous cloth, nobody had spotted it. The fact that the Dungeon was so dark probably didn’t hurt either. Since work on the Pathway centered around the middle of the room, nobody ventured to the corners.

Relieved, I joined the subgroup that was enjoying a nap. It was when I cast my eyes down that I heard a voice call out to me.

“Kanami.”

Before I knew it, a visibly exhausted Snow was sitting beside me.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m tired. Very tired. Super mega tired.”

“Welcome to the working life. Good job out there.” I took a drink out of my inventory and handed it to her.

“Come to the front of the pack with me later. Please,” she pleaded weakly,

taking her hard-earned beverage.

“Me? But Mr. Siddark won’t exactly like that, will he?”

“I don’t care. I wanna be with you.”

“You just want to foist the work on me and be lazy, surely? This job is more than just our guild’s. That’s not a good enough reason to change positions, is it?”

“I... I don’t wanna just ‘be lazy.’”

“Be that as it may, it doesn’t change the fact it’d be unilateral on our ends. Can’t you just grin and bear it for a day?”

“Sorry, but I want you to be with me all the same. I prefer your company. I’m good by your side.”

I found her insistence peculiar. “Er, uh,” I said under my voice, “do you hate Mr. Siddark that much?”

“It’s not that I *hate* him. Not really. He’s just so tiresome.”

“If he’s tiresome, just do what you always do. It’s because you’re putting yourself out that things got this straining for you. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“I can’t act that way. Even if he doesn’t get angry himself, people from the clan will yell at me. And if that happens, it turns into even more of a pain than before.”

It seemed clan affairs were a factor. Since their engagement was decided, it might be the case that if she made light of her fiancé, it would tarnish her house’s name.

“What would my presence do to mitigate that tiresomeness?”

“Nothing, but it’d soothe my nerves. I’d have some peace of mind.”

“You mean, if I’m there then you’d have peace of mind regarding *combat*.”

“Please, I’m begging you,” she said, her expression supplicatory.

Given how frantic she was, all I could do was nod. “Okay. If you insist, I’ll do it.”

A pause. “Good.”

Snow closed her eyes. Then she leaned against me and started dozing off. Thinking it'd be bad if people saw us, I took out a blanket from my inventory for use as Snow's pillow. Then I distanced myself a tad from her, getting some rest by sitting with my hand on my knees.

Apparently, Snow was quite overwhelmed. I'd wanted her to overcome it on her own power, if possible, but it seemed that was overly optimistic. She'd come back exhausted from head to toe, and she was beginning to lose heart. In other words, while she seemed cheeky on the outside, her spirit was weak. And now that I knew that, I couldn't justify my inaction. I decided to help her for the rest of the day. Then I got some sleep.

When I awoke, I started gathering the strength I'd need to rescue her.

A few hours later, the group, having finished the construction work on Floor 10, departed for Floor 20. I was relieved that ultimately, nobody had noticed my *Connection* gateway. Maybe it was less conspicuous than I'd anticipated.

The battle formation was revised a little going into Floor 11. Naturally, Mr. Siddark was effectively the leader, so he made all the decisions. He certainly had an eye for character, as well as a keen sense for combat. No one objected...apart from Snow.

“El, could you please place Kanami at the front too?”

“The guildmaster of Epic Seeker at the front? My intel tells me he's a mage specializing in detection and ice magic. He's better suited for the middle or back of the formation.”

That was so on the money, I was speechless. He was right; I really pulled my weight when I was in the middle or back, where I could provide backup for everyone. He had a firm grasp of the information regarding me after mere days of my being active in the guild. That one sentence was all I needed to learn how prodigious his intelligence-gathering and analytical skills were.

“That's not all there is to Kanami. He can use a sword too.”

“A fact I also know, of course. But I hear his strong point is his magic.”

“That intel’s erroneous. Kanami’s swordsmanship is without a doubt first-rate. Besides, he shows his strength when paired with me.”

A pause. “Okay. If you insist, I don’t mind placing him at the front for now, but I reserve the right to change his position depending on the results and situation.”

“Thank you very much.”

And so it was decided that I’d take part in the fighting. It wasn’t so much that he was convinced it was a good idea; to my eyes, he’d just wanted to show Snow his magnanimous side. That was why he had some harsh words for me when we passed each other.

“If you cause even the least bit of trouble for the others, you’re falling back again.”

“Understood, sir. I’ll do my very best,” I replied inoffensively, bowing my head.

“Hmph. If you’re a guildmaster, don’t go through Snow. Express what you want in your own words.”

Mr. Siddark’s estimation of me was only getting worse. Apparently, he was under the impression that I’d used Snow as a mouthpiece. Figuring it was pointless to try to make excuses, I said nothing. I just watched as Mr. Siddark stepped up to the front.

Snow, who was beside me, flashed me a disgruntled look. “You’re such a wuss.”

“Huh? What did I do?”

“What didn’t you do.”

“Snarling at a stand-up dude like Mr. Siddark would get me nowhere. What are you trying to do, stirring me up like that?”

“A stand-up dude? Hmph.”

She led me by the hand toward the front. From there, the second half of our dive commenced. It took only a moment for a battle against a monster to pop up. Unlike the back, the front encountered battles frequently. Since we were in

rows, we were that much more easily spotted, leading to many times more enemy attacks compared to a normal dive. The overall speed of the procession was also slow. The situation drove home just how hard a dive with this many people was. And yet Mr. Siddark was managing that difficult task to a tee. He did possess the competence to stand above the rest, that was for sure. And while his personality, abilities, and more all helped with that, the biggest factor was his social standing. Everyone followed his lead because *“he’s with the Siddark Clan. Whatcha gonna do?”*

On the other hand, it looked as though his status as a member of the House of Siddark also drove him into a corner. His position seemed like a bit of a tightrope.

The other elite fighters and I swung our swords as Mr. Siddark instructed. I didn’t fail to notice his expression change after I felled a monster attacking us in a single stroke. *Hope that made him see me in a new light.*

Predictably, Snow was behind me, shirking her chore. In order to evade Mr. Siddark’s eyes, she was fighting at my rear. She was the same as always. My plot to rehabilitate her by making her mingle with Mr. Siddark was now in the dustbin of history.

The farther we advanced down the floors, the more frequently the monsters tried to cross over onto the Pathway. Occasionally, whole groups of them managed to jump on us. Fearing a worst-case scenario (however unlikely), I stepped up to the head of the pack. I wasn’t being conceited; I simply had the strongest combat build out of anybody there. The more I fought, the more it mitigated any risk to the group as a whole. After taking ten or so enemy heads, Mr. Siddark called out to me.

“Aikawa Kanami, was it? You haven’t been using any magic. You a swordsman?”

“No sir. I’m also good with the blade, but I’m a mage.”

“Now I see why old Palinchron entrusted the guildmaster seat to you. I took you to be some kind of bumpkin, but it seems you’re adequately strong.”

“No, sir. I still have a long way to go.”

“I hate it when people act modest like that. I can’t hear it as anything but sarcasm. If you’re one who stands above others, don’t you think you should harbor more gravitas?”

“Urgh...I’m sorry. That’s just how I am.”

“Why would you apologize? Looks like we’re just not gonna get along.”

While I’d gained his respect for my strength, he still didn’t like my personality. A shame, considering I didn’t dislike people like Mr. Siddark. But if I voiced that sentiment, it’d backfire on me, so I just kept following him without a word. From behind, I examined his every action in order to memorize how he did things as a fellow guildmaster. I wasn’t going to unthinkingly mimic him, but observing the methods of a different guildmaster could only be beneficial. I watched how he issued orders even as I counterattacked a pouncing enemy. I did that while also paying attention to Snow and Ms. Tayly through *Dimension*. I’d grown to the point where such multitasking wasn’t difficult for me.

We progressed through the Dungeon without a hitch. However, by the time we reached Floor 16, the pack was starting to show signs of exhaustion. The procession speed was visibly slower, and the majority wore gloomy looks.

“It’s not far now, everyone!” shouted Mr. Siddark without delay. “I believe in you! With folks of your caliber, we can make this happen!”

But it looked as though words weren’t going to be enough. Morale wasn’t that easy to raise. Mr. Siddark was looking anxious now. He resumed the march forward, his eyes on the group as a whole. To give him support, I was always in the offing nearby.

“Are you not tired?” he asked me, baffled.

“I’m all right. I have stamina. If anything comes up, please feel free to utilize me.”

“Don’t underestimate me. Come what may, I won’t rely on you. It’s the other way around. *I’ll* protect everyone.”

“I see.”

It seemed my show of concern had the opposite effect. Little by little, I was

starting to understand the man. He was dominated by a bloated sense of responsibility. At a guess, it was a ball and chain attached to him from *birth*. And having spent his adolescence ruled by that obligation, his values had ended up skewed. I could now see where the tightrope walk was rooted.

Bound as ever by his sense of responsibility, he continued walking as the vanguard, with me behind him, keeping watch. It was then I spotted a pack of monsters within *Dimension's* range. I wasted no time reporting to him.

"Mr. Siddark. If we keep going this way, we'll encounter a group of monsters. We should change our course and leave the Pathway for now."

"What did you say? Come to think of it, I almost forgot you can use detection magic. Is it really true?"

"Yes, sir, it's true. A swarm of insect monsters is headed our way."

"We're not changing course. We're already taking more time than planned. Any further delay won't be tolerated."

"But if we run smack into them, the damage will be severe. We should prioritize safety over time—"

"You said the monsters are insectoid. Well, if that's the case, I can eradicate them with my magic!"

Apparently, I shouldn't have mentioned the monsters' taxon. He thought he could use magic to fend them off as long as they were insects. And it seemed Mr. Siddark was a mage who was capable of such a feat. He meant to end the threat by his own power, and it hit me with a sense of foreboding. Watching him reminded me of...

Wait, no, I actually can't remember. I just got the feeling I knew some people who were more than a little foolish and silly.

"I'm against the idea. It's too dangerous, and even if you succeed, it'll take a heavy toll on you."

"I told you not to underestimate me. A swarm on Floor 16 is no big deal."

Mr. Siddark had all of the authority, so I had no choice but to go along with it. He readied the magic energy inside his body in anticipation. I used *Dimension* to

grasp the swarm's movements and reported the precise timing of our incoming encounter. That was all I could do. Then, the time came.

"It's... It's a pack of 'em!" shouted a dismayed swordfighter at the front. "A swarm of monsters!"

A wave of unrest surged through the other members as well. Those with experience Dungeon diving understood the terror of a swarm. When the divers didn't have much strength to spare, they had to avoid swarms like the plague.

For me and Mr. Siddark, however, it was all within the range of what we'd foreseen. We formulated our spells calmly and coolly.

"Mr. Siddark! Please shoot after I've lured over as many as possible!"

"You don't gotta tell me! I know! *Scour all! Burn all! Conquer all!*"

The incantation was forceful, and the structuring of the magic energy was intricate. The spell was completed right as the swarm was about to make contact with the front line.

"Flame Blast!"

A torrent of flame erupted from his hands. The blaze was sizable, the force of the blast staggering. It swallowed the entirety of the monster swarm. Most importantly, the element of the magic attack put the matchup in our favor. The insectoid monsters were weak to fire, and one by one they burned to a crisp and perished. A tiny portion managed to avoid burning, but I saw them using *Dimension* and my blade made short work of them. All in all, we'd successfully annihilated the swarm in a matter of seconds.

"Whoa! That's Lord Siddark for you!"

"As a leader, he doesn't disappoint."

"The swarm, killed instantly... We're saved!"

While the members cheered at the instantaneous destruction of the threat, Mr. Siddark was bearing a pained look. "Urgh..."

He'd probably ripped through all of his MP through that one spell. Great beads of sweat dotted his forehead, and he was gasping for breath. Regardless, he didn't pause to rest. He caught his breath right away, reset his expression,

and shouted. “That’s right! You’re okay now, everyone! Whatever enemy may come, I’ll repel it! Let’s slowly but surely make our way to Floor 20!”

Mr. Siddark hadn’t missed his chance to buoy their spirits. After seeing that the members’ expressions had turned sunnier, he faced forward, and his own expression reverted to one of pain. I was beside him, and I had a full understanding of his distress.

“Are you okay?”

“This is nothing. You’re worried about nothing. Never mind that; your detection spell was superb. Without your pinpointing the time and the enemy’s movements, it wouldn’t have gone this well. I thank you.”

“Thanks, but more importantly, you don’t look so...”

“I’m telling you, there’s no problem.”

But his voice was feeble, even when he interrupted me. That spell had without a doubt robbed him of all his strength, yet his pride wouldn’t allow him to accept my help. All I could do was follow and keep an eye on him from behind. Deep inside, I was concerned. He was refusing a hand from anyone else in order to safeguard the prestige of his noble clan, and that made me take exception to the ways of the House of Siddark. They just raised my hackles, and the same went for the House of Walker for putting that frown on Snow’s face. The whole idea of noble prestige grated on my nerves. My impression of the four leading houses had organically turned quite black indeed.

We’re on Floor 16. Four floors left to our objective.

I kept on walking through the Dungeon, all the while worrying about how smooth our journey would be.



I was right to worry.

Floors 16 and 17 had few enemy attacks in store for us, so they presented no problem. And while everyone’s fatigue was mounting, their morale stayed high thanks to the annihilation of that swarm. It was no exaggeration to call the dive surgically smooth up to that point. However, while we were moving through

Floor 18, I detected a cluster of monsters in the direction we were headed yet again. I gnashed my teeth; this was one unlucky bunch.

“This...this isn’t good. We have another pack of them.”

“Urgh...what did you say?” he asked with a sick and tired tone.

“Mr. Siddark, this time around, let’s avoid them.”

“No, we won’t take any detours. If we fall behind schedule, it’ll affect my reputation—and the reputation of the House of Siddark!”

“But we don’t have a way to handle them.”

“I’ll show you. I’ll just kill them all again. We’re not shifting course!”

“You’re biting more than you can chew. You’re already past your limit. The others are exhausted, but not as much as you.”

“Don’t look down on me! I’m telling you, it’s fine! I steer this ship! And I’ll show you how perfectly I’ll tie a bow on this job!”

I was pretty sure he’d face off against the horde no matter what I said. His pride brooked no retreat. I contemplated knocking him unconscious and forcing him to get some rest. But he was the group’s leader. Plus, I could be certain that if the master of another guild attacked Mr. Siddark, who was also a noble from an influential family on top of that, it’d turn into a massive headache for me. As the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, it wasn’t an option.

With no other choice, I collaborated with him in order to raise the chances of a rout by however much I could.

“It’s a pack of beasts with red fur. They’ll be on us in a matter of minutes.”

“Red beasts on Floor 18...so it’s *those* things...in which case, if I use a water spell...”

He started crafting the spell, but *Dimension* told me it was nothing dependable. Since he’d squeezed his MP down to the limit and his physical condition wasn’t in tip-top shape, the spell was coming apart at the seams. He wouldn’t be able to fire anything as precise or powerful as before. Moreover, grand-scale spells impressive enough to exterminate large packs of monsters were too much for him to begin with. This could only mean trouble, so I fell

back a little to speak to Snow.

“Snow, you tell him. He’s planning to fight another swarm. This time we’re in serious shit.”

“What, a second one? Well, in any case, that’s a no,” she said, shaking her head.

“Why? At this rate, the job may end in failure. And more importantly, Mr. Siddark himself is in danger.”

“I couldn’t care less,” she replied flatly. “Whatever becomes of Elmirahd Siddark’s got nothing to do with me. It’s just such a pain in the ass that I don’t want to get mixed up in it. I can’t take it anymore.”

To her, both the job and the man meant nothing. I gave up on persuading her and returned to my spot behind Mr. Siddark. He’d already begun incanting.

“Ingest the viands, ravage the viands, render it unto viands!”

As his incantation neared completion, the horde came into view. The members at the front spotted the thrashing beasts and informed the rest.

“Another one! Dammit, another horde! This time we’ve got red pups on our hands!”

Soon, everyone knew, and all eyes fell on their leader.

“Everyone, rest easy!” he shouted. “I’ll wash ’em all away! *Tidal Wave!*”

The magic energy in the vicinity pulsed. Compressed magic power was converted into water, and even the moisture in the air was dragged into the spell, turning it all into a large quantity of water. The raging torrent swirled in the air, its volume expanding until finally it transformed into a tsunami. The flood swallowed up the entire corridor and attacked the horde that was headed this way.

The water spell *Tidal Wave*. A fearsome spell. But *Dimension*, in its coldhearted accuracy, informed me that even a spell of that scale hadn’t sufficed to rout the monsters. Clicking my tongue, I used *Analyze* on Mr. Siddark.

【STATUS】

HP: 74/201 MP: 0/299

He was in terrible shape. Using wide-range spells that went beyond his tether, staying on his toes in leader mode for close to twenty straight hours, keeping the group marching on despite how unreasonable it was because he valued saving time... That was the confluence of factors that kept chipping away at him. If I wasn't wrong, Mr. Siddark couldn't really move anymore. He'd staked his all on that *Tidal Wave*. Put simply, the group's leader had incapacitated himself without fully exterminating the horde.

"Pardon me, Mr. Siddark!"

While the group watched the magical tsunami in action, I went on the move. Holding an unsteady Siddark in my hands, I stepped back. He resisted, but his resistance was feeble, and I carried him away regardless. My destination was Snow, who looked surprised to see me carrying him. I threw him at her, despite how little she liked him. She hurriedly threw down the weapons she was wielding and caught him.

"Next!"

I immediately went back to the front of the line to see what *Tidal Wave* had done to the horde. The spell washed away everything in its path, slamming the red beasts into the walls. At first blush, it might look as though the monsters were all killed. But it simply wasn't enough. The amount of water wasn't enough. The force of the wave wasn't enough. The overall attack power was lacking, and that was all there was to it. The group had been cheering at the amazing wonder spell, but they were growing paler and paler now. One by one, the monsters that had been knocked down after taking a direct hit stood back up with furious looks on their faces. A hundred-odd monsters were still alive and well—and they were making no secret of their hostility toward the band of enemies that had attacked them.

I used my menu-sight to scope out the situation, starting with the details on the monsters.

【MONSTER】Flame Wolf: Rank 17

I also looked at the menus of the individuals on our side, getting an exhaustive grasp on their respective levels, callings, and specialties. Needless to say, I downloaded positional information as well. I now knew who was where and who was next to who, and I calculated how to bring about the greatest synergies. The speed of my number crunching was so superhuman that it bordered on magic. In time, I put together a plan whose goal was to sacrifice no one. Every microsecond was of the essence, and I kept cogitating, swearing to myself that I wouldn't let anyone die.

Not on my watch! Not anymore!

"It... It's no use!" said one of them, pale-faced. "They ain't down for the count!"

"The spell didn't have enough attack power! They're all still kickin' and rarin' to go!"

"Why didn't we avoid the horde, dammit?! At this rate, we're done for!"

"Ain't nothin' we can do but fight! Stand at the ready and assume your formations!"

Through their screaming and grumbling, everyone readied their weapons. I was grateful that they weren't panicking. With that, the Flame Wolves leaped at us.

It was then that my plan was fully formulated. At the front of the group, I drew my sword as I crafted a spell. "Spellcast: *Wintermension!*"

But my target wasn't the enemy or myself. Instead, I expanded *Wintermension's* field to encompass my allies. The cold air spread to engulf everyone in my group.

"I'll cut down the front line!" I shouted, aping Mr. Siddark in trying to make my voice carry to everybody. "Please keep calm and intercept any enemies that come for you!"

Wintermension also served to cool their heads to an extent.

Naturally, most of the Flame Wolves trained their sights on me after I shouted like that. I swung my sword at several approaching wolves, but I wasn't aiming for insta-kills. It was impossible for me to defeat close to a hundred monsters in an instant by myself. As such, my aim was to *injure* the things. I deliberately refrained from swinging my sword the whole way with each swing, as well as from stabbing too deep. I lacerated them with stroking motions. Though I couldn't kill them outright, I could attack droves of them, and the competent guild elites could certainly finish off wounded Flame Wolves. Defeating the enemy with their own hands would boost their morale to boot. I had to prioritize the efficiency of the whole group now, not just my own.

I tore through one Flame Wolf after another, but there were many who ignored me and slipped behind me. My group and the horde were now intermeshed, turning things into a melee. The elite warriors brandished their weapons and intercepted the Flame Wolves. My starting shout had paid off; most were keeping their cool. While dealing with the wolves snapping at me, I devoted most of my attention to *Wintermension*. Puddles of water littered the corridor, left there by *Tidal Wave*, and I was going to spring an evolved version of the trap I'd used on the Line Skitter the other day. Back then, I'd used *Snowmension*, but this time I would use *Wintermension*, although its effects weren't the same as the usual *Wintermension*. Really, it was a different spell altogether. To give it a name:

"Spellcast: *Wintermension: Frost*," I muttered quietly.

The cold hanging over the battlefield started rapidly intensifying. At the same time, I was ascertaining all of the battles between the dozens of elites and the hundred or so monsters, pinpointing where the divers were losing ground. One wolf's fangs were closing in on one man's back. The man was so focused on the enemy in front of him that he didn't notice. At this rate, the man would die to a single attack from behind. But I refused to allow that. *Wintermension: Frost* froze the puddle at that wolf's feet and stopped it in its tracks. The wolf yelped, its legs flash-frozen. That yelp alerted the man to the wolf behind him, and he turned around and thrust his sword into the immobilized beast.

Next.

Next was a mage who was concentrating on her incantation. The woman's

spell was unlikely to be complete before a certain Flame Wolf attacked her. I concentrated my magic energy and activated *Wintermension: Frost* on that wolf. Thanks to that *Tidal Wave*, there was plenty of water on the beast's body already. Freezing things was difficult when there was nothing to work with, but as long as there was water there to begin with, it was a piece of cake. With a crackling sound, the wolf began freezing solid. While I couldn't totally encase it, the effect did slow it down, making it so that its attack didn't reach its mark in time. The mage's spell successfully intercepted it.

Next.

Using my dimensional magic, I searched for the next imminent disaster, activating my spell at only those key locations. *Next.* A third diver saved. *Next.* A fourth, followed by a fifth. One by one, I rescued any and all who were on the back foot. And of course, I was doing that while also dealing with the row of wolves in front. After a few dozen seconds, I finally managed to take down all the nearby wolves, succeeding at keeping the number of casualties at zero all the while.

Not letting my guard down, I quickly migrated from the front line to the middle of the pack, ascertaining the overall situation as I moved and shouting instructions over the din. Luckily, I'd been able to learn everyone's name by the time I got there.

"Annaeth, please back up the person to the front and right of you right away! Also, we don't have enough people in the rear keeping a watch on the front row; if your hands are free, fall back! Tor, once you're done killing that Flame Wolf over there, please help Aldin behind you! Snow, leave Mr. Siddark to me and move to the front!"

Since Mr. Siddark was out of action, someone had to give orders in his stead. Snow looked dissatisfied, but after a little hesitation, she returned him to me and said only this: "No choice."

I nodded and propped Mr. Siddark up. Snow started making a decent effort. As I watched her move to the front, I heard a shriek from a small distance away.

"We... We're losin' here! We're about to crumble! They're gonna—"

Of course, I knew that too. "*Wintermension: Frost!*"

My ice magic rescued the ally who had been seconds away from getting killed. The comrades who saw that looked surprised.

“I get it now! So it’s thanks to you that our enemies keep turnin’ to ice!”

“You freeze ’em at just the right time to save our hides! Kanami from Epic Seeker, wasn’t it?!”

“You mean the dude who was right by Siddark?! He’s got a damn good spell in his arsenal!”

Having learned that the ice spell activating here and there was mine, they started following my orders.

“As you can see, if you’re ever in danger, I’ll save you with my ice magic! I can see the whole field at once through my detection magic, so please, just follow my orders for the time being!”

The responses were more agreeable than I’d expected, given the suddenness of my call.

“You’re another guildmaster of Laoravia, ain’t ya?! We don’t mind takin’ orders from ya!”

“We’re in the hole we’re in right now, so it can’t be helped! Get on with it and make with the orders!”

“Our leader’s down, so please lead us in his place!”

They were all seasoned Dungeon veterans. Their guts had to know what the optimal path forward in a situation like this was, so they all asked me for their orders.

“Okay, people, let’s switch to the optimal formation! Tor, please fall back and protect the technicians in the center! Annaeth, stay right there and keep fending them off; at your level, you can take them by yourself! You three over there! Please form a team and work in concert! Move forward and to the left and prepare for the incoming assault! Next...”

I had everyone take different positions based on their stats, paying who belonged to what guild no mind when I composed the team-ups. This was not the time to fuss over such things. I issued a constant stream of orders even as I

helped the group by using *Wintermension: Frost*.

While some folks seemed dissatisfied, I managed to convince them over time through various displays of the ice magic I'd developed. And so I strove not to lose a single person to the horde. I just kept coming up with the optimal solutions that made sure no one lost life or limb.

Mr. Siddark, who I was holding up, groaned. "Ah...wait...hold on...this is my job...I give the orders..."

He was on the verge of fainting and yet he still wouldn't relinquish his ball and chain of responsibility.

"Please rest for now. You've fulfilled your responsibilities...and you're in no state to be giving orders."

In all honesty, I didn't want to waste time answering him. If at all possible, I'd have liked him to just sleep, but if I got on the wrong nerve, he'd push things too far again, so I had answered him gently.

"Urgh, dammit... Son of a bitch..."

I didn't have the time to stand there commiserating with his frustration. I stayed by his side, but I shouted to the group time and time again in order to direct them to victory. Mr. Siddark didn't interject further.

After ten or so minutes, more than a hundred Flame Wolves lay defeated. Pillars of ice were jutting out all over the corridor, amidst which the wolves turned into magic stones, shining and fading into light as they did so. Cheers filled the hallway.

"YESSS! We killed all of 'em! Nice goin', Ice Mage of Epic Seeker!"

"We're saved! I honestly wasn't sure we'd survive for a second there!"

"It's all thanks to the guildmaster of Epic Seeker. His orders were right on the money."

They all expressed relief at having survived, and they praised me up and down. But I got right back to ascertaining the group's situation using *Dimension*. Basking in accolades wasn't what was important to me. Actually, it *was* important as a guildmaster, but that wasn't my objective. I checked each

individual's HP, and I checked to see if we had the same number of people as entered the Dungeon. After making sure no one had died, I heaved a deep sigh.

"I'm so glad no one's dead."

But I'd paid a price for it. More than half of my MP was depleted. I got a sinking feeling as I relaxed the tension in my muscles. I ended up almost dropping Mr. Siddark, to whom I was lending a shoulder, in the process, so I hurriedly tensed back up. After a few more minutes, everyone finished reviewing the situation and realized that no one had died, after which the group's elation rose to even greater heights. I shared in their jubilation, and I was feeling a lovely sense of accomplishment too.



On the heels of annihilating that horde, I ended up taking command of the group dive for Floors 18 and 19. That was because Mr. Siddark's spellcasting had taken such a huge toll on him that he could hardly even project his voice. No one from the group expressed any dissatisfaction, due largely to the fact that I hadn't let anybody die during that battle. It seemed they recognized my skill as a commander. Moreover, there was a tendency among them to want to *test* the master of the guild who had been doing such outstanding work recently. In order to measure up to their expectations, I kept leading the way with the utmost attentiveness and diligence.

Dimension spotted an enemy.

"A large monster is coming from in front of us. It's a Carmine Minotaur. Stop moving forward immediately. Mages, please form a line. Those who can wield heavy weapons, please be on standby behind them. When the target appears from around the corner, please shoot it with a volley of spells. If that doesn't kill it, the mages should retreat and leave it to the advance guard. That ought to shut it down completely. If anything happens, I'll follow up with ice magic, so please take it nice and easy."

I switched from the prepared-for-a-surprise-attack formation to the anti-oncoming-enemy formation. At first, there was quite a bit of pushback against changing the formation even when there were no enemies in view, but I'd laid out the correct course of action so many times that they now knew to simply

follow their orders.

“Shoot in five seconds...three, two, one, fire.”

At that moment, a cow-headed monster appeared from around the corner. The spells of the mages, who'd been given ample time to incant, blasted the thing like so many shotguns. The Carmine Minotaur turned into light and disappeared, never given one measly second to attack or defend.

“The end. Now let's keep moving forward.”

Behind me, the group was a little abuzz. They appeared to be talking about how insane my enemy detection ability was. Naturally, I was picking up on their conversations through *Dimension*. While many were applauding me as dependable, many were also wondering what the specifics of my detection magic were. They probably wanted to ask me all about it but couldn't because once this job was over, I'd go back to being the master of a different, competing guild. And since I could hardly afford to tell them about it in detail, I had no choice but to keep guiding the group with a polite smile on my face.

Thus we arrived at Floor 20 without incident. We had been able to avoid another horde thanks to *Dimension*, and we had taken the initiative against any monster that appeared, making any rough patch effectively impossible. To be extra sure, I'd had *Wintermension: Frost* at the ready during combat.

Now that we were at the vacant and deserted Floor 20, everyone went about their work reinforcing and strengthening the Pathway there. I guided Mr. Siddark with me to a spot removed from the rest and took a breather. The two of us sat down.

“I'm sorry,” he said quietly.

“Please, don't worry about it.”

“Urgh. I may have lagged behind you this time, but...next time, I'll...”

It seemed his indomitable fighting spirit was leaking out again. His pride simply wouldn't allow him to let me stand on the winner's podium over him.

Man, what a rough life.

I let him rest and went to help out with the construction work. All the while,

Mr. Siddark tried to get up multiple times, and I kept having to admonish him.

After several hours of work, our mission was finally at an end. Before, the ley line had been thin. Now it was visibly thicker, and the barrier was strengthened to the point one could feel it in their bones. I was worried it might have an effect on the *Connection* gateway lying in a corner of the spacious chamber, but it seemed the one on Floor 20 was fine too. As one might expect, the barrier wasn't strong enough to reach such a far-flung corner.

The group whooped with joy at having completed the job, and after a short rest, they departed for the surface. But Mr. Siddark hadn't recuperated yet. The toll he'd paid by firing off not one but two spells that had been beyond his limits wasn't something he could recover from overnight. When I tried to lend him my shoulder, he refused my help.

"That's okay. I may not be able to fight, but I can at least walk."

He walked in the middle of the group, his gait uneasy. But he wasn't raising his voice or trying to lead them anymore. He clearly lacked the stamina to do so. On second thought, he'd still try to force himself despite that. Maybe it was because he simply understood the current state of the party. Everyone in the group was trying to get instructions from me. By the time we'd reached Floor 20, they had already decided which of the two of us was better. I had no choice but to live up to their expectations and hand out orders from the center.

"You're fine to keep going at this pace," I told them. "There aren't any monsters."

Hearing that, the party proceeded in a relaxed manner. While I was overseeing them, I picked up on Snow and Mr. Siddark talking nearby. They were both wearing serious looks on their faces; even Snow's Snowy listlessness was gone. I pricked up my ears a wee bit. They weren't too far away, so I didn't even need *Dimension* to listen in.

"So, this is an invitation from the House of Siddark?"

"Yep. I'd have liked to have told you about it after completing this job to perfection, but...I'm sorry I ended up doing such a pathetic job of it."

"I'm sure both the House of Walker and the House of Siddark have agreed to

this...but are you okay with that, El?”

“I’m welcoming you, Snow. That’s why I’m bringing this up.”

So Mr. Siddark was inviting Snow to his house. This had to do with their private lives, so I stopped listening, but Snow cut their conversation short and approached me.

“Kanami, I got an invitation from the House of Siddark. I’ll probably be bound up all day tomorrow.”

“Er, uh, why are you telling me?”

“I need my guildmaster’s permission.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about. Obviously, I don’t mind. You can go.”

“I’ll be bound up *all day*. That’s okay with you? Are you sure?”

“Let me guess: you can’t refuse him directly, so you’re using me as an excuse.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m just double-checking, that’s all. Are you *really* sure about giving me permission? Won’t it inconvenience your Dungeon diving tomorrow if I’m not there? I mean, maybe you should think twice, right?”

“Nope, you’ve got my permission.”

She sighed. “Useless.”

“That’s not very nice.”

As I’d thought, Snow was just trying to use me to turn him down. If I’d shown even the slightest reluctance, she would almost certainly have tried to foist the refusal all on me. Just the thought of having to be the one to give two of the four great noble houses the cold shoulder...

That’s some scary stuff right there.

“All right, I’ll report back to El, then.” She trudged back to Mr. Siddark.

Evidently, I’d be Dungeon diving the next day without Snow. But really, a day like that was more natural than not. I didn’t want to tie anyone up for my own personal business, after all, and the same went for managing Epic Seeker.

I planned out the next day's solo dive as I led the party. If I led the way perfectly, the group would never end up in a dangerous situation, but the flaw in that plan was that by evading even small dangers, it resulted in detours aplenty. We went overtime overall, but we marched from Floor 20 all the way to the surface without any issues. I didn't know the protocol once we were back on the surface, so I asked Mr. Siddark for help with my eyes.

He nodded and spoke for me. "We'll handle the post-dive matters at Supreme. You all went through some travails due to my blunder, so please accept my honest thanks. I'm truly grateful."

Then he spoke to each of the guildmasters about remuneration and what to expect going forward. Lastly, he addressed me.

"Epic Seeker Guildmaster Aikawa Kanami, I thank you for your assistance today. Regarding your remuneration, someone will visit your headquarters in due course. Please wait until then."

"Understood."

We exchanged innocuous words, and that wrapped up the business side of things. When it came time to part ways, he left me a final remark. And this time, it was personal.

"Aikawa Kanami: I'll never lose to you...and don't you forget it."

A one-sided declaration of war. I'd been wondering why he'd been so reserved this whole time; it seemed he'd put me in the "rival" box in his head. Essentially, he was saying that while he acknowledged his defeat, I could expect him to come out on top next time around.

Before I could say anything in response, he was already far away and getting farther. Ms. Tayly had been looking on from the back with a content smile.

"Before I knew it, this got *entertaining*. A delicious development."

"The fact you can call something like that entertaining is what's weird about you guys. Personally, I'd like to build an *amicable* relationship with a member of a leading noble house."

"Heh heh. No, this is great. You're now the rival of Snow's fiancé. Oh, I

wonder what sort of story awaits us? Hee hee hee!”

“There’s nothing there, miss.”

“I guess this is the ‘stay tuned’ part of the story. By the way, what should I do? Do we call it a day now?”

“You can if you like. Please tell Snow for me too. She’s in the back, all tuckered out.”

“Got it. I’ll be seeing you, Kanami dear.”

Snow was hanging her head behind us, so Ms. Tayly nestled close to her like a mother would her child and whisked her away. The whole party was winding down and parting ways, and the number of people was decreasing little by little.

Upon leaving, more than a few people shot words of greeting my way. The way I’d taken command of the tail end of our dive must have left an impression. I did as the crowd did and made to leave, heading back to Epic Seeker headquarters. My destination was Mr. Alibers’s workshop. It was late at night and there was nothing else to do. I could at least see how my sword was doing. If everything had gone as planned, I might even get my hands on the finished product.

Envisioning my new sword in my head, I started speed walking without even realizing it. For whatever reason, a trusty sword was the subject of many a little boy’s dreams. Passing through the night-dark Laoravian townscape, I arrived at the workshop. The lights were still on.

“Coming through!” I said, entering.

I was greeted with a shocking sight. Many young buck blacksmiths lay motionless on the floor; it was like I’d stumbled on a corpse heap. Most were sleeping like logs, covered in dust. The few who were awake looked half-dead, with dark rings under their eyes. Mr. Alibers also looked like he was about to shuffle off this mortal coil. When he saw me, he drew closer.

“Ha ha! If it ain’t my guildmaster! Nice timing!”

“Ah, Mr. Alibers. Good evening.”

He came to me with a fine smile on his face, but any way I sliced it, he'd definitely stayed up all night. The chances were high that his hyperness was indicative of the last embers left in his lamp.

"Your sword's finished. Come take a look! It's this way!"

Mr. Alibers pulled me to the back, where a single straight sword lay before my eyes. The design was exactly as I'd requested. A symmetrical straight sword with a pure white blade and a blue pattern. The scabbard was on display next to it as well.

【CRESCENT PECTOLAZRI STRAIGHT SWORD】

Attack Power 4. Adds 10% of user's AGI to Attack Power. If the opponent's AGI exceeds the user's, +30% to user's AGI.

"This is my sword?"

"Yep, that's right. And I'm proud o' the sword I made for my guildmaster. I want ya to have it."

He handed me the blade. I was taken aback by its weight, or the lack thereof.

"It's so...light?"

"Heh heh, ain't it just? But don't worry. It's light, but I can vouch for its sturdiness. Not a thing here can put a chip in that there sword. Or are ya the type that can't use a sword unless it's got some weight to it?"

"Oh no, my swordsmanship's self-taught, so sword weight isn't something I'm bothered by. I couldn't be happier."

"Glad to hear it."

I lightly swung the sword and put it in its sheath. That chain of movements felt much faster than before. In fact, it felt orders of magnitude faster. That was just how light and easy to handle this sword was. It felt at home in my hands.

"I can get used to this. Now, if it can cut crystal, then it's perfect."

“Oh, it can. Well, in theory, anyway. But I’m confident it’ll work.”

“Thank you, sir. Truly.” I bowed my head. “I’ll test it out tomorrow.”

With this, I could get back to exploring the Dungeon.

“Let me give you the magic item for the heat that we were talking about last time too. I used a high-purity magic gem for this beaut. Here!”

He tossed me something shiny.

【RED TALISMAN】

+20% to the user’s fire element resistance.

It was a pendant adorned with a red jewel.

“Wow, it packs a punch for something so small. If I take something like this into the Dungeon, I imagine it makes dives easier.”

“Be careful; if ya bring in a grab bag o’ stuff, ya might find the magic items interferin’ with each other. O’ course, we’ve already confirmed that that sword and the Red Talisman don’t.”

“Thank you very much. I’m sure that now, diving the floors beyond Floor 20 won’t be so hard.”

“Oh no, you don’t gotta thank me. If anything, I feel I oughta thank *you*. If you get stronger, that’s all I need to have meself a ball. And if you could dive good and deep for me, I can use the magic gems ya pick up to learn more about my trade. I’m *askin’* ya to work me to the bone.”

“Roger that. I’ll bring you more gems, so brace yourself.”

Smilingly, we bumped fists and promised to not to lose touch. After receiving the heavy equipment I needed for Snow, I exited Mr. Alibers’s atelier.



Then, I returned to Maria's room and talked about my day at a leisurely pace before falling asleep. Another fulfilling day was behind me. I faced surmountable troubles like everyone else, I put in a moderate amount of blood, sweat, and tears, and I lived a life with modest pleasures and amusements. This is what I'd longed for... for so many years...

The happiness I'd longed for... Was that what this was? Was that all I needed?

Even though everything was going so well, as usual, a slight but persistent headache rooted itself in my skull. That was why I decided I'd hit the Dungeon again the next day. I had to hurry down to the thirtieth floor so I could fulfill my contract with Palinchron.

The next morning, I found Snow waiting for me in my office, having come uncharacteristically early. Since she'd be visiting the House of Siddark, she wasn't in her usual ethnic-looking garb, but rather in an indigo-blue bell-line dress. She'd also switched out her hair ornament for a high-end, high-class one. Her tribeswoman aesthetic had given away to the mien of a "silver spoon" young noble lady. A superabundance of decorative jewels kept her horns hidden, and her long skirt kept her tail concealed, so there wasn't a scrap of an indication that she was a dragonewt. The girl before my eyes was a refreshing breeze, a maiden whose beauty was beyond reproach. And she'd been glancing at me repeatedly for some time.

"Augh, I don't wanna go." She grumbled to that effect over and over again, the culmination of which was "Boy, I wonder if somebody's around who'd come kidnap me."

Ticked off by the way she'd grumble to herself while looking at me, but never actually address me, I mercilessly ignored her and headed for the Dungeon by myself, crossing through the *Connection* gateway.

The number-one order of the day was to test out my new sword, the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. I would see how it fared against one of the Crystal Golems of Floor 26. If I could cut through those things, it'd lower the difficulty level of the Dungeon significantly.

I progressed without pausing through the floors with my sights on Floor 26. The only real obstacles on the way there were the Rio Eagles of Floor 22, and I

of course ignored them as usual, so no problem arose. It took me next to no time to get from Floor 20 to the roadblock I sought to conquer—Floor 26. Using *Dimension*, I picked a Crystal Golem and brandished my blade.

The battle was over in a flash. The moment the golem swung its fist down at me, I sliced its trunk horizontally. That was it. That was literally all there was to it. The golem's upper half slid to the side and crashed to the ground. One swing and it was in twain. It felt like I'd sliced through polystyrene. I watched as the golem faded into light.

“Whoa! Holy moly!”

In the face of such sheer expectation-topping sharpness, I was compelled to voice my admiration. I hadn't imagined that such a slight boost in the weapon's attack power would change the math this much. The biggest boon was that the blade hadn't suffered a single chip or nick. That meant I could fight indefinitely. With a path to victory now open for Floors 26 and 27, I advanced deeper into the Dungeon in high spirits. I encountered several more golems en route, but without their hardness to fall back on, their strength was on par with monsters around the Floor 10 area. I cut them down, one after another, without impediment. The same held true for Floor 27. While Floor 27 contained many faster species of monster compared to the previous level, those, too, relied on their hardness, so their degree of difficulty barely differed. I rapidly made my way farther into the Dungeon depths, slicing away at crystalline ants and birds and bugs and things as I did. A handful of monsters summoned their brethren, but that wasn't an issue as long as I averted the reinforcements using *Dimension*. As a result, it took me less than an hour to reach Floor 28. I was overjoyed that the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword was enabling me to progress in such leaps and bounds.

Floor 27 was a cave of translucent crystal; Floor 28 was slightly different. This wasn't a world of perfectly clear white. No, what greeted my eyes instead was a rainbow world of color. These walls were also made of a special mineral, but unlike the floor prior, it contained more than just crystal. I didn't know this mineral's name, but it was shining in a prismatic host of hues. I stuck my sword into that rigid wall, not because I had gold in my eyes, but because the hardness of the walls figured into combat. I was testing to see if, as before, slamming the

enemy into the wall would be effective.

It chipped the wall, and some of the mineral fell into my hand. However, the fragment in my hand lost its luster immediately, turning to dull black stone. My menu-sight informed me it was just a rock, so it seemed I couldn't make a mint here. More importantly, it appeared to be softer than the crystal up to this point.

I stayed alert to my surroundings as I advanced, searching, of course, for the stairs and bosses through *Dimension*. I figured that for the time being, I'd keep going until either the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword stopped working or an enemy attack managed to put a scratch on me. I was confident that with this blade in hand, a deeper floor was the floor more suited to my strength level. Not a single enemy attack had landed on me so far, so it was only natural to think that. I was almost certainly safe to keep diving deeper and deeper.

As I was comfortably making my way through the rainbow-colored corridors, a grasping arm suddenly emerged from the wall. I'd detected the arm as it was beginning to grow into being through *Dimension*, so I instantly distanced myself, running to where the arm couldn't get at me. While I hadn't seen anything like it happen before, I wasn't surprised. It was a kind of snare that popped up in dungeons in RPGs all the time. At the level I was at now, a surprise attack of *that* caliber would never so much as graze me. The arm swiped at thin air, its prey now too distant. It kept emerging, and a color-swapped version of the Crystal Golem stepped out from inside the wall.

【MONSTER】Rainbow Golem: Rank 27

I concluded that it was the same type of monster as the Poison Salamanders of Floor 24, in that it always sought to ambush its victims, fighting using the topography to its advantage. I held my sword at the ready and approached it. I wanted to steamroll it through a flurry attack before it could return into the wall. The blade tore through its body without resistance, and I sliced it into pieces. From the look of it, this sword cut through the monsters of Floor 28 like butter too.

As I made mincemeat out of the Rainbow Golem, I could sense my thinking regarding equipment change in real time. Until now, I thought it'd be quicker to level grind rather than fuss over equipment, but that wasn't the case when I was up against special varieties of monsters on the deeper floors. Preparing weapons that were effective against the enemy's specific characteristics boosted the efficiency of my dives many times over. Case in point, the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword, a weapon suited to slaying crystal, rent the Rainbow Golem asunder.

However, its dismembered form wriggled softly like clay, without turning into light and fading away. Unlike a Crystal Golem, this thing was weirdly tenacious. I thoroughly chopped it up, turning it into a magic gem to pick up before resuming my dive.

As I didn't like the idea of getting surprise attacked again, I put my hand to the wall and attempted to expand *Dimension*, but my magic energy refused to permeate the wall's interior. I knew that all matter had permeable gaps, yet my magic power wouldn't enter this wall. I'd thought that since I'd successfully gotten *Dimension* to look inside lava, this might work too, but it seemed things wouldn't go quite that smoothly for me. Apparently, the degree to which *Dimension* could grasp a substance or phenomenon had to do with how deeply I comprehended it. For some reason, my understanding of lava and fire and the like was now profound. I didn't know when I'd gained such an understanding, but the heat of Floors 24 and 25 felt like no threat to me. In my mind, it was a phenomenon I could deal with. In contrast, the mineral in this wall lay beyond my current comprehension. My knowledge of the world I came from told me nothing about it. What were its components? What was its molecular structure? By what logic did it exist? I had no idea. And because of that, *Dimension* couldn't spread into it.

I might wanna ask Mr. Alibers about the mineral once I'm back. If I learn about its properties and special qualities, there's a chance I can make Dimension permeate the stuff.

I cut specimens out of the walls and collected them as I proceeded. Souvenir for Mr. Alibers. In that time, I kept getting attacked by Rainbow Golem after Rainbow Golem. They were tricky about it too. They'd try grasping at my feet

with countless hands, or falling down on me from the ceiling, but they still weren't a threat to me. I always caught the moment the monster came out of the wall via *Dimension*, and the golems were simply too slow to ever even touch me. I'd gotten past the point where Floor 28 could pose a challenge. Utterly unobstructed, I eventually spotted the stairs leading to Floor 29 and descended without hesitation.

The whole new world that lay before me threw me for a loop. Floor 29 boasted a unique trait that I hadn't seen before this point. Some of the corridors on prior floors had special terrain, sure, but the floors still had discrete paths to follow, the only exceptions being the Guardian chambers of Floor 10 and Floor 20. This floor, however, was a wide-open space without any corridors, despite not being a Guardian's room. In addition, the ground was sand, not stone. It seemed that in order to clear Floor 29, one had to walk across a blanket of sand that sparkled with the colors of the rainbow.

"If possible, I wanna find the staircase to Floor 30 and then dip for the day."

Ever vigilant, I started proceeding across the sand; it was so soft that it was hard to walk on, which made putting one's back into an attack a difficult proposition. A diver whose attacks revolved around magic, on the other hand, probably wouldn't have a rough time here. But crying over what I couldn't have wouldn't get me anywhere. My only recourse was to keep on forging ahead.

Dimension spotted a lone monster, so I triggered an encounter as an experiment.

【MONSTER】Jewelfish: Rank 29

A gigantic and very colorful fish was swimming in the rainbow sea of sand. It gradually picked up speed before leaping toward me, fangs glinting. I wrenched myself out of the way and dodged its jaws. Though I'd managed to evade it, its final velocity surprised me. All of the crystal-type monsters before this thing had been so slow in comparison. Its sheer speed reminded me of the Rio Eagles of Floor 22. If I didn't play my cards right, this fish would reach speeds even faster than those birds. I instantaneously selected the spell that this called for.

“Spellcast: *Blizzardmension*. Load.”

I finished crafting the spell, compressing it, and hiding it in the monster’s body so that I could spring the spell on a dime. It wasn’t time to activate it yet. *Blizzardmension* required a lot of fuel. Keeping it active for twenty or thirty seconds would be all it took to render me unable to fight. I’d only run it for a second—no, half a second.

“Spellcast: *Wintermension*.”

I deployed the hiemal barrier and got a read on the Jewelfish’s motion while at the same time raising the cold in my environs. The fish swam around in the surrounding sand, continuing to watch for a moment to strike. And the moment it moved behind me, it pounced.

“Release.”

A circumference of fifty centimeters laterally from its body. That was the space *Blizzardmension* suffused. When the fish entered the barrier, its momentum was slowed down and weakened. Then, due to the high-density dimension-element magic energy, I was granted a colossal amount of information. I now grasped how much the fish moved in 0.01-second increments. My bead on its location was flawless. And that wasn’t where *Blizzardmension*’s intelligence-gathering abilities ended. I was perceiving it down to the friction of its muscle tissues, which meant I knew where it was tensed up or not. Its posture, its center of gravity, where it was flexing its body—I grasped it all, and I calculated, predicting its next movements. All that remained was to place my sword where I knew it’d go. And since it’d been slowed down, the fish had no means of evading the blade. A second later, it was flying through the air—filleted in two. It fell to the ground a ways away and turned into light, fading into nothing.

“Phew...”

I held my head as I went to pick up its gem drop. In all honesty, this spell’s fuel consumption was horrendous. However, I also figured the spell could improve drastically depending on how I used it. The main issue was all the pointless information overload, as with the previous battle. I hadn’t needed that much just to pare a fish. If I’d robbed it of a little bit of its speed and if I’d gotten just a

little bit of locational information on it, I could have beaten it without wasting so much MP. But since I didn't know how to adjust the strength of the spell, I'd ended up grasping the movement of the monster down to the tensing of its muscle tissues. Moreover, the duration of the spell had simply lasted too many seconds. I still had a ton to contemplate.

"If I could just control it..."

I aimed to reduce the usage duration and to collect only enough information to ascertain the enemy's line of sight. Maybe that way, using the spell wouldn't give me such a headache.

The moment I tried to pick up the magic gem while calculating how much MP I'd lost, my right foot was dragged into the sand.

"Wha?!"

My leg threatened to sink into the ground as though I'd stepped into a pitfall. I put my strength into my left leg and managed to break free of it. I gave up on the gem and expanded *Dimension* into the sands beneath me. Needless to say, it was hard for *Dimension* to penetrate the sand. But it wasn't like high-density objects like walls. The gaps in the sandy ground were wide, and by sticking my magic energy into those gaps, I could search for the enemy, albeit only with a rough idea.

I found a monster at the bottom of the sand.

【MONSTER】Eddy Anchor: Rank 29

At first, it looked like a giant spider in shape, but I reassessed right away. With a name like that, this was no spider. It was more akin to an antlion.

I didn't know how to fight this enemy; I just put my strength into my legs in order to keep away from it. However, the soft sand on the ground sank in, so I couldn't move very nimbly. The sand under my feet was acting strangely.

Dimension informed me what was going on. The Eddy Anchor was manipulating the sand and trying to drag me under. I lost my balance, landing on my hands and feet. At this rate, I'd get sucked in with the flow of the sand

right where it was.

“Spellcast: *Layered Dimension*.”

I aggregated information about the sand that touched my feet. The softness, the flow, and the nature of the sand, and so on. Next, I checked to see if there was anything I could make use of in the vicinity. Unfortunately, there was nothing in a hundred-meter circumference but flowing sand. I did spot another Eddy Anchor in the distance, but it was too far away to affect the current situation. I examined the antlion that was trying to suck me in. It was employing its six legs and magic energy to command the sand, opening its gaping maw and waiting for prey to enter. Its carapace resembled crystal, and it seemed very hard.

In that case! “Spellcast: *Freeze!*”

I took some water from my inventory and sprinkled it on the sand, activating my ice spell at the same time. This was to harden the sand. Now, I had a foothold to work with, albeit only for a short span. I stepped through the frozen foothold, escaped from the sand, and leaped into the air right above the Eddy Anchor. The moment I took to the air, I launched my sword straight down with all my might. The sword cut through the sand, getting sucked into the monster’s maw and drawing a spurt of blood. I landed in the distance and checked the enemy’s condition using *Dimension*. Right then, the Eddy Anchor was turning into light and fading away.

“Phew.”

I started thinking about how to retrieve my sword and gem drop—but an unexpected turn of events put a damper on that. The sand hadn’t stopped shifting. Even though the Eddy Anchor, the one ostensibly manipulating it, had disappeared, it was still sucking me in. In fact, the suction had only strengthened. A whirlpool had formed on the ground. I expanded *Dimension* into the ground again, looking for a cause.

And then I spotted it: the hole at the bottom of Floor 29. It seemed to be connected to the floor under it. The Eddy Anchor that had plugged up the hole was no longer there, and now the sand was falling down with great force. The ever-intensifying vortex caught my feet. At this rate, I would get sucked down

to the thirtieth floor and fall from its ceiling.

I was of two minds. Should I fall or should I flee? If I put my mind to escaping, I could just make another frozen foothold with some water and *Freeze*. But if I did that, I'd be abandoning the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword that had fallen through the hole.

Of course, weapons were consumable goods. My life wasn't as replaceable. If I just hunted another Line Skitter, I could obtain more Crescent Pectolazri to forge a second sword. Nonetheless, losing the work of art that Mr. Alibers had poured his soul into after a single day would make me feel like a dog. Besides, losing the sword here would put my diving plans substantially behind. My life was more precious, yes...but still, it'd be such a waste.

I probably wouldn't take any fall damage. I'd be falling onto soft sand, and my body was made of tough stuff now. What I was worried about was plunging into Floor 30 by myself. The plan had been to take on the Guardian alongside Snow.

"Urgh..."

To be frank, I was pretty sure I could defeat the Guardian. Ever since I'd first come to this world, I'd never truly struggled in a fight, and that fact gave me confidence. It could be the case that the chances were higher than not that I could beat it easily by myself.

"And if that's so..."

Then I had to prioritize the sword.

I was particularly confident regarding my speed. I'd have no trouble running away, since I was by myself. If I found myself in the slightest pickle, I could just take to my heels.

"...guess I'll go grab it."

I took a deep breath to fill my lungs before steeling my resolve and diving into the sand myself. I swam, pushing my way through, and spotted the hole at the bottom of Floor 29. Of course, my eyes weren't open. I was relying on *Dimension*. And then, I passed through the hole and fell down into Floor 30.



I landed on the ground and immediately scanned the floor. The chamber was breathtaking. Flower blooms that gleamed in rainbow colors stood on the sandy ground, and countless crystal pillars that shone equally colorfully were standing side by side. There were also a great number of colorful stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Floor 30 reminded me of a limestone cave. That being said, the shining prismatic minerals intimated that this was no ordinary limestone cave. It resembled Floors 28 and 29. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and Floors 28 and 29 were the way they were due to this floor's influence. Floor 30 was *complete* enough, comparatively speaking, to give that impression.

I picked up my sword and walked through the chamber. The flowers made a cracking noise as I tread upon them. The sensation on the soles of my feet told me they weren't vegetation but pure rock. After a few seconds of trampling the beautiful blossoms, I spotted a shadowy figure ahead. And if I guessed right, it was...

【TRIGESIMAL GUARDIAN】Thief of Earth's Essence

"The Guardian of Floor 30?"

In response, the figure turned toward me. It was a young man with dull chestnut hair. He was wearing old clothes with frayed hems, and his eyes looked oh so tired. They were a purplish gray, a blue-black color, and what really stood out were the dark circles under them. He looked a little bit older than me, maybe; about as old as a college student in my world.

The young man put a hand to his forehead; he began to look puzzled. "Yeah. Yeah, that's right. I'm a Guardian. I know that. Of that, there can be no doubt. But I made a promise to that guy...and then...and then!"

This guy hardly looked like a monster. Could he really be a Guardian? Really? He seemed all mixed up. From what people had told me, the Guardian came into existence when a diver first entered its floor. I didn't know how it worked, but if it was akin to a sudden summoning, I didn't blame him for being in a state of confusion.

He kept talking to himself, his empty eyes wandering around as he strove to

grasp his situation. “And then?! What happened to me after? Oh. Oh, right. I think I joined together with that dumbass and got swallowed?!”

His eyes snapped wide and he crouched down. That instant, a giant black sickle whooshed over his head.

“So close!” came a voice tinged with glee.

Yet another figure had appeared from out of nowhere, and this one didn’t look like a monster either. The bearer of the scythe was a very young and stark-naked little girl with brown skin and body-length black hair, no taller than a grade schooler, and she was floating in the air. The blade was around two meters in length, and it was made of amorphous darkness. Lastly, her crimson eyes were brimming with the urge to kill. Everything about her was abnormal, most of all my inability to gain any information on her despite using Analyze.

She clicked her tongue, but she still seemed to be having a ball as she swung at the guy a second time. He groaned, no longer looking so puzzled.

“Oh! I get it now! Dammit, so that’s how it happened?!”

He put up his dukes, keeping an eye on his surroundings while he dodged her death stroke. In the midst of that, our eyes met again.

“It’s too dangerous here!” he shouted to me. “You’ve gotta run!”

“Wait, huh?!” I had no idea what was going on. I never would’ve dreamed that when I reached Floor 30, the Guardian would be urging me to flee. Nor could I have predicted in a million years that he’d ignore me and start engaging in combat with a little girl.

“Reaper’s too dangerous! I, Lorwen, Thief of Earth’s Essence, will keep her occupied, so use this chance to run!”

“Reaper”? As in, the Grim Reaper?

Judging by his expression, he truly was worried about my safety. But I stayed in that spot, at a loss over what to do. So long as he was a Guardian, he was my enemy, and I was supposed to take him down. And yet...Mr. Lorwen was just too human. And this was way different from what I’d pictured beforehand.

The girl looked as troubled as I did. “Hey, something’s off!” she cried.

“Lorwen, something’s not right!”

Even as she said that, she didn’t stay her hand against him. She was still trying to take his head.

“Of course!” he replied as he kept dodging her high-speed scythe. “It’s all already over! That fight is over! Your caster-mage is dead! Which means you’ve got no reason to attack me anymore!”

“What?! No, that can’t be! Don’t say such mean things, Lorwen!”

“If you keep moving, you’ll stop being able to maintain your bodily form!” He dodged her sickle by a hair’s breadth and grabbed her arm before flinging her away.

Watching from afar, I could see the clear gap in strength. While the girl moved fast, her attacks were repetitive and lacked any guile. Mr. Lorwen’s movements, on the other hand, were polished. There was a yawning chasm between their skill levels. Her scythe would never reach him.

She clutched her throat and groaned dolorously. Based on appearances, it looked like she wasn’t getting enough air.

“Urgh...it hurts...”

“See?! Your magic energy keeps leaking without getting replenished, and that’s what happens!”

She glared at him, then smiled faintly and muttered, “No... No, I can still fight. I’m still alive... It’s not over yet!”

“Hey, don’t tell me—”

Sensing she was doing something out of the ordinary, Mr. Lorwen extended his arms in order to hold her off. The girl’s body immediately warped into a black mist and melted into thin air. I’d only been able to notice thanks to *Dimension* being up and running. She had turned her whole body into magic energy and merged with the energy in the air. Then the energy that she now was moved behind me.



“Damn! You’re after me now?!”

“Look this way, mister.”

It was damn near teleportation. Taken aback by her effectively warping behind me, I unsheathed my sword and looked over my shoulder. She had a big smile on her face. It was the innocent smile of a child who’d pulled off some kind of prank. She put her hand on my shoulder. Then she poked my cheek.

“Hee hee, got you to look!”

I jumped away from her. Pain and heat racked the nape of my neck. “Yowch!”

My sword was trained on her as I put a hand to my neck. I didn’t sense an ounce of hostility from her, but the chances I’d been hit with some kind of attack were high.

After I gained some distance on the gleeful little girl, Mr. Lorwen attacked her.

“Reaper! Don’t drag strangers into this!”

“You’re too late, Lorwen! The boy’s mine now!”

The girl flew away from Mr. Lorwen. It didn’t take long to comprehend what she meant by that. I focused *Dimension* on the heat in my neck. A black symbol resembling a magic circle was now floating over that spot, and it emitted heat as it siphoned away my magic energy. *Dimension* informed me that the energy was flowing into the girl called Reaper. Looking closely, a symbol similar to the one on my neck had appeared at some point on her forehead. Some kind of link had been created between the two symbols; there could be no doubt that she was currently draining my magic energy.

“Hee hee! *The devil’s behind you now. The space behind you, my darling... it belongs to me and only me,*” she incanted. She absorbed my energy, and now she was bursting with power. “*I am the one, the only, Grim Rim Reaper!* Talk about a coincidence! This boy is the same as him! Hee hee hee! He’s *another* dimension mage! And would you look at that! I just filled my caster-mage vacancy using him! Now then, Lorwen, what’re you gonna do?!”

Whenever she shouted and made her power swell, more magic energy leaked from me. She was doubtless only surviving off the energy she was taking from

me. Mr. Lorwen groaned and came over to me.

“Damn, no choice now! What’s your name, kid?!”

“Kanami,” I said, still with a hand to my neck. “My name is Aikawa Kanami.”

While I could sense a wickedness in the girl, I didn’t sense any malice from the Guardian. I concluded that telling him my name couldn’t hurt.

“Ai... Aikawa Kanami?!” he shouted in surprise.

Apparently, my name rang a bell. However, Mr. Lorwen only gave a look of surprise for a brief space of time, and then quickly closed his mouth and returned to a serious expression.

“Sorry, Kanami! I’ll be needing you to cooperate! If you wanna undo that curse, we have to take her down!”

“I... I don’t really get what’s happening, but I do know that that girl is bad news! And that I can’t afford to let things play out!”

I now understood that holding my neck was doing nothing to stem the flow of energy, so I accepted Mr. Lorwen’s proposal.

“Hee hee, heh heh heh, ah ha ha, AH HA HA HA HA HA!”

I brandished my sword side by side with the Guardian as we stared down the grim reaper girl who was merrily laughing her head off. This was completely different from my initial plan, but it couldn’t be helped. I had to do something about the foe before my eyes before I could touch the Guardian. I started thinking about the optimal plan to defeat her.

The next moment, her giant scythe smashed the surrounding crystal to pieces. I dodged the attack by a nose as I asked him a question—I needed information to be able to do anything at all.

“Mr. Lorwen! Is that thing a monster or what?!”

“No, it’s not! And of course, it’s not a Guardian or a human either! It’s just a spell! It’s a spell with a mind of its own!”

“A spell?!” The possibility hadn’t crossed my mind.

“Yep. It’s a curse created solely to kill me. The spell used a fairy tale as its

motif, and the spell's name is *Grim Rim Reaper*. Please fight while keeping that story in mind!"

"Wait, did you...did you say fairy tales?! Sorry, but I don't know that one!" I'd never heard of the Grim Rim Reaper.

"But I mean, everyone knows that story the world over!"

"I'm telling you, I really don't know it!" However famous the story was, I wasn't from this world.

I kept dodging her aiming-for-my-blind-spot scythe swings, the look on my face ever serious. Mr. Lorwen could tell from my expression that I wasn't lying.

"Okay! I'll give you the gist! She can't exist while you're looking at her; she only takes form when you're not looking at her. She's the villain in the fairy tale and acts according to that rule. She'll attack from outside your field of vision, so hit her using counterattacks!"

"She only takes form when you don't see her? Okay, got it!"

That was all she needed to be a thorn in my side. Sure, she was a spell as opposed to an organism, but that was still an overpowered ability. She could attack from all directions, teleporting and then swinging, teleporting and then swinging, and while I could dodge, countering her scythe stroke was easier said than done.

There was something unnatural about her onslaught, though. When facing Mr. Lorwen, she exuded a hair-raising bloodlust, but she had no bloodlust toward me at all. And I got the feeling she was actively avoiding swinging for my vitals too.

I had Mr. Lorwen's back. Irritated, she backed away a little and huffed indignantly. "Oh, for goodness' sake! Would you get out of my hair, mister?! I just wanna kill Lorwen!"

"Er, so uh, you don't plan on killing me, then?"

"Of course not. You're what I'm feeding on, mister. I'd just be crippling myself."

"What you're...feeding on... I don't suppose you could quit draining my

energy for the time being, huh?”

“No duh! If I stopped, I’d stop being in fighting form, so I’ll drain you till death do us part!”

“You’re gonna drain me to death? In that case, what choice do I have but to fight you?”

I gripped my blade anew and glared at her, but I couldn’t muster the will to kill her either. Her looking human was already enough to make slaying her difficult. Her reacting to stuff in that childlike way only dampened my fighting spirit even more.

“Kanami, it’s no use! Once the curse is on you, it’ll just keep draining your energy until you die!” the Guardian cried.

But I didn’t believe him, partly because I wasn’t going to swallow wholesale whatever somebody I just met said, but mostly because I didn’t get the sense that the danger was quite as bad as he was making it out to be. It was true that my energy was getting sucked out of me, but that was hardly going to kill me. It was leaking from my body a tiny bit at a time, like through a thin straw. And while it would hinder combat a little for me, it wasn’t life-or-death. Or at least, it shouldn’t be.

She processed the energy she was taking from me with apparent relish and started crafting a spell. “Hee hee! What juicy magic energy! I’m thinking I’m in finer form than before! Now it’ll be child’s play to escape from your gazes!”

It looked as though this spell could cast its own spell. “Spellcast: *Dimension: Nightmare!*”

It was very similar to my magic, and not just because it contained the word *Dimension* in its name. It was clearly the same school of spell. And that wasn’t all. Even the idea of tacking a word like “nightmare” onto the spell’s name sounded like something I’d do.

Floor 30 became filled with dimension-element magic, black bubbles suddenly appearing within that domain. Using *Dimension*, I gleaned the full picture of her magic. In essence, it wasn’t all that different from *Dimension*. I also detected that the black bubbles were packed with teleportation magic. It was a lot like

Snowmension in that way. As for why the bubbles were black, it was probably to block the enemy's vision even as it conquered the space on the battlefield.

As promised, she made her body disappear and teleported to our blind spot. I immediately expanded *Dimension* out wide and eliminated it as a blind spot. However, her own *Dimension: Nightmare* grasped the expansion of my *Dimension*, pinpointing where the expansion was thinnest and moving to that spot.

Though *Dimension* was a spell that gathered information about space, it didn't always do so automatically. For the most part, I had to think about what information I wanted. In other words, unless I was painstakingly meticulous, there would invariably be a small gap somewhere. And she was traveling within those gaps. It was a battle of precision between *Dimensions*.

She appeared near Mr. Lorwen's rear and slashed at him laterally. He wrenched himself out of the way, but if I wasn't mistaken, it looked like the scythe had grazed the hem of his clothes. Right before the sickle could do more damage, I perceived her using *Dimension*, so the weapon had lost its physical form.

Seeing that she'd failed to even hit his hem, she pouted. She slashed at Mr. Lorwen over and over, but each and every time, my *Dimension* "saw" her, making her sickle fail to reach its target.

"Grr! I'm so fed up! Your stupid magic's getting in my way!"

She changed targets to me. It seemed she had no means of getting around *Dimension*. Focusing on me, she tried to strengthen the link between her and the emblem on my nape.

"I'll just drain more of your energy and leave you unable to use that spell!"

Mr. Lorwen grew flustered. "Kanami, fall back for now—"

"That's okay, Mr. Lorwen," I replied quietly. "I've got this. I get it now."

I had collected enough information on her. Her unique ability had taken me by surprise at first, but now I was used to it.

I ignored her and crafted a different spell. To be frank, this piddly little curse-

link could never drain me dry. It was like pricking a hole in a giant silo with a needle. It had no real impact when it came to the larger picture.

“I’ll switch all my magic energy usage to *Layered Dimension* and prioritize my space-sight.”

I intensified my perception field, filling the entire space and eliminating any unseen spot for her to materialize in. There were no more places where it was thin either. I left zero holes through which she could get the jump on us. That was all I had to do to utterly incapacitate her.

“Wait, huh?! What the?!”

Through her *Dimension: Nightmare*, she’d detected that my magic energy now permeated every square inch of Floor 30. She turned her body to mist and teleported around, darting from black bubble to black bubble and leaping through space, only to find herself unable to ever actually materialize.

“Huh? There’s nowhere I’m not seen?!” Sweat beaded on her forehead and she grimaced.

“Give it up. As long as I’m anywhere near you, you’ll never be able to materialize again. I won’t miss one millimeter or one second of time, and I’ll never let you go.”

Dimension’s gaze captured every microsecond she teleported. By perceiving the flow of magic energy, I could even predict where she’d teleport to next. Moreover, I’d already finished analyzing the hundred-plus black bubbles. With that, she was left with no means of doing us harm. And as long as she couldn’t attack us with her scythe, it was checkmate.

“You can’t be serious! You snake! That’s beyond messed up! I can’t!”

After repeatedly teleporting, the incensed reaper tried to hit my body with both hands. As she was still unable to materialize, she couldn’t even touch me.

“Phew. Glad I happened to have a spell that’s handy against her. I’m gonna take a breather for now.”

I took a deep breath, relieved that the rapid-fire action had finally come to a stop. And it appeared that Mr. Lorwen understood that as well, as he saw how

neutralized she was. He relaxed and came over to us.

“Damn, Kanami, you’re something else! But are you sure your magic energy ain’t running out?”

“It’s not really that bad, mister. Honestly, it isn’t something I might die from.”

Lorwen started ruminating with a serious expression. “It’s not that bad? Is it our location? Or is your magic energy just that huge?”

Seeing him at such a loss to explain it, the girl floated closer. She knew it was pointless to struggle, so she’d made her scythe vanish. I stood at the ready against her, but she addressed the Guardian with a lighthearted tone.

“I think that’s just how much magic energy he’s got compared to you. Unlike you, mister’s got loads and loads. I’m draining away, but he’s still got strength to spare. And even worse, it’s super effective against me!”

“Is the gap between us that big?” Lorwen replied equally casually.

“Yep. If he’s a richly flavored apple, you’re dried fruit.”

“Well, I’m sorry I’ve got such low magic energy! Actually, I’m *average*, if anything!”

“Quit yelling at me! In any case, he won’t meet the end you thought he’d meet. I think a boy like him can probably keep me going indefinitely.”

“He can keep you alive? You’re kidding me.”

It seemed Lorwen could scarcely believe what she’d concluded. And for some reason, he appeared to be somewhat *worried* about her. I was the one who couldn’t believe what I was hearing; these two had been trying to kill each other moments prior, and now they were chatting as though that fight hadn’t just happened. They were too buddy-buddy. I was even inclined to think the two were old friends. I figured I should learn more about the situation, so I butted into their conversation.

“Er, if I may?”

“Hm? What’s up, kid?” He stopped ruminating and looked my way with a placid expression.

“It’s just, I came all the way down here to take down the Guardian of Floor 30, so...”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I’m a Dungeon Guardian,” he said, his benign expression unchanging. “So much happened that I forgot.”

This wasn’t going to script, to say the least. Wasn’t a Guardian supposed to be a merciless, unfeeling monster? Wasn’t a Guardian the kind of mad beast that attacked any humans it encountered, leaving countless casualties in its wake? That was what I’d been told, and yet...

“Wait,” said the girl, “you came to kill Lorwen? Then let’s kill him together! I’d have liked to have killed him by myself, but I don’t mind bringing *you* aboard!”

She was the one who supplied all the mercilessness and madness, not Lorwen. I did want to talk to her too, eventually, but Mr. Lorwen was the priority at the moment.

“Hold... Hold on a second. Er...Reaper? Let me talk with Mr. Lorwen first.” I didn’t know what to call her at first, but I settled on just calling her Reaper.

“Hmph! Don’t leave me out! Let me in on it!”

“I’m not leaving you out of anything. I’ll listen to you later on, so for now, be good and—”

“No way, no how! I know how this goes! You say that now, but you just plan to ignore me in the end!”

“I can assure you that’s—”

“Hey, forget about that and undo your spell already! With magic like that, I can’t touch anyth—”

“Spellcast: *Wintermension*.”

“Wait, huh?! It... It hurts! It hurts!”

I activated a limited version of *Wintermension*, the target being the curse-link stretching to her from the emblem on the nape of my neck. It was the same process as when I impeded other people’s magic. All I did was apply *Wintermension*’s vibration-damping ability to suppress the flow, and that was enough to stem the transfer of magic energy to her. In fact, if I wanted to, I

could reverse the flow and drain *her* energy.

Cut off from her supply, she began to suffocate. The only reason I'd left her alone even though she was draining my magic energy was because I was confident that I could do this at any time. I quickly restored her supply and chided her.

"Now be quiet."

"Yes, sir," she said, looking extremely spooked. "Even the way he scolds people is the same as him," she muttered as she backed down dejectedly. Clearly, she had some trauma with regard to what I'd just done.

I'd been bailed out by how effective my dimensional magic happened to be against Reaper; she was shut down completely. But something was nagging at me a little. Even if Reaper was a spell created by some mage, it felt too convenient. It was almost like the spell had been cast knowing I'd be using it...

You know what, I'll think about that later. First, I have to talk to Mr. Lorwen.

"Er, first things first, are you really the Guardian of Floor 30, mister?"

"Sorry, kid, but could you cool it with the 'mister' and the formality? It's bothering me."

"Huh? You mean my formal register?"

"Physically, we're basically the same age. Please just talk casually."

It was true that appearance-wise, we weren't all that many years apart. Mr. Lorwen looked older than me, but not by much.

"Got it, Lorwen. And you can just call me Kanami too."

"Of course, Kanami. Now then, what was the question again? Was it whether I'm a Guardian or not?"

"I'm having trouble believing you could be a Guardian. Reaper, on the other hand, I could believe."

"Nope. That nitwit just came with the package. During the last moments of the ritual, she was near me, so she got wrapped up in it, that's all. I'm definitely the Guardian here."

“So you’re a monster, then?”

“Yep, I’m a monster. Only, unlike the other dudes, I haven’t fully fallen yet, so I’m still mostly human-looking.” Lorwen shifted his eyes to his own body. He was the very picture of a normal human being.

“Damn, for real? That’s a problem. I came here because I thought there was a boss monster to kill.”

“Oh, you don’t gotta worry about that. I can’t die like a person dies. You’re good to face me like you would a monster.”

“You can’t die like a person dies? What’s that mean?”

“The moment my heart stops beating, my transformation into a monster is complete. And if you beat me, you officially clear the Trigesimal Trial. Wanna go at it now?”

“I dunno. You still look too human to fight to kill.”

“Yeah, guess I don’t blame ya... If I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t be able to draw my own sword either.” Mr. Lorwen shrugged with a sheepish smile.

This truly put me in a bind. At this rate, I wouldn’t be able to fulfill my end of Palinchron’s bargain. I hadn’t imagined the Guardian would be this understanding. From what I’d heard, when Guardians in the past had manifested, it had resulted in lots of casualties, but Mr. Lorwen seemed to be different. Was the play to force his heart to stop and turn him into a monster? I figured I’d be able to point my sword at him if he looked the part. Probably.

“Hrm. In that case, let’s make a deal,” suggested Mr. Lorwen.

“Huh? A deal?”

Yet another deal. A deal with Lorwen in order to cash in on Palinchron’s deal. It reminded me of chains of fetch quests and errands in an RPG. Go do this for me. Go do that for me. Meanwhile, the main story thread is put on the back burner. That happened all the time in video games. I had half a mind to ignore all of it and just level grind. After all, as long as I could do something about that pair of girls, I was pretty much golden.

“Yep, and it’s a simple one. Grant me my heart’s desire. If you do, I’ll die.”

“If I grant your heart’s desire, you’ll die? Is that really true?”

“Us Guardians are dead to begin with. Our lingering attachments keep our bodies animated, but that doesn’t mean we’re alive. As such, if we lose those attachments, we start growing weaker, and if we fulfill our driving ambition, we disappear.”

Mr. Lorwen had said he was already dead. It seemed the reason he’d said I could treat him as a monster to slay was because he had already braced himself for death. I was speechless, but he continued.

“In fact, dying is what I want. So you don’t have to worry. You can aim for my life.”

He smiled faintly. I knew he was being considerate, trying to lessen my anxiety however he could. And I figured it was only right I repay his kindness.

“Understood. If you insist, I’ll resolve to kill the Guardian through that method.”

“Thanks, Kanami.”

We shook on it. We’d only known each other for a short while, but I could tell that Lorwen wasn’t a bad person, and as such, I was willing to cooperate with him. Of course, it was also a self-interested move. Lorwen was strong. He was so capable, in fact, that he could dodge a hyperspeed scythe coming at him from his blind spot with ease while unarmed. I had no doubt that he’d be quite the asset against those two overpowered girls. Depending on the contents of our deal, he might become my ally up until he fulfilled his heart’s desire.

“No, you can’t!” shouted Reaper, unable to stay quiet anymore. “I’m gonna be the one to kill Lorwen, so there’s no way I can let him die like that!”

It seemed Reaper was obsessed with murdering Lorwen by her own hand. And considering she was a spell cast for the sole purpose of killing him, I perhaps couldn’t blame her for reaching that conclusion.

“Look, I’m telling ya, the dude who ordered you to kill me is dead now. Man, have you got a thick skull. You ain’t got no reason to kill me anymore.”

“I understand that...but...but then what am I supposed to do? What reason

have I got to go on living?”

“Decide for yourself,” he said, his tone strong and firm. “That’s what life’s about. Having your purpose in life decided for you before you’re born ain’t how it usually is. You need to live and *search* for what to do with your life.”

I felt the same way. I was of the opinion that, at the very least, making it one’s purpose in life to kill somebody was wrong.

“But... But that’s *hard*...” she said, close to tears as she turned back into black mist.

“Hey, wait! Where are you going?!” shouted Lorwen.

I knew where Reaper was fleeing, though. Or rather, she made it crystal clear to me. Because the black mist went inside of me. At first, I thought I’d reject her entry using *Wintermension*, but her sorrowful expression made me feel bad for her, so I ended up letting her inside.

“Lorwen. Reaper went inside me. And she’s all withdrawn and sulky.”

“Inside you? I...see. That’s good,” he said, relieved to hear that Reaper was okay. Apparently, he was concerned about the fate of the curse that had been so intent on killing him. He was like a big brother fretting over his ill-behaving sister.

“But my body feels kinda heavy now.”

“I mean, yeah. Reaper’s a curse. That’s only natural if you’re shouldering a top-level curse.”

“Wha... What do I do with her?”

“Well, Reaper may be a dumbass, but she’s not a bad kid. If you can reason with her, she’s a spell you can make use of. Congrats, Kanami. From this day forward, you’re the owner of a legendary death spirit.” The look in his eyes said he’d found someone to take care of his dumb little sister.

“I’d like to pass, if possible.”

Lorwen may have been cool with it, but there was no way I’d agree to this. It wouldn’t kill me, but it did put a drain on my precious MP.

“Sorry, sorry. I was just joking. I’ll help you drive Reaper out. We’ll find a mage to replace you. Or if we can seal her away, that’d be good too... Unfortunately, magic’s outside my area of expertise, so there’s nothing I can do. Hey, are any other Guardians alive and kicking?”

“No. I’m told both the Guardian of Floor 10 and the Guardian of Floor 20 are dead.”

“Damn, if a Guardian who specialized in magic were around, we might’ve been able to save her. But they’re dead, huh? They’ve all disappeared.”

Lorwen spoke of *saving* Reaper without missing a beat. The two had been trying to kill each other before, but it seemed that wasn’t all there was to their relationship. I intended to learn more about them little by little, but now that things had settled down, I wanted to ask him about the number-one most important thing. For indeed, it didn’t get more important...

“So, Lorwen, what’s your heart’s desire?”

...than the method by which I could kill the Thief of Earth’s Essence.

“My heart’s desire, huh? Let me think. I feel like there was a lot,” he said, less than articulately. Gradually, he unearthed the memory, changing his expression countless times as he strung together his next sentence. “If I recall, my biggest wish was to become a famous knight, I think.” He opened and closed his empty right hand as he continued talking to himself. “Yeah, that’s right. My desire was to show the world my sword skills. That was my dream since I was a kid. I know that’s what it is. I know for a fact that that wish was a thing.”

Embarrassed by the childishness of his own dream, he nevertheless stated it to me. His expression became assured.

“Yeah. What I want is prestige and glory. I want the masses to sing my praises as a hero.”

With a boyish grin, he let spill his very simple wish. It was so innocent, so pure...and sad and empty, in a way.

“Otherwise, I’ll have no recompense,” he muttered, leaving his confession at that.

I wasn't imagining it. If I squinted, he looked positively *forlorn*.

Chapter 5: The Guardian of the Thirtieth Floor

After meeting Lorwen and Reaper on Floor 30, we passed through the *Connection* portal and returned to my office at Epic Seeker. Snow was there, dozing by the window. Since she was back in her usual tribal garb, I knew that whatever business she had to attend to at the House of Siddark was behind her. She noticed that we'd popped in from the portal, and she rubbed her sleepy eyes and looked our way.

"Welcome...back?" she said, looking at the man behind me.

I had Lorwen come in front of me. "Er, this is the Guardian of Floor 30."

"Hey, nice to meet ya. Name's Lorwen. As you heard, I'm a Dungeon monster, so no formal register needed." Lorwen put a hand to his chest and bowed his head with bombast.

Snow reflexively bowed back. "H-Hello. My name's Snow. It's...a pleasure to meet you. Wait, hold on...er, uh, huh?"

I didn't blame her for not being able to digest the information. Dungeon divers exclusively viewed Guardians as terrors. Anybody would react the way she did if some dude just rocked up to them and claimed to be a Guardian.

"Long story short," I said, "I saw he wasn't a bad person, so I brought him here from Floor 30." For the time being, I communicated to her that there was no danger. It was important that she understood she was safe.

"Wha...whoa..." She goggled at me.

"I'm told Lorwen will die if he attains renown as a knight, so I figure I'll help him achieve that. Apparently, Guardians disappear when they lose the attachments tethering them. It's way safer than fighting them."

"And you believe that?"

"I do. I made a judgment call. And since I plan to let Lorwen stay at Epic Seeker, I'd like you to see to our guest's needs."

“I’m sorry?”

I then told her about our deal. It was one way to have Lorwen fight on our side. After he had told me about his heart’s desire, I’d told him I was worried about that pair of girls, and he had volunteered to serve as security. With that, I’d given Snow the minimum she needed to know, so I looked outside to see how dark it was. The sun was setting, and soon it would turn pitch-dark out.

“One more thing. I’m currently cursed by a killer phantom named Reaper, so I need to go do some research. I’m gonna hurry out before the place closes, so I’ll be back soon. Wait here with Lorwen.”

If I recalled correctly, there were public institutions that dealt in books. However, maybe it was too late at night and they were closed. I hastily jumped out the office window.

“Wait, Reaper?” she stammered. “What on earth happened in the Dungeon?”

“Hmm, I might as well explain,” said Lorwen. “Ain’t got nothing to do while we wait, after all.”

“Huh? Ah, sure, okay, thank you.”

I saw the scene through *Dimension*. The Guardian offered politely to explain, which placated her. Meanwhile, I sallied forth into town, galloping at full speed toward the library.



“Holy moly! This is nuts! These are all books?! That’s so many books, mister!”

Reaper had kept quiet from Floor 30 up to this point, but the moment she entered the Laoravian library, she suddenly became full of life again. It seemed she had never seen such long rows of books before. Unable to fully contain her excitement, she popped out from inside my body.

Incidentally, Reaper was no longer in the nude. So long as I kept supplying her with magic energy, creating clothes for her was possible. Right now, her body was shrouded in a pitch-black mantle.

Hearing her jubilant voice from the blind spot behind me, I wasted no time cutting off her energy supply through *Wintermension*.

“Agh! But why?!” she choked out.

I’d told her in no uncertain terms not to come floating out outside of the Dungeon, so the people around me interpreted it as some boisterous kid entering the building somewhere out of sight. Still, her noisiness was a problem. I drew closer to the unmaterialized Reaper and spoke under my voice.

“Quiet. No talking in the library. Otherwise, they’ll throw us out.”

“Library?” she asked, adopting my hushed tone. “Why do we gotta keep quiet in the ‘library’?”

Since she’d piped down, I now knew that it had been due to a simple lack of common knowledge. It seemed that if I just admonished her, she’d listen to me.

“Reaper, you don’t even know about libraries?”

“You shouldn’t expect much from me. Killing Lorwen is all I know anything about.”

I got a vaguely boastful vibe from her. It looked to me as though she took pride in her mission to kill Lorwen. Then again, it also looked to me as though she took pride in him as her accomplished big brother. That confirmed it for me—the two were clearly close.

“How many years has it been since you were born?”

“Hm, not even one.”

I sighed, beckoning her over and outside the building with a finger. “Reaper, I’m gonna go borrow a book at the library real quick. Wait here for me.”

Now that we were outside the library, her voice grew loud again. “Huh?! You want me to wait here, all alone?! Tell me what the library is!”

I was nervous that her voice had carried inside. She wasn’t breaking any rules; I’d told her to be quiet *inside* the library. But it seemed she couldn’t extrapolate what I really meant from that.

“I’ll tell you later. And I’ll borrow some books for you to read too. So please, behave and wait here for me. You’re a good girl.”

“A good girl?” she replied. “Yeah, I’m a good girl, don’t you know?” After

becoming absorbed in thought over those words, she settled down. “Okay. I’ll wait here.”

“Ah, uh, good.”

Reaper was more docile than I’d anticipated. She sat down on the side of the road and started playing with the sand on the ground with her index finger. Normally, that would just be idly killing time, but she seemed to genuinely enjoy the simple and boring act. Maybe everything on the surface was a novelty to her.

Knowing that she’d last for a decent stretch, I hurried back into the library, asking the staff to search for books about fairy tales and curses. Tomes on both the tale of Grim Rim Reaper and curses turned up in no time. Both were major presences in this world, so finding them was apparently a cinch.

First, I used *Layered Dimension* to speed-read the fairy tale. The story had been passed down through oral tradition since long ago, and it had permeated most regions. So much so, in fact, that if one spoke of fairy tales in this world, the first one to spring to mind would be Grim Rim Reaper’s.

The story itself was harmless. The message it taught was to pay attention to where it’s dark, and nothing about it made it a story that couldn’t have developed on Earth. Some of the descriptions were on the disturbing side, but that wasn’t so rare. All I really learned was that Grim Rim Reaper was a phantasm that attacked you when it was out of sight. It didn’t have a weakness and there was no way to beat it.

While not particularly satisfied, I had no choice but to move on and pick up the book on curses. It was an old and dusty text, and it said that in the distant past, there was no shortage of curse magic in the world. However, after someone named “Saint Tiara” had laid the foundations of modern magic, they’d started dying out.

Unlike Tiara’s magic, curses had many prices to pay. As such, the text contended, people naturally took to rejecting them. It didn’t take much reading for me to grasp how hard to use curses were. First of all, they consumed not only MP but also HP. Already, that made them a poor choice for battle. It seemed that there were also cases where they harmed the caster’s physical

condition, shortened their life span, or inflicted illness on them. If the curse failed, the caster was consigning themselves to ruin. And as a rule, curse casters were digging their own graves—much of the time, the curse returned upon their own heads.

If what I was reading was correct, I was now the caster-mage of the curse, and the curse-target was Lorwen. In other words, Reaper might not only kill Lorwen; there was a chance she could kill *me*. I lamented to myself what a nuisance I'd taken in as I turned the page, to find "Reaper" in that fresh new page's list of curse examples.

The Reaper Curse was first identified a thousand years ago, its first appearance made on a certain battlefield.

I didn't put much stock in the veracity of that claim. This world's current level of civilization didn't give me much confidence that things that occurred a millennium ago were passed down the ages accurately. But I figured it couldn't hurt to keep reading.

A thousand years ago, amid a great war waged between man and monster, a certain curse was first identified. The curse suddenly manifested in the center of an advancing order of knights, killing many a troop. Stabbing the curse with swords and hitting it with magic did nothing to kill it. It would dissolve into a mist and appear behind its prey, reaping a number of heads as it went. What could people call it except Reaper, God of Death?

The account ended after describing how a certain no-name knight had taken Reaper down with him. There was only one way to destroy Reaper, and that was to swing one's sword in time with the blind-spot attack. In exchange for his own head getting taken in the process, the nameless knight managed to decapitate Reaper by doing so. After that, the Reaper Curse never showed itself again. Or so the book stated.

I clicked my tongue. This was not enough information. The citation for the account was listed as "local legend," so right off the bat, I couldn't take it at face value. Moreover, why had they come to the conclusion that it was a curse to begin with? Why had it only ever appeared once? Who was the caster-mage? A lot of important details were missing. Realizing that there was no point in

investigating any further, I got to my feet and called the staff to borrow some children's picture books (under the name of "Epic Seeker") before going back outside.

I could hear the voices of two girls. Reaper was playing with a girl I didn't know, entertaining her by summoning and removing her magical black mist.

"Wow, that's so cool! There's so much black hazy stuff! You really *are* a mage!"

Sparkles in her eyes, the girl chased after the black mist. Then Reaper noticed I was back and erased it again.

"Ah, my big brother person's here now...sorry, I can't play with you no more."

"Aw! C'mon, let's play some more!"

The girl walked closer to Reaper, a displeased look on her face. She tried to grip Reaper by the hand to keep her from going, which made the curse shudder with a start and move out of the way.

"I... I'm really sorry! I just can't. It's the rule I follow... It's late, so you should head home now."

"Okay," she replied, after a pause. She'd looked at Reaper's expression and decided to give up.

"See you next time!"

"Yeah!"

They waved at each other. I waited for the girl to go out of sight.

"When you haven't got your caster-mage or curse-target in me and Lorwen around, you're just a normal little girl, aren't you, Reaper? Sorry I got in the way of your fun."

"No, it's okay. I don't mind," she said, gently shaking her head.

"You can engage in a rapport with a kid just fine when they're that age. I'm surprised."

"Rapport?"

"It just means you can play together."

“Play together? I’m always playing with Lorwen, don’t you know?”

“No, that’s not the same. That’s not play.”

“It’s not?”

“It may be fun for you, but it isn’t for Lorwen. It’s not play unless both parties are enjoying themselves.”

“Wow, the more you know...” She nodded over and over, taking in my every word.

That in itself was surprising. My first impression of her was as more unhinged company that I couldn’t really reason with, but that might have been my misunderstanding.

“You’re more docile than I was expecting.”

“Wonder why? The things you say are just so easy to understand, mister. The things Lorwen says, on the other hand, I can’t make heads or tails of!”

“I mean, the stuff he tells you makes perfect sense too.”

“I dunno how to put it. Your words seep into my body. It’s ’cause you’ve got the same magic energy as *him*. It resonates in my heart like crazy!”

“The same magic energy... I see. That might just be it.”

That could be the reason she grasped what I said but not what Lorwen said—just maybe, she was *made* that way. If she was created to listen to her caster-mage but to never give an ear to the curse-target, it’d make sense. A rule like that getting incorporated into an attack spell that in every other sense had a mind of its own shouldn’t come as a shock. What it was was rotten. Really, really rotten. A rage that surprised even me welled up within, and before I knew it, blood was dripping from my clenched fist.

“What’s wrong, mister?”

“Oh, nothing.”

I hid my bloody fist behind my back and forced a smile, searching for some topic of conversation to distract her.

“By the way, why do you keep calling me ‘mister’? You overheard my

introduction, didn't you? My name's Aikawa Kanami."

"Hmm, I dunno why, but 'mister' just feels right. Am I not allowed to call you that?"

"No, it's fine if you do, I guess."

I had no reason to say no. In her eyes, I looked to be around that big brother age, and it wasn't something that bothered me.

"All right, let's go back. I got you some picture books; have Lorwen or somebody read them to you."

"Picture books?! Oh, it's that one! Ah, but you've still gotta tell me all about the library. You can't get out of having to explain using picture books!"

I pulled her by the hand and started heading back toward Epic Seeker. "Yes, yes. I'll explain on the way there."

"Heh heh, this world's so full of stuff that looks so fun. I'm having a blast!"

We chatted as we walked down the dimly lit roads. From afar, we maybe would have been mistaken for brother and sister. That made me a little anxious, but at the same time, it felt a bit pleasant too. It was like I'd slipped back to the past, and that truly felt just a tiny bit nice...



Reaper and I went back to my office, to an enthusiastic greeting from Lorwen.

"Kanami! Snow told me something awesome!"

"Something awesome?"

"You know how there's gonna be a tournament of strength in this country soon? If I throw my hat in and win the thing, I'm sure my wish'll come true. And without having to bother you either!"

"Now that you mention it, I do think I heard about something like that. It's called the Brawl, if I recall? That really does sound perfect. It fits your heart's desire to a tee."

"Yeah! I think I'll go sign up right now!"

"Hold your horses, dude. It's dark out. Let's do that tomorrow."

“Damn, it’s night out?” he said, stopping in his tracks. “Guess you’re right... Nothing for it, huh?”

Relieved he wasn’t going anywhere, I started talking to the tired-looking Snow.

“Wait...are you exhausted, Snow?”

“Yeah, I’m beat. He peppered me with questions all day.”

“You worked hard today. But now you know a little better what Lorwen’s like, right?”

“He doesn’t seem like a bad person; I’ll give you that. Just bear in mind that there’s no guarantee a person’s what they seem.”

“You’re just being a sourpuss.”

“Besides, I’d bet we have different criteria for what a bad person is.”

“I’m sure we do. But tell me, do you really bounce off him that hard?”

A pause. “No, he’s fine. There’s something else that I’m not fond of, that’s all.”

“Something else?”

“Never mind. There’s no problem. But I’m tired. I’m just tired. I’m going back.”

With that, she sauntered out the window. *Is it just me or is the office window becoming the de facto exit as of late?*

After watching her leave, I spoke to Lorwen and Reaper.

“Guess I’ll go get a bit of shut-eye myself. Let’s all go to my sister’s room for the time being.”

“Hold up, Kanami. Don’t tell me you’re trying to get us to stay the night in your sister’s room too?”

“What, would that be weird?”

“Of course it’d be weird. You don’t gotta worry about us, Kanami. We’re not human, so we can make do.”

“You can make do...how, exactly?”

“Now’s the perfect time. I’ll show you something monstrous about me.”

He showed me his arms, and with a sound like two stones clashing, he transformed them into crystal.

“They turned into crystal?”

“I’ve got some gargoyle-line monster in me, so that’s why. This kinda thing’s my forte.”

“And how’s that relevant?”

“I’ll turn to stone, so put me atop this building or what have you. That way I can get some rest and pull guard duty at the same time. Two birds with one stone. And I’ll serve to ward off evil, I’ll bet.”

“Wait, you can get enough rest like that?”

“It’ll be enough. Monsters don’t need as much rest as humans to begin with. Besides, I’ve been tasked with ensuring your safety. Let me do at least this much for ya.”

I looked Lorwen in the eye to see if he was telling the truth. If he was lying, I couldn’t tell.

“Okay. So that’s you settled. What about Reaper, though?”

“Can’t ya just have her float in the air to sleep? You’re probably able to.”

“No way, that’d be a bad idea.”

I was already gonna be putting up a man-statue atop the building every night. I didn’t want any more strange phenomena attracting attention to Epic Seeker. I could come up with an explanation for the handsome gargoyle, but not the little girl floating in the air.

“No, nuh-uh, not happening!” objected Reaper, as was her right. “Now that I’ve got the chance, I wanna sleep in a bed!”

“Reaper, we’re freeloaders,” said Lorwen. “Exercise a little more restraint. Curb your selfishness and sleep in the air.”

“Uh, she can be selfish if it means she’s not sleeping in the air,” I replied.

Looks like Lorwen's got his own screws loose somewhere.

"I'm gonna sleep alongside my big brother, so butt out!"

"For the time being, come with me to my sister's room, Reaper. You're a little girl; I'm not gonna have you sleep in the open air."

"You're the best, mister!"

I beckoned Reaper to follow me, and Lorwen looked on with immense surprise on his face, though he soon reverted his expression back to normal and shrugged before walking off in the opposite direction.

"Gotcha. I'll be outside, then. Reaper, you'd better be on your best behavior."

He swiftly and nimbly popped out the window and climbed up to the roof. I didn't have the time to stop him; I didn't think he'd be exiting via the window. Looking back, though, both Snow and I always entered and exited through the window, so he might have been under the mistaken impression that it was the actual exit. I resolved to clear up his misconception the next day. Then I took Reaper with me to Maria's room, chiding the overexcited little murder ghost as we went upstairs.

I knocked on the door to Maria's room and entered. She was there, sitting in her bed. She came closer, her expression becoming sunnier. But the cheer in her eyes vanished when she perceived Reaper's presence behind me, and her expression turned stiff. While she didn't have her vision, it seemed she could detect somebody there from the sound of our footsteps.

"Hiya, Maria."

"Welcome back," she stammered, "Kanami."

But her attention was still on Reaper.

"Er, so, this is a kid Epic Seeker's gonna be taking in. Her name's Reaper. Play nice with her, okay?"

"Wait, Reaper? As in the death specter? Who on earth—"

"Yay! She's not a grown-up! Wow, you've got a nice little sister, big brother!" She drew closer to Maria. Apparently, she'd been wanting to interact with someone her age for some time.

“Big...brother?”

Maria was the one with the problem here. Her expression stiffened even more.

“What’s the matter, Maria?”

“Kanami, what is this girl to you?”

“Er, uh, she got lost in the Dungeon, so I escorted her. She got quite the shock in the Dungeon, and it looks like her memory’s unstable, so it’d help me out if you could show her some kindness.”

That was the excuse Lorwen and I had decided on back on Floor 30. Incidentally, Lorwen’s cover was that he was a swordsman wandering the lands for purposes of training.

“I see. So in other words, you picked up a weakened little girl and had her call you her big brother? My goodness, how altogether *noble* a pastime.”

“No, she just started calling me that of her own accord. I didn’t tell her to.”

The winds were starting to blow someplace ominous. At some point, Maria’s expression had turned into an airtight smile. And while a smile it certainly was, it was also blasting me with immeasurable pressure, causing my skin to start pouring sweat.

“You didn’t tell her to? But even so, you didn’t tell her *not* to, did you?”

“I mean, yeah, I guess, but...”

“Which means you chose for her to continue calling you ‘big brother.’ Your crime is great.”

“Whoa, you’re banging the gavel on me?!”

The pressure she was exuding, which felt a lot like waves of heat, only intensified.

Yikes. I don’t know what’s got her goat, but my instincts are ringing all sorts of alarm bells.

Just as I was about to work my calculation gears to their limit to grind out an excuse, Reaper interjected.

“Hrm...uh, big sister?” she said innocently. “It’s wrong to bully him, don’t you know?”

Maria’s blazing pressure was suddenly nowhere to be found. “Big sister?” she stammered. “You mean me?”

“Uh-huh. I’m smaller than you, after all. I thought I’d call you sis, but would that bother you?”

Every time Reaper said “sis” or “sister,” Maria’s face became a little less tense.

“I... I don’t really care. You can call me whatever you like.”

“Woo-hoo! Thanks, sis!”

Reaper glomped on Maria, and Maria’s expression stiffened again. To be more precise, she was actively maintaining a surly pout in order to keep her lips from curling. I knew that for a fact because I’d activated *Dimension: Calculash*. Maria was currently doing her damndest to keep her poker face so that Reaper didn’t know how gratified she felt.

“Right. I don’t mind if you call me ‘sis.’ But let’s stop calling Kanami ‘brother,’ shall we?”

“Huh? Why?”

“That’s, well...he already has a sister in me, and if both of us refer to him as ‘brother,’ it’ll get too confusing.”

“It won’t get confusing! If you like, you ought to just think of me as your little sister. That way, your brother would be my brother too!”

“My little sister?!”

I released *Calculash*, as I was starting to get the feeling that if I left everything to Reaper, it’d solve everything. Whenever Lorwen came into the picture, Reaper turned into a deranged agent of death, but otherwise, she was as innocent as a lamb.

“Hey sis! Can I be in that fluffiness with you? I’ve never been on a bed before!”

“Wait, huh? You want to be in this bed? I can’t say I mind a little thing like that.”

“Hee hee hee! Thanks!” Reaper got atop the bed and opened up her picture book.

Maria was blushing, and now what was conjecture had turned to conviction. Maria had a soft spot for little sister types! She was often the youngest person around, and because she was a late bloomer, she was often taken for a younger child. It seemed that due to that confluence of factors, she was pleased as punch to be called a big sister.

“Hm? What is that?”

“It’s a picture book! He borrowed at the library for me!”

“A picture book? Thanks to these artificial eyes of mine, a picture book’s not something I can appreciate.”

“Your eyes, sis? In that case, I’ll read it to you!”

And just like that, Maria started to look after Reaper. After seeing her change of heart, I borrowed a blanket and plopped myself into a corner of the room. I didn’t see any issue if I just left those two to their own devices and dozed off.

“Ah, Kanami, we *do* have something to discuss later,” came Maria’s cold voice the moment I closed my eyes.

All I could do was nod in a cold sweat. It seemed I was dreaming when I thought Reaper had saved the day for me. That being said, Reaper was currently serving as a breakwater, so I could fall asleep with some peace of mind, at least for *one* night. Maria’s and Reaper’s mirthful voices became my lullaby, and I fled to the world of dreams.



Early the next morning, just after sunup.

“That light! It’s so beautiful! This is the yellow sun?! This is the blue sky?! Holy cow, it’s so pretty!”

The shouting from the roof woke me up. “Lorwen! Not so loud!”

But Lorwen was too overcome with emotion to heed me. “So this is that ‘sky of blue,’ huh?! *This* is the view everybody was striving to see... Ah, what a relief. The world made it to blue skies in the end.”

I could even hear a touch of teariness. I had no choice but to use *Freeze* to cool his head.

“Huh?! It’s cold!”

“Shh...it’s too early.”

He bowed his head. “My... My bad, Kanami. I lost my cool a bit.”

But through *Dimension*, I could detect that the guild members who’d been sleeping inside the Epic Seeker headquarters were awake. Right behind me, Reaper flew out and floated in the air, gazing at the sky.

“Hm, huh? What the, huh? It’s blue! It’s crazy blue! Wow, so this is the ‘sky of blue’! It’s prettier over here, right, Lorwen?”

“Couldn’t agree more, Reaper. Next to those murky skies, there’s no comparison.”

They were chatting cheerfully while I was nursing a headache. “Stop yakking and come inside the building, would ya? Somebody might come here to have a look. And Reaper, I told you not to float outside the Dungeon.”

Lorwen must have finally inferred that this was inconveniencing me, because he piped down and entered Maria’s room—through the window, of course. Reaper, for her part, turned into mist and entered my body. When I asked her why, she told me that walking without floating was a pain, so maybe she thought of me as a set of wheels she could ride.

Maria was surprised to see Lorwen appear before her, but when I explained that he was something akin to Reaper’s parental guardian, she accepted it fairly readily. Unlike before with Reaper, I didn’t sense any danger, which meant that as I thought, it was letting Reaper call me “big brother” that had angered her.

Next, I told the members, a handful of whom had stayed the night within Epic Seeker, about Lorwen as well. Since all of them had heard Lorwen’s weird sky-related exultations earlier, I needed to give them the skinny without delay. I

found the members using *Dimension* and made the rounds introducing Lorwen to them. When I told him he was a guest of ours, they accepted it without question, much to my surprise. From what I gathered, running a guild often required sheltering visitors from abroad.

While I was doing my introduction marathon, I sensed Snow wake up through *Dimension*. I met with her in the hallway and bade her good morning.

“Morning,” she said. “So, what’re we doing today?”

“Morning, Snow. I more or less finished running around introducing Lorwen to the guild members, so I’m thinking of heading out with him to register for the Brawl. So no work or Dungeon diving today.”

“Okay, good. Then I’ll be in the office sleeping. Ah, what a fine day ahead of me.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to sleep, seeing as I’m leaving Reaper here.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

“Because it’d probably take me more time with Reaper around. That’s all, really. C’mon, Reaper, come out.”

The girl crept out from behind me and tilted her head in puzzlement. “Oh? I’m house-sitting today?”

“Correct. I’ll leave you some picture books, so have that young lady over there read them to you.”

“Picture books? Hm... It’s true that if I had to pick between this and that... I guess I prefer the picture books. Yesterday I was the one doing all the reading! All right, see you two later, Lorwen, big brother.”

It appeared she valued her picture books over the outside world. Relieved, I took the picture books I’d borrowed from the library out of my inventory and forced them into Snow’s hands.

“Wha? Picture books?”

“Yep. I leave it to you.”

“Hey, wait a second, Kanami! I still—”

Reaper nestled close to her. “C’mon, miss, read ’em!”

“What? All right, fine.”

She smiled with a vexed look on her face, but she wasn’t impatient or unkind with the girl. Once you forced some work into her lap, Snow always did the task with a sense of responsibility. Of that I could be certain. As such, I knew I didn’t have to worry about Reaper for the time being.

After watching Snow and Reaper enter the office together, I headed into town with Lorwen. However, I didn’t really know where to register, so the first thing I did was drop by various public institutions and gather information about the Brawl. Then we found the government office where registration was taking place. It was a wooden building that took a lot of space, and people of all stripes were packed inside. Laoravia was a nation full of rare races, and it was clear to see that most of the people here were of different nationalities. Moreover, one could tell from the way they carried themselves that many among them were fight-masters confident in their own skills. Adults bearing weapons and armor I’d never seen before were prowling around with violent looks in their eyes. Given the timing, it was safe to assume that almost everyone here was going to participate in the Brawl.

“Whoa, look at the place,” I said, daunted by the palpable bloodthirst.

“Heh heh heh, gotta love this atmosphere,” said Lorwen excitedly. “This is the way it oughta be before a big battle.”

It seemed he was more of a fight-lover than I’d taken him for. Not wanting to be here for very long, I expanded *Dimension* to collect information and searched for the reception area. I found a reception desk that was free in the corner and took Lorwen there with me.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I’d like to ask you about participating in the Brawl, if I could.”

“You gentlemen are signing up for the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball, right? Sign here, please.”

I’d wanted to ask her for more details, but the lady at the counter gave us what looked to be contracts right away.

Firstmoon? Ball? Wasn't it supposed to be "Brawl," as in, a fighting tournament?

She'd laid so many terms I'd never heard of before on me at once that I froze up. Lorwen, meanwhile, took the quill and started writing his signature without hesitation.

"Ah, Lorwen, we should hear more first—"

"This won't steer us wrong. Long story short, it's gotta be a tournament for knights hosted by the Dungeon Alliance. These tournaments get named fancy, highfalutin stuff like this all the time."

"Be that as it may, I still think you oughta read the fine print more."

The text on the paper he'd been handed was small and dense.

"Oh, these things are basically all just saying, 'If you die, don't come crying to us.' And a lot of the time, they lay traps to misrepresent how much you'll make, but since my goal is gaining glory, that doesn't matter."

"All right then..."

"Aren't you gonna put your name down, Kanami?"

"Who, me?"

Sure enough, we'd been given *two* papers to sign. And it'd probably be acceptable for me to throw my hat in, for Epic Seeker's sake as well as my own. However, I figured I should focus my efforts on being able to fend off those two girls from the other day. I didn't want my attention to get swallowed up by the tournament in case that led to me neglecting to react in time to that fearsome pair.

Just as I'd collected my thoughts on the matter, the receptionist addressed me. "Er, Mr. Kanami, was it?"

"Ah, uh, yes, that's me. Why do you ask?" I asked, taken aback.

"I knew it! I had a feeling the second you entered. I'm glad I didn't get that wrong!"

"Wait, what?"

“Ah, I’m sorry. Forgive me for getting all keyed up on you. Lately, the guildmaster of Epic Seeker’s become a household name in Laoravia. So I heard rumors about what you look like too.”

“Oh, okay. That’s how you know my name.”

It seemed she had learned of me through the grapevine. She must have been well-versed in such things, working reception at a place like this. I was feeling a bit abashed when she extended her hand toward me.

“I’m a fan of yours. May I shake your hand?”

“Oh, sure. If you’re okay with the likes of me.”

A fan. That meant she was probably rooting for me. Feeling awkward, I gave her my hand.

“The likes of you? It really is just as they say. A handsome boy with a burn mark on his neck who’s a deft hand but a tad too diffident too.”

“A...handsome boy? There’s no way I...”

“With your looks, you definitely qualify to be called handsome. Dungeon divers are all a bunch of shabby, shady-looking people. Talking up a promising youngster and exaggerating a little in the process is a requirement to maintain a lively Laoravia.”

“Huh. I see.”

I smiled wryly; she’d convinced me. What I didn’t get was why Lorwen was envying me aloud from behind me.

“Must be nice. The young star of hope who appeared from the blue. I like the sound of that.”

Maybe the hurdles barring Lorwen from obtaining the “glory” he was envisioning were relatively low.

“Mr. Kanami, about your registration... Are you aware that you’re already registered for the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball by way of the Laoravian government’s nomination? It’s very rare, so there’s no mistake.”

“The...the government’s nomination? Is that something that can happen

without the nominee's knowledge or consent?"

"No, it shouldn't be. Er, it says here the one who recommended you is one Palinchron Regacy. Did you maybe hear something about it from him?"

"Ah, that tells me everything I need to know, thank you."

Palinchron Regacy. Hearing that name was enough to solve every mystery. *Come to think of it, Palinchron does work for the state too. He must've slipped my name into the recommendations category through his government connections.*

"At the moment, Mr. Kanami, you're registered as a party of one. What would you like to do? Would you like to form a party with the gentleman next to you? Doing so would mean he doesn't have to take on any preliminary matches."

"Er, is this not the kind of tournament where it's one-on-one?"

"One-on-one tournaments take place in even-numbered months. Firstmoon is for knightly bands. Which is to say, it's a tournament for parties of three."

Back in my world, most tournaments of this type were one-on-one, and I'd assumed that was the case here too.

"So does that mean I need to fight three matches by myself?"

"No. As a rule, you would be fighting a band of three all at once. But I think that if you're facing opponents who value civility and decorum, like knights or nobles, they'll at times choose to fight one-on-one three times."

"In that case, I guess I'll have you be in my party, Lorwen. And for the third slot, I'll ask Snow or Reaper—"

"Hold on," said Lorwen, his expression serious. "I don't wanna miss this chance to fight *against* you."

"If what you want is to win the tournament, then shouldn't we be a team?"

"You're not wrong, but I've got a bad feeling about it. If I end up winning without fighting a strong opponent in you, will that really be enough to make me disappear? Part of me might not accept that as a true win."

"Oh, gotcha. I guess that could be too."

Lorwen's feelings on a matter played a large part in clearing up his lingering attachments. There was a possibility that this was all in vain unless he himself was satisfied.

"That's why I'm gonna take the liberty of fighting as a party of one. If I'm gonna win either way, I wanna hog all the glory."

"Talk about making things rough. Plus, that means if I don't go all out in the tournament and take it seriously, it won't work, right?"

"Yep, that's what it means. Sorry, man."

If I stayed my hand and served as kingmaker for him, it'd amount to nothing. If he caught on that I was holding back, we were back to square one.

"Nah, it's okay. I don't mind getting serious if it'll help Epic Seeker. Only, it'll make fulfilling your goal way harder. What a predicament."

"Oho, you sound pretty confident, my man."

"Well, the reason I went to Floor 30 was to take down its Guardian, so yeah, I think I can take you."

"Heh. Then the Brawl is looking to be good fun! It's not really a tournament if you don't rise up the brackets beating strong opponents!" he said, trembling with excitement after seeing how brimming with confidence I was.

Meanwhile, I was wondering if opponents as strong as Lorwen had indicated were really going to be at the Brawl. To put it bluntly, I was probably the strongest out of any human in the Dungeon Alliance. Now that I'd reached Floor 30, I figured I'd become more than a match for the "strongest diver" Glenn Walker. So I had my misgivings that Lorwen, who I sensed was around the same power level as me, would find any of the so-called strong fighters here satisfying.

"Excuse me, ma'am, what sorts of people does the Brawl attract?"

"What sorts of people? Well, let me think... Every year, the representatives of each nation assemble for the Brawl. It serves as a seed. Oh, and mercenaries and criminals who are sufficiently skilled also participate."

"Criminals too?"

“Yes. That reminds me, Mr. Kanami, before you became a guildmaster, you lived in a remote hinterland, right? In which case I don’t blame you for not knowing. Please allow me to explain.”

“Ah, thank you.”

She wasn’t kidding when she called herself a fan; she clearly knew a fair bit of my public profile.

“The venue for the Brawl is located over the canal between the countries of Laoravia and Eltraliew. It’ll be held in Valhuura, the large-scale mobile theater floating on a vast canal.”

“On a canal...”

“When there’s a match on, the anchor is down, so there’s no need to worry about the venue swaying too much. Since it’s located on the border, it doesn’t belong to any one country, so no country’s laws apply to it, and criminals can participate without worrying about their legal status.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the dumbest reasoning—”

“Of course, it’s an exaggeration to say it’s lawless. But it’s true that criminals gather there. The Brawl gives scoundrels and thugs with more than enough brawn a fresh chance, and it’s also a place where those with coin hire freelance muscle. It’s the continent’s biggest job-searching sphere, so to speak.”

“But isn’t a bunch of criminals gallivanting around dangerous?”

“It would be, but the security is incredibly tight. Security pros from all five nations keep a watchful eye, and if trouble seems to be brewing, the perpetrators become persona non grata in all five nations. That’s five times the normal ostracization. As such, year by year, the Brawl doesn’t usually see too many such cases.”

This world had a culture of holding tournaments like these, and I obviously had no choice but to accept that. Basically, it was a national-scale, multiday festival of sorts, with no holds barred.

“Also, another group that often participates is nobility.”

“Nobility? Why is that?”

I wasn't expecting nobles to participate. I'd had the preconceived notion that they'd be spectating from afar.

"Their reasons are many and various, from simply honing their skills as knights to accruing prestige. But usually the main reason is to gain an opportunity to make some statement. There are a lot of *courtship activities*, so to speak."

"Courtship? Didn't you say it was a place for job hunting?"

"It's a place for both. It is the largest such gathering on the continent, after all."

"A place...for both?"

This tournament was more involved than I'd imagined. I was getting a little uneasy.

"Everything one says during the final round of the Brawl becomes official and on the record. And when it's said in the presence of many people in high places, it's not too different from a duel oath at that point."

"I can imagine how a marriage proposal made at a time like that would get people pumped."

"Yes, it's quite rousing," she explained with relish. "If you get the support of the people and those in power, you can ride that enthusiasm all the way to an actual wedding. It's an oft-used tactic for when a low-ranking male noble wants to marry a high-ranking female noble and get their union approved of. And the spectators look forward to it as well."

To hear it from her, this was something that had happened loads of times in the past. And because there were clearly lots of people out there like her who couldn't get enough of other people's romantic stories, it was a courtship method that was allowed to persist.

The receptionist continued, the look on her face serious. "Mr. Kanami. Mr. Lorwen. Whatever you do, please be careful when it comes to the introductory remarks of your matches. You're both handsome, so I think people will target you. It could be the case that they smooth talk you, and all of a sudden you find yourself married off or with a new line of work, or ruined financially, or enslaved."

“Huh? Stuff like that can happen all of a sudden?”

“It happens a lot. You’ll get knights who say, ‘I’ve never seen a knight of your caliber. If you can defeat me, I’ll give you my daughter’s hand in marriage!’” she said, voice-acting all her examples, “and then lose on purpose, or nobles who say, ‘I dedicate this battle to you, the object of my affections. And if I should win, allow me to express my feelings as my reward,’ creating an atmosphere that makes it hard for said person to turn them down, or brigands who go, ‘I feel sorry for the crowd when the money that’s on the line is such a pittance! What say we both wager our entire fortunes before we cross swords?!’ thereby trying to fleece them of everything they own.”

My face grew pale; none of those examples were a laughing matter. So many lives had gone awry thanks to such stunts.

“In any case,” she continued, “what I’m trying to say is you mustn’t get caught up in the heat of the moment and end up buying into weird oaths.”

I nodded and nodded, etching her warnings into my mind. *I won’t fall for people’s provocations and make any dumb promises! I refuse to!*

While there weren’t any strong opponents among the participants, it seemed the rules of the tournament themselves were the formidable foe I’d be facing. Lorwen nodded, a wry smile on his face, and he handed his signed form to the receptionist.

“Thank you, Mr. Lorwen. That completes your registration. Heh heh, for Mr. Kanami’s friend to be entering the fray, I can’t help but expect good things! I’m sure this year’s Brawl will get everyone *super* pumped up! This year’s the year of the St. Tiara prophecy, after all! Attendance will be the highest in history!”

The receptionist placed Lorwen’s form on the pile of papers to her side, then smiled when she saw how thick it was.

“The year of St. Tiara’s prophecy is a special one?” I asked.

I had no interest in the numbers attending. It was the bit before that that caught my attention.

“Yes, the main religion of the Dungeon Alliance is the Church of Levahn, and there’s a prophecy about the year that the founder Tiara will be reborn. ‘Sword

and sword shall come as one, and a true hero shall appear.’ That’s the prophecy that the people believe in.”

“Oh, I see.”

There were similar prophecies back in my world too, but in this world, religion was involved; by the look of it, people were overly invested in it now.

“Since the Day of the Blessed Birth ended in disappointment recently, the citizens’ expectations are now hanging on the Brawl. I’m looking forward to it too.”

“The Day of the Blessed Birth ended in disappointment? What on earth happened?”

“Oh, were you not aware? According to the prophecy, the second coming of Saint Tiara was supposed to happen during this year’s Day of the Blessed Birth, but nothing like it happened at all. It was the same old festival, and it ended in the same old ritual, so everybody feels let down. That’s why devout Levahnites are whispering among themselves that something that fits the prophecy will happen during the Brawl instead.”

We listened to more anecdotes one could only hear from a receptionist, and after asking about the rules of the tournament in more detail, we concluded our visit to the Brawl registration desk.

The receptionist shook my hand and said, “I’m rooting for you” before watching us go. She’d been a chatterbox, but we were thankful for her friendliness.

“We just made the registration deadline,” said Lorwen after we exited the building. “You awakened me at just the right time.”

“You’re right. Talk about perfect timing. Now then, I might as well buy Snow and Reaper souvenirs or something—”

We’d been relieved that we were able to wrap things up without a hitch. By force of habit, I expanded *Dimension*—and detected a girl’s presence.

“Yeah, Sieg. Talk about perfect timing.”

The girl’s voice was as clear as a bell, and I turned to look, directing my eyes

to the top of the building. There sat a girl with otherworldly beauty. My heart skipped a beat. I got the feeling I'd seen a sight like that before. Someplace, sometime in the past...

That beyond gorgeous girl—Lastiara Whoseyards—chuckled to herself before dropping down to the ground and drawing closer to us.

Lorwen could tell she possessed uncommon strength, and his expression stiffened. “She a friend of yours?”

“Let’s just say we’re acquainted. I’ll talk to her.” I took a step forward and crafted *Dimension: Calculash*.

Meanwhile, she spoke to me in a cool and very friendly tone. “Are you getting buddy-buddy with *another* Guardian? You never change, Sieg.”

It didn’t look like she meant any harm, but I had to be on guard all the same. She had shown considerable hostility toward Epic Seeker before. Refusing to let her control the pace of the conversation, I started grilling her.

“Are you alone today?”

“Dia’s emotionally unstable,” she said cheerfully. “He’s off with Sera at the moment, so right now I’m by myself.”

I went directly to my next question. It was something I’d wanted to ask this entire time. “So what on earth do you want, exactly?”

“Hmm, what do I want? Oh, I know. I only want one thing—to bring back my friend.”

I didn’t believe her. I couldn’t. Last time, she’d wanted both me and Maria, but neither of us knew the two girls. There was no way we could be friends.

“As such,” she continued, “I figured I’d register for Brawl too. Come help me, you two.”

She beckoned us over, turned on her heels, and made to enter the building. If she meant what she’d said, she was planning to get her name registered inside.

I furrowed my brow. “Hey! Why should I help *you*, lady?”

“I’m not ‘lady,’” she interrupted quietly. “I’m Lastiara. You can *see* my name,

can't you? So call me by it. If you do, I'll call you Kanami."

Though she'd said that under her breath, her tone was firm and assertive. It seemed she absolutely would not put up with getting called "lady" by me.

"Lastiara, then," I said, reckoning there was no harm in at least calling her by her name. "I've got no reason to help you."

"Hmm, are you sure? I don't mind running amok right here, right now, you know?"

"Is that a threat?"

"Hee hee. I think it's an effective one against you."

It was true that I didn't want to stir up trouble with her here. If we duked it out in a metropolitan area like this, I could be sure that there would be collateral damage, given how powerful the girl before my eyes was. And since I was working for Laoravia now, I wanted to avoid causing any mayhem in town.

I sighed. "Okay, fine. I'll help you."

I had no choice but to follow her inside. Her expression screamed, "Thought so!" Lorwen, who was behind me, was also looking amused by this turn of events for some reason. Maybe my reaction was that comical to him.

We lined up in front of the same receptionist as before, since she would probably inform us about the stuff we needed to know in her nice and friendly manner. We waited our turn in line, Lastiara and I keeping each other in check with pointed looks. When she received the form, she filled in the required fields with practiced ease. When the receptionist saw that form, however, she blanched.

"La... Lastiara Whoseyards?"

"Yep, that's me. Thought I'd come register real quick."

Looking closely, I got the feeling the receptionist's hands were shaking.

"Um, strange question, but...is that really you?"

"Of course. Me, state a false name? I'd never! Unlike a certain someone," she said, casting her eyes my way.

That was wholly unexpected. I'd never once gone by an alias.

"Hey, that ain't me. Aikawa Kanami's no pseudonym."

She looked shocked before sighing. "You're right. And that's the problem."

"Do..." the receptionist stammered. "Do you not mind? Registering your name here while you're the number-one most-wanted person in Whoseyards? You're going to cause quite the hubbub, you know?"

"Thanks for the concern, but I know there's a tacit understanding that tournaments like these don't care about the participants' origins or pasts. There shouldn't be a problem."

"Yes, that's true, but...you're in a different league entirely, or maybe I should say your circumstances are that special..."

So this Lastiara Whoseyards was a wanted fugitive, and a special one at that. And despite that, the receptionist was speaking to her with deference, so chances were high she was originally a noblewoman.

"Whatever my circumstances may be, on the day of the Brawl, no laws apply inside Valhuura, so it'll be hunky-dory. Besides, it makes things fun, right? My entering the tournament."

"Well... Well, yes, there's no doubt the crowd will go wild, but...I think that the moment you leave Valhuura once the Brawl is over, you'll be surrounded by all the security officers. Does that not give you pause?"

"I'm good. I'll have Kanami there with some kind of saving throw, so it's no big deal."

Apparently, she was under the impression that I'd antagonize the Dungeon Alliance's combined security forces to rescue her. Not bloody likely. I was baffled as to how she could even reach that conclusion.

"Hey, why do I have to do anything? Why would I?"

"Oh, I think you will. So much so, in fact, that I'd be willing to bet on it."

"Okay, then I'll bet I won't."

"Wow, you're in? In that case, whoever loses does whatever the winner

wants.”

“I ain’t losing, so that’s fine by me. If anything, I’ll be yukking it up helping the security guards. No doubt about it.”

She laughed merrily. She was slightly different than I’d imagined. At first, I’d taken her for a dangerous individual, but after bantering with her, I knew that wasn’t the case. In fact, it was the opposite. It was hard to put into words, but I just clicked with her. Oddly enough, we got along great. Just by chatting with this girl, my heart leaped. Our conversation organically became repartee, making talking to her a lot of fun. It was almost as though...

The receptionist hung her head in resignation, a grave look on her face. “Okay. The Brawl certainly can’t refuse your application. I hereby acknowledge your registration. I believe the qualifying rounds will be the venue for lawbreaker participants.”

“Yep, that’s fine. Thanks!”

The three of us left the building together.

“So tell me, Lastiara,” I said right off the bat, “why’re you entering the tournament?”

“I had no choice. There’s no other way to get you alone.”

“In other words, you—”

“Yeah, I wanna fight you without being interrupted. And then I’ll smash that fishy bangle on your arm to bits.”

“My bangle? Is that all?”

“Yeah, because it really looks like that’s the keystone. Snow brought it to my attention with her eyes.”

It had been Snow who’d put that idea in Lastiara’s head. I recalled what she had told me, back on the night we first met.

“In other words, I’ve forgotten my past, and it’s this bangle’s fault. That’s what you wanna say, right?”

“That’s right. So you already get it, then.”

I heaved a heavy sigh and calmly dissected the information on hand. My hazy and inconsistent memories of the past, my frequent headaches, and the experience that I had but couldn't remember getting. Add Palinchron's attitude and Snow's words to that cocktail, as well as the existence of Lastiara and Diablo Sith, and one hypothesis that squared it all came into view.

"Yeah. I can't deny the possibility."

"Wow, you're quicker to understand than I was expecting."

It wasn't that I was choosing to believe the girl in front of me. It was a confluence of the words of many different people. And it was a possibility I couldn't ignore. I had to consider it. I knew that.

I knew that, and yet...

"But a possibility is just a possibility. It can't be true. It absolutely can't!"

For some reason, I just couldn't bring myself to consider it. Nor could I bring myself to contemplate removing my bangle. It was like a curse; I was literally unable to truly digest the idea. There was no way I could acknowledge something like this. The notion that this world that was so convenient for me and my beloved sister to live in was *false*...

The magic energy that coursed inside of me turned into sludge-like muck-blood, binding my whole being. Or at least, that was what it felt like. It was an unpleasant sensation, like my beating heart was in a vise.

"I see." Lastiara nodded with sadness in her eyes.

In response, my tongue moved of its own accord. "Sorry," I muttered, "but I can't remove this bangle. This is the most important thing there is to me!"

For indeed, "this" was. This world. Having my sister by my side. That was more important to me than anything else. I couldn't hand over the bangle, and my whole world with it. That was the deal.

"The most important thing, huh? Then I guess it can't be helped. I mean, I knew it'd come to this from the get-go, so..."

She looked a tiny bit forlorn, but the next second, her expression turned bright and sunny, and she took a step toward me.

“You needn’t worry. For the time being, I don’t plan on trying anything. I can’t prod you the wrong way in case there’s a suicide spell inserted in you or something like that. I need to prepare more, or else...”

“Prepare more?”

“I need Dia in tip-top condition, is what I’m saying. And I guess I need a situation where no one else can get involved.”

“And you’re telling me the Brawl is that situation?”

“The Brawl is for the five nations to keep each other in check and struggle for supremacy. If Laoravia ever wants to take action to protect you during a match, they can’t. If they made a mess of the Brawl in the process, the other four nations would take that opportunity to hit Laoravia where it hurts.”

From what I’d heard, she was right—the balance of power between the nations at the Brawl was an intricate affair. It was something of a five-sided chess match. None of the individual nations could make a move too readily.

“So you wanna fight fair and square, putting our desires on the line, huh?”

“Yep. And I’m having you put that bangle on the line. That’s easy enough to understand, I should think?”

Her methods were eminently reasonable. She was essentially challenging me to a weird sort of duel, so to speak. She was risking her own bodily safety in order to get at my bangle. From what people told me, it was a common occurrence for Brawl fighters to wager their belongings. Odds were, if she boasted that she had thrown her hat in the ring to obtain Aikawa Kanami’s bangle even if it meant getting arrested in the end, I’d be unable to oppose the atmosphere of the crowd. And not only was she doing it through legitimate channels, it also stood up to reason more than it didn’t. This was going against the image of Lastiara Whoseyards I’d had in my head. I’d thought she would try to get her way through more unreasonable means.

There was, however, one thing I didn’t much care for. “But isn’t that assuming you’re stronger than me?”

I didn’t much care for the fact Lastiara Whoseyards thought she could beat Aikawa Kanami.

“If you ask me, I can give you a run for your money. You’re good at support magic, while I’m more specialized for direct combat. And more than anything, I have more experience fighting other people than you do. I’ve got one hero of legend’s worth of battlecraft inside me.”

“That’s optimistic of you. It’s nonsense to think that because I’m good at support magic, I’m therefore not good at direct combat. In a proper duel, there’s no way I can lose.”

For some reason, I was feeling competitive with the girl before my eyes. I found myself wanting to be stronger than this Lastiara from the bottom of my heart. It was almost like I wanted to look cool in front of a girl I liked...something a little kid would do. To hide that from her, I glared at her with venom, and she stared back at me undaunted. As we stared each other down, silence fell, and that was when another voice entered the fray—Lorwen.

“Ha ha! Never would’ve predicted this would turn up roses for me too! I like how confident you two are. I love it! Ah, this is getting good. This is the way a place where people cross swords oughta be!”

Lorwen hadn’t butted in earlier since he’d figured it was a chat between acquaintances, but after seeing that our discussion had come to a conclusion, he gleefully expressed his own feelings on the matter, and he seemed positively exuberant at the sudden prospect of worthy adversaries to fight.

Then he smirked and said, “Hate to break it to ya, but *I’ll* be taking this tourney.”

It was a solemn declaration, like a knight’s oath, and when he said that, a pressure I couldn’t name started pressing down on me. Lorwen’s magic energy was too low for that fathomless pressure to be magical in nature. No, this was something else. Cowed by whatever it was Lorwen was exuding, Lastiara and I were left in a cold sweat.

In response, Lastiara enveloped the vicinity with ferocious magic energy. “Sorry, but a Guardian isn’t what we want or need right now.”

Her pressure was simple and straightforward, but it was powerful, and for that reason it was fearsome.

Another stare down, and another stretch of silence. The seconds passed. In the silence, Lastiara's and Lorwen's eyes glanced my way.

Wait, do they want me to throw in my two cents too? For some reason, they seemed to be expecting it. Maybe I should have deployed *Wintermension* to create my own, more chilling brand of pressure. Honestly, though, when all eyes were on you, it actually made it *harder* to produce anything, so I chose not to say anything and just watched the two of them stare each other down.

The silence continued.

And continued.

Unable to take it longer, a sweating Lastiara said, "Hey, Kanami! Have you got nothing for us?"

"Not really."

"Oh c'mon! You're such a party pooper! Isn't he?"

"Yeah, bro. That whole back-and-forth's ground to a halt now," said Lorwen, turning on me, much to my disbelief.

These two had only just met (as far as I knew), but they were on strangely good terms. Maybe they had something in common. Something bad.

The tension in the air proceeded to dissipate into so much mist, and we all laughed. And while I didn't let my guard down completely, my wariness diminished little by little.

After some idle chitchat, Lastiara said, "All right, I do have things to do, so I'll be heading home soon. Don't die and I'll see you at the Brawl, you two."

And with that, she took to the rooftops and ran as blisteringly fast as usual. After confirming that she was outside of *Dimension's* range, I finally let my guard down. Lorwen was beside me, thrilled to have met a formidable opponent out of nowhere. It seemed he couldn't wait to fight her.

Thus, my second encounter with Lastiara ended without trouble.



After getting ourselves registered for the tournament, we returned to Epic

Seeker HQ. I didn't see Snow or Reaper in the office, so I searched for them through *Dimension*. Seeing they were all gathered in Maria's room upstairs, I headed in that direction.

"Ah, welcome, Big Brother!" said Reaper.

"Welcome back, Kanami," said Maria.

"Oh, you're finally back," said Snow.

What an odd sight. They were all holding knitting needles and plugging away at balls of yarn.

"What's going on here?"

"We were looking for something to do and ended up knitting," said Snow, showing me the yarn in her hands.

"Why knitting?"

"It's the only thing I'm halfway good at besides fighting."

Two scarves were lying at her feet, probably completed, while Maria and Reaper were about to complete their first scarves. Clearly, she'd been teaching the other two her special skill, most likely because she had no other choice; Reaper must have gotten tired of picture books and Snow had needed some way to get her to pipe down.

"Wow, didn't know you were so good at knitting."

A pause. "I practiced a little back in the day," she said, averting her gaze bashfully.

I could tell she'd practiced much more than a little, judging by the finished products. I picked up Snow's scarves and gave them a look. One was striped, the other checkered. To my eye, they looked high-quality enough to sell.

"I don't need them," she said, her head still turned away. "You can have them."

"Huh? You're giving them to me?"

Unfortunately for her, thanks to *Dimension*, her averting her gaze did nothing to hide the fact that she was feeling embarrassed.

“I’m not cold,” she continued. “And I’ve got plenty.”

“Okay, I’ll take them. Thanks.”

I wrapped one around my neck and put the other in my inventory.

“Ah, big brother!” said Reaper. “I’ll give you mine too!”

She threw me her freshly completed scarf from a little distance away. Like Snow, she didn’t need one herself. All she could wear was the “clothes” she personally composed.

“Thanks.” I took her shoddily made scarf.

“Kanami!” stammered Maria, swept up in the flow. “Please take mine as well.”

“Aw, you should use it yourself, Maria. Snow and Reaper just gave me theirs because they can’t use them—”

“No. Please take it,” she said, a nice smile on her face.

“Ah, sure. Thank you.”

I folded to the pressure she exuded, which managed to exceed even Lastiara’s and Lorwen’s, and took her scarf.

Maria was blind; the eyes behind those eyelids were artificial. And yet you wouldn’t know it from her scarf. I’d known she had dexterous hands, but not to this extent.

Lorwen was behind me, looking on with envy. He approached Reaper as he cleared his throat. “Ahem. Ahem. Reaper, got something for me?”

“Huh? Why have I gotta give you something?” she said, slicing his tiny little hope in two.

“Hold on, wait up. You’ve known me longer than you’ve known Kanami, right? Normally you oughta have one for me too!”

“But Lorwen, you’re my enemy.”

“You... You can’t be serious... That’s ridiculous...” His brow was furrowed; he was being sincere. He reminded me of an older brother who got no gift from his beloved little sister on his birthday.

“Sorry, man,” I said, understanding his pain.

“It’s okay; I’m used to it.”

“You’re used to it, huh?”

Lorwen lifted his head back up right away. He may have been accustomed to hard knocks like these, but that just made me feel even sorrier for him. What must his life have been like up till now? I put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’ll make you a scarf later. I’m good at this kinda thing too.”

“Thanks, Kanami. A friend’s a good thing to have, huh?”

Before I knew it, he’d elevated me to friend status. He and I laughed and cemented our bond of friendship in each other’s eyes. Little by little, I’d come to understand Lorwen’s disposition. He was sincere and faithful, but for how adult he made himself out to be, his personality had a childlike quality. And while he was hard on Reaper, it came from a place of kindness. He was a person I could trust.

That’s right. He’s a person I can trust.

I’d have a hell of a time seeing Lorwen as a Guardian—as a monster now. I realized that anew as I laughed. But that shouldn’t be a problem. While I’d be fighting against him in the Brawl, we wouldn’t be fighting to kill. I was going to grant his desire and give rest to his soul as a fellow human being. There was no reason to view him as a monster to accomplish that. As such, I could smile and laugh without a trace of battle nerves.

There’s no problem. There shouldn’t be a problem...

But for some reason, I couldn’t dispel the unease in the pit of my stomach.

Chapter 6: The Mightiest Swordsman

After receiving those scarves, Lorwen forced me to come with him to the Dungeon. His stated objective was level grinding, but he must have had other motives as well. I'd left Reaper with Snow, since she wanted to have some fun up on the surface. I guess Snow must have figured that that was less work than the Dungeon, because she agreed to look after her. They were holding even more knitting tools when we parted ways, so it seemed she was pretty into it. It only took a monster to accomplish that. As such, I could smile and laugh without a trace of battle nerves.

"And that's why I'm here in the Dungeon with my best friend Kanami."

"Whoa, when did we become best friends?"

Lorwen and I were chatting as we walked through Floor 21.

"I thought about it, and you know what I realized? I ain't never had a friend my age before you," he said with a serious expression. "And I appreciate that it's gonna help erase the attachments keeping me here too, Kanami."

No friends his age, ever? Talk about sad. "Gotcha... You don't have to thank me; I'd think of you as a friend either way."

"Back then, I was just swinging my sword, day in and day out," he murmured. "I never had any opportunity to make friends."

I could see his eyes grow more and more hollow, so I changed the subject.

"Uh, are you good with a sword, Lorwen?"

"Yeah. I think I'm probably the best swordfighter in the world."

"Huh? The best in the world?"

"Yep, you heard me."

When the topic turned to swords, he started brimming with confidence. Out of nowhere, he broke into a run and started scanning for monsters, looking all around. He didn't show any signs of using magic energy; he could perceive the

presence of monsters some other way.

After finding a Fury, he cracked his knuckles. "I'll prove it. Give me any old sword you've got."

I took out a mass-market sword from my inventory and threw it over to him. He snatched it and walked toward the Fury without brandishing it. Naturally, the Fury let out a roar. It reached for him, putting so much strength into its strange double-pair of arms that its veins were showing. The moment they were about to touch him, a light slicing sound rang out, and thin lines ran down those arms. The next moment, all four of its arms fell to the ground without ever having touched a hair on his head. You read that right. The arms hadn't flown through the air. They'd simply fallen straight to the floor. *Dimension* allowed me to fully grasp how astonishing and fearsome that feat had been. It was nothing short of miraculous.

Even using *Dimension*, I hadn't caught any preparatory movements from him. Right until the moment he did move, he hadn't tensed up a single muscle in his body. And the instant the monster's attack was about to hit him, he'd swung the sword with the maximum efficiency the human body was capable of. But that was all. Putting it into words, that was all there was to it, but I couldn't express the shock of witnessing it. Even if I were surrounded by all the works of art in the world, I doubted they'd be able to beat that level of impact. His sword skills had reached some realm *beyond* art.

Swinging the sword at maximum efficiency meant a literally flawless economy of movement. In other words, in the space of less than a hundred millionth of a second, he could shift his weight less than one hundred millionth of a gram, and swing his sword less than a hundred millionth of a centimeter off the optimal blade-path. Lorwen had pulled off a slash of such astronomical difficulty with ease, and I knew just how difficult it had been thanks to *Dimension*. I couldn't help but tremble from the fear and awe. It wasn't a question of how he drew his sword, or how he moved his legs, or how he swung his arms or positioned his blade. This went well past any theory of the blade. This was the maximization of the potential of the human body.

More thin slice lines ran through the Fury, rendering it into chopped meat. Lorwen looked over his shoulders at me, backlit by the light the vanishing

monster emitted. Looking closely, not only was there none of the enemy's blood on him, there wasn't even any gore on his sword. His blade had been so absurdly fast that it had all been left within the monster's body.

"That was around, I wanna say *thirty percent* of what I could do in my heyday," he said with a dissatisfied look on his face as he came back.

"Thirty percent? *That?*" I wasn't willing to readily believe that such god-tier moves weren't even half of his peak.

"Yeah, I feel so sluggish. But it can't be helped. Since I was made the Guardian of Floor 30, they must have set my strength level at around that rank."

"Set your strength level? Something like that's possible?"

"Yep. The boss of Floor 30 needs to be at a strength level that matches the floor or else humanity's in a jam, right?"

"That's awfully kind of the Dungeon."

"The Dungeon is real human-friendly. I hear a tender-hearted dude created it," he said, casually spouting off information I couldn't imagine anybody on the surface was privy to.

"So you're saying somebody actively created this Dungeon?"

"I am. Though there's a rule that I can't say who. Just know that *somebody* did," he said, smirking meaningfully.

It seemed there was a cap on the information Guardians were allowed to share with divers. Lorwen had called it a rule. But this was such important intel that I couldn't afford to back down.

"How knowledgeable about the Dungeon are you?"

He gave it a moment's thought before shaking his head. "Not very. All I know is that in exchange for an opportunity to work through my lingering attachments, I have a duty to guide humans to the hundredth floor."

I didn't know whether he was lying. Maybe he was forced by some other rule to give me that as a canned answer. I tried to probe his expression, but he just smiled faintly and shook his head again.

“It’s true. I swear as your friend, I’m telling the truth. My transformation into a Guardian was the sloppiest, so they never explained much of anything to me. One second I was staring down Reaper, the next, I was suddenly sucked in. Nobody told me a thing.”

“Sucked in? By what?”

“By the land. There’s a spell—no, a magic circle for that. And before we knew it, Reaper and I got flung into the Dungeon.”

“Got it. Could you tell me more about that day? I wanna know about your and Reaper’s past.”

“Our past is no big whoop. I was a knight in some war, and Reaper was a spell injected into that war. The end. Yep, that’s really all there is to it,” he said, smiling as he reminisced.

That smile said it all. He was strolling down memory lane regarding his encounters with Reaper.

I wasn’t about to give up there. I wanted more intel. “How far in the past are we talking? This morning, the color of the sky had you all surprised. Has the world changed that much?”

“Hmm. I think they said I’d be called back a thousand years later. So it was probably a thousand years ago. A millennium’s a long-ass time; there’s bound to be global-scale changes. I really was taken aback by how the sky had changed color. A thousand years ago, it was just constant warfare. That whole era was so tiresome. And there I was, a knight in the thick of it, trying to make a name for myself when I fell with my ambitions unfulfilled,” he said, speaking of his own untimely end like it wasn’t that big a deal.

I picked up on a medley of emotions—not just regret or sorrow, but also nostalgia. I didn’t know what to say to a living dead man, so I didn’t open my mouth.

Upon seeing me like that, Lorwen laughed. “Ha ha! I’m telling you, don’t worry about it, man. That’s just life. It’s rare *not* to die with some regrets.”

“That may be true, but even so, I can’t laugh in the face of someone who’s died.”

“You sure are straitlaced, Kanami. Let’s be more easygoing.”

“Easygoing?”

As if to tell me to relax the tension in my shoulders, he rolled his own to loosen them up.

“Yeah, man. You should enjoy it more. The Dungeon, I mean.”

“What’s there to enjoy?”

“The deeper you dive, the stronger you get. And isn’t getting stronger fun?”

This Dungeon Guardian’s words were pregnant with meaning. He made it sound as though the Dungeon has been set up precisely to make humans stronger. He didn’t assert it outright, but his image of the Dungeon came through his phrasings.

“You’re right. It *is* fun getting stronger,” I replied without prevarication.

As a lover of video games, I enjoyed level grinding, that much was indisputable.

“Good. Get stronger for me. That’s the reason I brought you here.”

“Er, what do you mean?”

“You want to get stronger so you can hold onto your way of life. And as a Guardian, I want to make you stronger since you’ve got so much promise. Our interests are aligned. And the Dungeon is the ideal training ground.”

“So, uh, Guardians make humans stronger because they have a duty to guide humans to the hundredth floor?”

“Yep. Or so I’m told.”

That was hard to swallow. From what I’d heard, the hundredth floor had the power to grant any wish. Wouldn’t it make more sense for them to be hindering divers in order to protect that floor?

“But the hundredth floor has this amazing treasure...or rather, something like a *power*, right? You’re saying Guardians are around to cede that power to humans? Really?”

“Maybe? That, I dunno much about.”

“‘Maybe,’ he says...”

“It’s certainly true that a strange ‘power’ is stashed on the hundredth floor. But nobody’s told me to guard it or to give it away. I was just told to guide people, so that’s what I’m doing.”

“A Guardian’s duty sounds awfully half-cocked to me.”

“I’m right there with ya, bud. So much about it all seems loose and unfinished. It ain’t *like*—.”

Not like who? The “somebody” who created the Dungeon?

Since he was bound by his rule not to talk about the creator, I shifted topics. “I welcome you making me stronger with open arms, but are you okay with that? If I get stronger, won’t your goal of winning the Brawl become harder?”

“You don’t gotta worry about that. The stronger the enemies, the greater the glory for me, so this is by no means a bad deal for me. Besides, the Brawl isn’t the be-all, end-all of glory-winning. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll just ponder my next move.”

“Kay, got it.”

I didn’t particularly care one way or the other. While Lorwen had to jump through a variety of hoops to accomplish his objective, all I had to do to accomplish mine was get stronger. If I got stronger, nobody would be able to threaten me. If I got stronger, I’d become able to rub Lorwen out in a one-on-one. If I got stronger, I’d be able to extract information about my memories from Palinchron or those two girls by force if necessary. My options would multiply.

“All right, I’ll set my sights on getting stronger for now. Let’s go, Lorwen.”

“You got it. Let’s hit the area around Floor 30 for the time being.”

In the end, it was the same as always. I leveled up while Dungeon diving and accumulated some money in the process. My situation hadn’t really changed dramatically, but there was a stability in that, and that was close to the most optimal way to be for me. Together with Lorwen, I delved deeper into the Dungeon.



Unlike Snow, Lorwen was a very cooperative partner to have. He never slacked off and he never complained. That alone was a huge help. Even better, the way he battled was different from Snow's sloppy fighting style; it was fantastic how it was based on precise calculations. He attached importance to coordinating with his collaborator, drawing out combat results that were more efficient than otherwise. To put it bluntly, he was a hundred times easier to fight alongside than Snow.

The blade he was using was an ordinary sword, so his attacks didn't work on the Crystal Golems and the like, but his ability to disrupt and confuse as the vanguard of our two-man team was out of this world. He continually dodged the enemy's attacks right in front of it and used martial arts not unlike aikido to throw it off-balance. By serving as a splendid decoy, he upped our efficiency, decreasing the time it took by as much as fifty percent. We reached Floor 30 in about half the time it had taken the day before. We grabbed a breather on the enemyless Floor 30, sitting on the colorful, shining rocks.

"I gotta say, Kanami, you're packing some good magic."

He must have been able to see *Dimension* because he was pointing at the magic energy in the vicinity.

"You mean the dimensional spell I've got up?"

"Yeah. The fact that your eyes are able to follow my movements is thanks to that spell, right?"

"Yeah, it is. This dimensional magic makes life easier for me in a lot of ways."

If it wasn't for *Dimension*, I might still be around the Floor 10 area. That was how high a percentage of my overall strength it occupied.

"Your knack for battle ain't nothing to sneeze at either. Looks like things'll be easy," he continued.

"Easy? What will be easy?"

"I mean that with your Dexterity and Aptitude, I'll probably be able to teach you my swordsmanship," he said, blowing my mind with the most easygoing

expression.

“Huh? You can *teach* swordsmanship like that?” Given how godlike the sword slashes he’d displayed on Floor 21 were, I found that difficult to believe.

“You’re more talented than you think, Kanami. With Dexterity and Aptitude like that, there’s no way you *shouldn’t* be able to learn it. I think you can acquire any normal skill.”

Lorwen had said the words “dexterity” and “aptitude” a second time, leading me to believe he was referring to the stats.

“You mean the numbers next to Dexterity and Aptitude have something to do with skills?”

“Yeah, they do. I don’t know much about it, mind you, so I can’t give you an explanation. Talk of stats and skills and stuff like that only started spreading a bit before I died.”

It looked as though the concepts of stats and skills had only come into being a thousand years prior.

“In any case, you can acquire any skill in this world, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. And super easily too.”

“Any skill? That can’t be.”

I wasn’t quick to believe it. While I was confident when it came to my stats, which were crazy enough to make the Laoravian priest I’d met through Palinchron look flabbergasted every time he checked, that didn’t mean I could mirror Lorwen’s swordsmanship so easily.

“I ain’t lying. As a dimension-element mage, I’m sure it’s possible for you.”

“But... But then, isn’t it weird I don’t have more skills than I do? The only three I have are Dimensional Magic, Ice Magic, and Swordplay. If it’s that easy for me to learn new skills, shouldn’t I already have more?”

“That’s because you haven’t actively tried to pick up new skills. Maybe you were unconsciously operating under the assumption your skills can’t multiply that easily.”

“I mean, who wouldn’t?”

That a person could only gain one or two skills in their lifetime was the prevailing view here. Everybody regarded it as common sense, and that had trickled down to me.

“Listen. It *is* easy as long as you tick the boxes. Dimensional mages generally excel at observation. By using your dimensional magic to closely watch the movements of a person with a skill, you can learn it yourself. That’s all you’ve gotta do. As far as I know, you can pick up on a scary amount of info, gain an awareness of it all, and memorize it. And you’ve got the talent to accurately mimic all of it too. Trust me, you’ll be able to reproduce my swordsmanship.”

He pointed the blade he was holding toward my eyes, the first time he’d assumed a sword stance all day. Then, to model the move, he swung it lightly downward. Though the swing was light, it was executed beautifully. It seemed to me like a specific sword technique honed to perfection. I could practically sense the history behind that polished and elegant motion.

“Was that a move from a particular school of the blade?”

“I knew it... The fact you were able to tell that swing was some kind of technique already sets you apart from the rest. Any ordinary person would have seen it as just another sword swing. But you were able to conclude at first glance that I was using some kind of technique from the friction of my muscles, the shifting of my center of gravity, the fixing of my gaze, the particular way I relaxed my tension, the swinging of my arms, and the overall execution. You need to understand how amazing that is.”

I had no rebuttal. Recently, I’d taken to keeping my dimensional magic up the whole time I was awake, and I’d also gotten into the habit of trying to understand phenomena within the spell’s range. It was like a shortcut to success, a way to familiarize myself with an alien world. However, it seemed that the more I leveled up, the more that technique ascended to become a different beast. It was certainly possible that at this point, as long as it was within the range of what was humanly possible, there was nothing I couldn’t comprehend.

To liken it to something on Earth, I’d be able to see through any illusion a magician could attempt. I’d figure out the type of pitch and the speed before

the pro pitcher even threw the ball. I'd even be able to understand the workings behind secret martial arts techniques with thousands of years of history before ever receiving them. And all with a single glance. By using relatable Earth analogies, it finally sank in how insane that was.

"For the time being, I think I'll have you copy all of my skills. And the skill I've got the most confidence in is Swordplay, so that's the first thing I'll pass down to you."

Once again, Lorwen swung his sword in an elegant, flowing manner. He slashed the air over and over from every angle—from above, at a slant, from the side, and everything in between, and always with perfect form. His eyes were on me the whole time; he was telling me to watch and imitate.

"If you're willing to teach me, I'll copy you without reservation. Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash.*"

I grokked the beautiful sword swing via *Dimension*, suffusing the area around Lorwen with magic energy and gathering all information about his motion—and not just simple physical movements of the muscles. I also absorbed detailed information regarding the tiny fluctuations of Lorwen's magic energy, as well as regarding his heartbeat, blood pressure, amount of sweat, line of sight, and so on. These sorts of techniques were not something that could be achieved through the body alone. It also had a lot to do with the mind. In order to imitate him all the way down to his mental state, I searched for all kinds of information. The state of mind that one would inevitably reach after tireless repetition. I committed it all to memory—the swing down, the diagonal slash, the side slice, the thrust, the sweeping stroke. Looking back, I realized I'd never watched anything this intently in my whole life.

In battle, it was important to collect the minimum necessary information with the minimum amount of effort. As such, it had never occurred to me to steal people's skills using *Dimension*. Now that Lorwen's magnificent display was over, I started swinging my sword, following his example. With my superhuman powers of observation and memory, I retraced the gorgeous bladework he'd shown me. Of course, I was moving slowly compared to him, but I was confident that my swings were otherwise identical.

Lorwen applauded. “Damn, that’s amazing. You really did perfectly emulate my moves after a single glance. If a swordfighter undergoing serious training were to see you now, they’d probably lose it.”

“Thanks to the effects of my magic, it’s easy to mimic moves, but it’s just monkey see monkey do.”

“Bro, normally it takes years just to get to the point where you can mimic a swordfighter’s form, so...”

With a wry smile, Lorwen unleashed another set of varied sword movements. I admonished myself for spouting such careless remarks. Lorwen might have been able to belt out god-tier techniques easily *now*, but he must have had a training period in the past, and what I’d just said made light of his blood, sweat, and tears.

“Er, I... I’m sorry, Lorwen.”

“Don’t apologize to me. It’s the swordfighters of the world you oughta apologize to. I’m actually in a fantastic mood—a promising new disciple has appeared before me!”

“Huh? A disciple? Me?” The word made me tense up a little.

“Just you wait and see—I’ll make you a master of the Arrace School of Swordsmanship in time for the Brawl!” he said enthusiastically, if unilaterally.

Ever since he’d made me his best friend out of nowhere, I’d known there was a chance Lorwen had a tendency to get ahead of himself.

The Arrace Clan, huh? If I’m not wrong, in this day and age, they’re one of the leading noble families, and the one with the Blademaster in it. Lorwen might actually be an ancestor of theirs.

Visibly amped up, he continued, letting his imagination run away from him like a little kid’s. “I can see it now! Master and disciple, squaring off during the final climactic match of the Brawl! The elegant swordsmanship of the Arrace School will captivate the masses through our beautiful clash of blades. And that means that even if I lose, I’m guaranteed to attain glory as the master who *taught* Kanami, winner of the tournament. I’m thinking I’ll say something along the lines of, ‘Heh. Kanami, my top disciple... Looks like you’ve surpassed your

master. Well done. Seeing how much you've grown, I feel happy, but also sad... I hereby acknowledge your initiation into the Arrace School.' I'll be the center of attention from the masses as the scowly swordmaster who passed down legendary sword skills!"

"Sure, if you're happy with that, you can call me your disciple."

Putting aside how cliché it was, that scenario certainly suited me. This way, everybody won. No matter who took the tournament between me and him, glory would be his, and I'd master his sword techniques.

"All right!" said Lorwen, "*That*'ll put me on the map! This, I don't mind!"

"Calm down, Master. Take a deep breath and then teach me the next thing."

After hearing me call him "Master," his relaxed expression grew even more so. He twirled the sword in his hand like a baton, making it glint like he was doing a dance.

"Heh. Sure, that's fine. I, Lorwen Arrace, third head of the Arrace Clan, hereby vow that I shall make Aikawa Kanami the successor of the blade-style of the Arraces!"

He was smiling a nice smile, enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart. As his closest friend, I was happy for him. Having fun was a good thing. That was enough to brush away almost all my stresses and cares. With a strained smile, I seared the scene of Lorwen Arrace rejoicing into my mind, the image of him smiling heartily, despite the possibility that death would us part. And I had no intention of stopping him.



Amid the field of many-colored flowers, a bell-like ringing sounded.

Lorwen and I were clashing blades, shattering the gem-flowers underfoot and illuminating the otherwise dim limestone cavern of a floor with the resulting sparks. No normal person would be able to track our swords with their eyes, such was our speed. At first glance, the fight would seem like a battle to the death, but that wasn't what it was to us, because while we were swinging our weapons at speeds an ordinary onlooker couldn't process, for us it was slow enough that we could stay our hands any time we chose.

That fearsome battle of blades came to an end when Lorwen's sword stopped at my left wrist.

"Dammit," I said, panting. "I can't land a single sword stroke against you!"

"I mean, if you beat me in a sword duel after a little bit of practice, I could hardly call myself your master," he replied with a wry grin, scratching his head.

His nonchalance deflated my confidence. "But I'm using *Calculash* and everything!"

While I'd been expending MP and keeping my dimensional spell up, Lorwen hadn't been using any magic. Coming up this short when I had a handicap was pathetic.

Lorwen cocked his head in puzzlement. "You seem pretty chagrined that you can't beat me. Tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing you've never lost before, huh?"

I had no words. It wasn't that I'd never lost before. I'd tasted defeat plenty of times. But that was back in *my* world. Ever since I'd come to *this* world, I'd always come out on top. Thanks to the blessing that was my stats spread, I'd remained undefeated in combat. Yet now, that no-loss record was about to crumble to Lorwen's might, and that did make me feel somewhat...or no, maybe *very* bitter would be more accurate.

"Looks like I hit the bull's-eye. But this is just training. It's not like you're inferior to me overall. If this were a real fight, you wouldn't be coming at me using a sword, would ya?"

"Hm...well, probably not, I guess."

Lorwen's weak point was apparent at a glance. It was the paucity of his magic energy.

"If someone uses freezing magic on me from afar, or I get attacked by arrows or traps or the like, I haven't got a way to fight back, so you don't gotta get so anxious. Getting panicky or impatient never helps."

He couldn't craft a proper spell for the life of him, and that was evidently why he'd staked his future on the blade and honed his craft to such stellar heights.

But then again, it was for that very reason that I wound up thinking I wanted to beat him at his own game someday. It was an immature impulse, but that was the desire brimming in my heart.

The words came spilling out. “Even so, I wanna beat you in a sword duel!”

“You do, do ya?”

My reasons were childish. Lorwen was the strongest swordfighter, and that title made him a dazzling paragon to me. The impact and the ring of the title had taken hold. I found myself longing to be not some mage that battled from a distance, but a swordsman who fought at the front lines. Besides, if it was just a challenge to attempt, it didn’t cost me anything.

“Good!” Lorwen’s lips curled; he could practically taste my ambition. “It ain’t fun for me otherwise!”

It seemed his heart was pounding with excitement at the birth of a sword rival he could never have seen coming. Then he came swinging, signaling that it was time to resume our training. As always, the slash he traced was a work of art. And as always, the operative phrase for his swordsmanship was “no wasted movement.” He aimed at what was theoretically the point on the opponent’s body that would hamper them the most, swinging his sword at the theoretical closest and fastest line between point A and point B.

That was the baseline. The *really* troublesome thing was how he was in conscious control of all of his body’s motions. Consequently, he threw in countless feints in the most minute details. He’d suddenly change his line of sight, shift his weight in unforeseen ways, or put his strength into strange areas. That was all he needed to do to engender doubt and confusion in me, who was grasping things via *Dimension*. When I fell for a feint and swung my sword suboptimally, it was over the very next instant when Lorwen’s blade made contact with me.

He fainted in innumerable ways in the twinkling of an eye, always with an unruffled expression, and always without the aid of *Dimension* or anything like it. He’d reached unfathomable heights in both body and mind, and my heart wouldn’t stop thumping as I observed it all, sending large amounts of blood all through my veins. It wasn’t just my brain but also my body as a whole that was

telling me that if I didn't run at full capacity, I wouldn't be able to keep up with the man before me.

Every one of Lorwen's moves was a masterwork that deserved a place in history. Clashing blade against blade like this was objectively a savage and barbarous thing, yet I felt like I was walking through a renowned and expansive gallery of art. Each of his moves was as enchanting as the last, and whenever I mimicked it to respond in kind, he would send yet another masterwork for me to mirror. Thus, I could view more art without a moment's pause. It was just too beautiful, too fun. I lost track of time as I continued strolling through the museum called Lorwen, much like a little kid with stars in their eyes walking through an unfamiliar new world.

When I was a kid, I thought they were so cool. The heroes swinging their swords on the other side of my LCD screen. The blade battles where both sides shed blood over everything that mattered to them. Like most kids, I'd viewed it as more badass than something to fear. There was always that tension between how brutish and immoral it was and how utterly dazzling and enchanting it looked. That was what swords represented to me. And not only was the exemplar of that dream of being an awesome swordsman right there in front of me, I was able to keep pace. I was enjoying the time I was spending this way more than any sport or video game or other form of entertainment. I got so stuck in it that I had no idea how much time had passed, and when I finally crossed my fatigue threshold, I fell to my knees.

"Hff, hff, hff!" I felt heavy, as if I'd run for kilometers straight with no oxygen.

Even Lorwen had broken a sweat, albeit a small one. "Hff, hff..."

He asked me a genuine question as he wiped his sweat. One I didn't think had anything to do with the blade.

"Tell me if I'm wrong, but do you have a crazy good memory?"

"Huh? I mean, yeah, I'm pretty sure I've got a good memory."

I'd already been confident in my memory back in my world too, and thanks to my leveling up in this one, my prowess at memorization had reached well past the realm of the human.

“Sure, but I’m surprised you can throw out moves you learned an hour ago with exactly the same form.”

“Once I commit one to memory, I can be pretty sure I’ll never forget it.”

“Normally, you’d have to repeat the move over and over again to get your body used to it, but...I guess you don’t even need to do *that*. Let me tell ya, Aptitude really is a scary stat.” Lorwen broke into a cold sweat distinct from the exertion sweat from earlier. “Then again, I’ve got your Aptitude to thank for having taught you more or less all of the basics of the blade this quickly. All right, let’s keep it up and teach ya the secret techniques.”

“The secret techniques already?”

“At the speed you picked it all up, I’ve got no more fundamentals to teach ya. If I take ya at your word, I don’t need to run through ’em a second time, after all. Now try mimicking this next move for me. I think it’s gonna hit a bit different from what you’ve been practicing thus far.”

My training had finally reached the secret techniques stage. I’d likely finished in a few hours the kind of thing a master transmitted to an inheritor of a craft over a matter of decades. Lorwen smiled wryly as he manipulated his magic energy. Apparently, the Arrace School secret move made use of magic energy, and it was low-cost enough to be workable despite Lorwen’s meager amount of it. His energy transferred to the sword he was holding and covered its surface before solidifying into a physical shape. The hardened energy expanded and contracted in accordance with his will.

I’ve seen that technique somewhere.

“Hey, is that the skill ‘Magic Power Materialization’?”

“Wait, you know it?”

“Um, yeah. I know about it... Wait, where did I see it again? Uh...”

“Well, if you know about it, that makes my job easier. You understand how the breadth of what you can do with the blade expands if you’ve got this in your arsenal, right?”

I nodded, and at that moment, he swung his sword lightly and smoothly,

cutting a flower his blade would have never reached otherwise. It seemed he'd effectively lengthened the blade through Magic Power Materialization.

"Okay, so now I'm gonna fight ya usin' Magic Power Materialization as gently as possible. I want ya to analyze closely the process by which the energy anchors on."

He put the sword down on its side and lengthened and contracted the energy once again, though this time he did it very slowly so that I could grasp the mechanism behind it. Using *Layered Dimension*, I observed it down to the smallest detail. The element of the energy was close to Void. Lorwen had called himself the Thief of Earth's Essence, but it appeared he didn't use Earth-element magic energy for his super moves. Pure, plain, elementless magic energy clung to the sword, repeatedly expanding and contracting as it writhed.

I tracked the movement of that energy with the intention of observing it down to the molecular motion. How did the particles of magic move? How did they function? I gradually unraveled the rules and seared them into my brain.

The intensity of my concentration mounted at accelerating speeds; one second became divided into tenths of a second and then further divided into hundredths of a second. By the end, I came to understand the intertwining laws of the world that ticked at increments of shorter than a hundredth of a second. And then I posited the existence of an element that didn't exist in the laws of physics called "magic energy," working out the formulas and equations underpinning that phenomenon by filling in the assignment expressions.

"Okay, I think I've got it down for the most part."

"Damn, you really understand the gist after seeing it one time, huh?"

I set about trying my hand at reproducing Magic Power Materialization myself. I spread my energy into the equation for the crafting of spells that was etched into my brain—the so-called "magic formula." I manipulated the magic energy flowing from my body, making it creep into the sword I was holding to cover it before solidifying it. But try as I might, the energy wasn't solidifying, and I knew why. It was the difference in the nature of our magic energy. His was as quiet as a clear stream. Moreover, it was elementless, uncolored energy. My energy, on the other hand, was as restless as white water rapids, and it was far

from plain and elementless. No matter how hard I tried, the colors of dimensional and ice magic ended up getting mixed in. The trick to Magic Power Materialization was to quietly harden magic energy that was void in nature, and while I understood that, I just couldn't make it work.

"Urgh, it's...it's hard," I said, furrowing my brow.

"Guess even you can't reproduce it right off the bat. Actually, this technique is the kind ya master over a lifetime, so..."

But I didn't wait to listen to the whole sentence before I gave up on that and tried the next magic formula. If the magic energy I was using wouldn't turn colorless, I just had to try a formula that would produce the same result even with a different kind of magic energy.

"Argh, it's so hard...so I'll just do *this!*"

Instead of colorless energy, I generated energy of the very familiar ice type and coated my sword with it. If I stopped there, it would just be an *Ice Flamberge*, so I attracted the moisture in the air and froze it as a substitute for solidified magic energy. By doing that over and over again, I managed to lengthen the sword tip. I'd brute-forced it, but with this, I'd invented a skill that was a standin for Magic Power Materialization. I swung my ice blade the same way Lorwen had and cut an otherwise unreachable flower too.

To give this skill a name... "Maybe I'll call it Magic Energy Freezing?"

"I dunno, man...isn't that basically a totally different skill at that point? I'd say if anything, it's closer to a spell than a skill."

"But the result's the same, no?"

"You've got a point there."

Most likely, it didn't measure up to Lorwen's Magic Power Materialization in terms of sharpness and hardness. My Magic Energy Freezing was that full of weak spots and that fresh out of the oven.

"Gotta say, it really does seem like you can master everything in a day. Now all I've got left to teach ya is the final secret move."

He must have determined that I'd learned something comparable enough to

Magic Power Materialization, because he was moving onto the next thing.

“The final secret move. I like the sound of that.”

“Sorry to get your hopes up, but it’s not some amazing sword technique.”

“Huh, it’s not? Even though it’s the final move of a blade art?”

“Nope.”

He closed his eyes, then quelled the already quiet magic energy inside him. Sure, his energy wasn’t making the slightest movement, but to me, it looked like he was just standing there.

“Wait, that’s the final secret move?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t actually have a name, but...a certain person called it a skill named ‘Responsiveness.’ This is the true secret of my strength.” He beckoned me with his hand.

“You’re saying I’ll understand if I attack you?”

He quietly nodded. I was of two minds. The guy had his eyes closed, for one. Furthermore, I didn’t sense the tiniest usage of magic power; he was honestly just standing there. Since he couldn’t see, he’d probably end up eating any sword stroke.

After a moment of hesitation, I decided to believe in him and took a step forward. Knowing what a master he was, he might be able to defend himself by reading my footsteps or the air currents. I swung my sword at a decent speed, and I wasn’t disappointed, because he blocked my strike with his blade. He brushed off my sword and swung at me in the same fluid motion, without an ounce of hesitation to be seen in his movement. His sword blade lengthened toward one of my vitals. I somehow managed to fully block the attack, but his onslaught didn’t stop there. It was almost like he *could* see. Actually, no, his movements were even more precise than if he’d had his eyes open. After several clashes, Lorwen successfully disarmed me, knocking the blade out of my hands.

“But your eyes are closed...so how?”

If he’d been using magic energy, I would have understood. But he hadn’t been

using the tiniest bit. He'd beat me purely with his body alone.

“This is the Responsiveness skill. I'm told it's a power that can detect everything in the world, from the air to magic energy to more.”

In the face of this skill's sheer strength, all I could do was smile faintly.



If his explanation was true, it was an ability that resembled *Dimension* a great deal. Actually, it was stronger than *Dimension*, considering Lorwen didn't need to expend any MP to activate it.

"Maybe you're thinking it's similar to your own magic, but it's different, technically. Your dimensional magic allows you to grasp everything on an intellectual level, while this is way more instinctive by comparison. It's a technique to comprehend the flow and the natural ways of this world intuitively."

Until now, most of the sword techniques were rational and based on precise calculations. That this final technique was based on such an ambiguous and vague power had me scratching my head.

"With this power, no matter what situation you may find yourself in, even if you're out of magic energy, you'll be able to fight against Reaper. And if you combine it with your dimensional magic, your comprehension power ought to power up, becoming more accurate than ever before."

"All right, I'll try doing it too." I closed my eyes, quelled my magic energy, and cleared my mind, mimicking Lorwen's technique by following what I'd observed. But all I was doing was standing in place. I heard his foot skid on the ground, and I braced myself—

"Ow!"

The next instant, he flicked me on the forehead. My eyes flew open.

"Sorry, you did it wrong."

"Huh? What'd I do wrong? Hold on. I'll try again."

"It's good to challenge yourself."

I attempted it again, the same way as before. This time around, I held nothing back. I perfectly mimicked the information I'd gleaned down to the most minute detail. His heartbeats, the amount of perspiration, his breathing—I brought myself closer and closer to all of it. I even reenacted where he'd tensed his muscles to a tee, let alone his posture. I sharpened my senses and waited for him to come at me with his forehead finger fl—

“Ow!”

I couldn’t block it.

“Hmm,” said Lorwen. “You’re not picking it up as quickly all of a sudden.”

“Oh c’mon! There’s no way I can understand my surroundings with my eyes closed and without using any magic energy!”

“But you can. You saw it yourself; I was using this skill to dodge Reaper’s blind-spot attacks.”

“But how can that possibly be?! You’re... You’re not doing anything!”

That’s right. This skill involves not doing anything. And if you don’t do anything, you can’t grasp any information. That’s the logical conclusion.

“It’s *because* I’m not doing anything that I understand. It’s less a technique of the body and more a technique of the mind. Looks like you may be able to mimic things on an external level, you can’t on an internal level. Basically, it’s your headspace that must be tripping you up.”

“Hold on, there’s no way my headspace will solve the problem!” I couldn’t comprehend what he was saying.

“And here I thought this skill was ideally suited to you, Kanami.”

I shook my head frantically, and he gave me a pitying look, which didn’t amuse me. After all, the chance that this was a unique skill that only he could perform was high. In fact, I was sure of it. That’d make sense of things. A technique of the mind like the Responsiveness skill? I’d never—

“Your mind and body are kinda disconnected,” he continued.

He drew closer and put a hand on my forehead. Then he closed his eyes, as if he were feeling around inside my heart. I didn’t feel any magic energy in his hand. Even if I activated *Dimension*, I still wouldn’t know what he was doing. For all intents and purposes, he had his hand on my forehead and that was that. Despite that, he perceived the state of my heart and voiced what he was sensing.

“Not only are they disconnected, you’ve also got a ton of chains binding ya, it looks like. Sturdy, constricting chains.”

“You can even grasp stuff like that through Responsiveness?”

“It’s because this skill is more or less the utmost peak a human can reach, though it has a drawback, in that as a sort of enlightenment, it’s hard to learn.”

“A sort of enlightenment? You...were gonna teach me something that, well, *ultimate*?”

“I thought you’d be able to learn.”

“But, like, there’s no way I could achieve enlightenment that easily.”

I cursed how difficult the trial Lorwen had assigned me was. In my world, enlightenment was the stuff of fairy tales, something that a handful, if not fewer, of our grand forefathers might or might not reach in their lifetimes. How could an idiot like me come shoulder to shoulder with the greats?

Lorwen forcefully dismissed that idea. “You’ve got that backwards. It’d be stranger if you *didn’t* reach it easily. That’s how silly strong you are.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I didn’t think he was talking solely about my dimensional magic or my Aptitude or what have you. I had a feeling he was talking about something more fundamental. About everything I’d been gifted in this world. The way this world seemed so partial to me.

“Maybe what that Lastiara Whoseyards girl said was on the money. I can’t state anything definitively, but it’s true that your heart’s in no normal state.”

“So you think so too.”

“Yeah, I do. My Responsiveness skill is telling me your mental condition is off...but I won’t say anything beyond that, seeing as I’m a dead man who’ll soon disappear. I’ll leave you some words to chew on, but I won’t lend you a hand outside of that.”

His words weren’t too cold nor too kind. They were unmistakably his remarks as my master.

“What say we head back, Kanami? You must be fairly tuckered out, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“You almost entirely mastered a whole school of bladecraft and it only tired

you out a bit. Boy is that unfair.”

“That weirdly gets under your skin, huh, Lorwen?”

“It’d get under anybody’s skin at least a little. That’s just how unfair it is.”

As we bantered, we were about to exit Floor 30 when I noticed how thin his magic energy had gotten.

“Lorwen,” I stammered. “Am I imagining it or has your magic energy gotten weaker?”

This was different from expending magic energy. It wasn’t that there was less of it. The magic energy itself had gotten thinner, and the most apt way to describe it was “weakened.”

“That could be. Looks like teaching you was more fun than I’d have guessed. That was so fulfilling,” he said, smiling faintly and leaving it at that.

He was walking ahead of me, and from behind I could see that he was swaying feebly.

“I...see.”

I understood now. In the space of a few hours, we had erased one of the regrets in his heart. And I also understood how exceedingly easy the deal we’d struck to resolve his lingering attachments was. The hurdles in the way of achieving his heart’s desire were incredibly low. It probably wouldn’t take much at all for him to vanish from this world. But that wasn’t a sad thing. Not when vanishing was his ultimate desire and the end point of a happy life. As such, I couldn’t say anything more than that.

I couldn’t do anything but mumble those two words and keep following in his footsteps.



Following that Dungeon dive with Lorwen, I headed alone to where I figured Palinchron was in order to give him a progress report on our little deal. I also had to report how I’d unilaterally decided to make Lorwen a guest of Epic Seeker. While I was guildmaster, the true top echelon was the submasters, veteran members that they were. Third, I wanted an explanation as to why he’d

signed me up for the Brawl without asking me first. Lastly, I planned to question him about my mind and body too. I'd contemplated asking him to heal me, as his forte was mental magic, but I shook my head and put aside the idea right away. There was no doubt that Palinchron was hiding stuff from me. I didn't trust him enough to be able to take that option. I couldn't trust him unconditionally. Not anymore.

I had a lot to talk about. I recalled the directions Snow had told me as I walked. My destination was the foot of a mountain at the edge of Laoravia. There lay the villa of Rayle Thanks, the third of the three submasters and the man who'd saved me from the big fire alongside Palinchron. Mr. Rayle was Palinchron's best friend, and it seemed Palinchron was borrowing his place while he was active in Laoravia.

As I walked through town, the number of people around gradually diminished. It looked as though the villa had been built in an outlying district. From what I'd heard, it was a lavish home, so I was slightly looking forward to paying a visit.

I continued walking down the desolate road, until at last I reached the villa. Or more precisely, the ruins of said villa.

"Huh? What the hell? This *is* the place, right?"

The villa had collapsed. None of its stone walls were left standing, and the pillars that had formerly propped the building up lay broken. The belongings inside weren't intact either; everything had been destroyed. Obviously, the roof was gone as well, baring the interior to the elements. A number of people were running restlessly around nearby. These were the chamberlains and butlers and so on, as well as buff workers who looked to be in the construction business. From the snippets of the conversations I overheard, I could tell they were currently disposing of the debris and rebuilding.

I spotted the person who was giving them orders and drew closer. He was a man with countless scars on his face—the owner of this villa, Mr. Rayle. Himself a powerhouse, he picked up on my presence and looked my way, a little hostility on his face, which soon melted when he saw it was me.

"Oh, it's you, huh? Thanks for coming," he said, welcoming me with an

amicable expression.

Despite being so obviously stretched thin, he'd greeted me with a smile. This was a man with a sturdy heart. He had more grit than two other submasters I could name.

"What on earth happened here?"

"Oh, nothing, just got hit by a small little assault."

"An assault? What kind of attack could cause all *this*?"

Judging by the fallout, I thought they must have gotten attacked by a dragon or something. But his reply was even scarier than that, and in more ways than one.

"We got wrecked by a single girl."

"Huh? A girl? You're pulling my leg, right?"

"One girl did this. The girl called Diablo Sith. By her hand, this place became vacant land," he said smilingly.

He'd come to terms with it, but this was no laughing matter to me.

"Diablo Sith?!"

She was one of the two overpowered girls. Her emotionally unstable outbursts and her way-too-pretty tear-stained face had made quite the impression on me.

Mr. Rayle seemed to know something about her, so I asked him, "Who or what *is* she?"

"Hmm...it was like she was an assassin with an axe to grind against Palinchron. The guy's incurred quite a few people's enmity, see. Stuff like this happens all the time. But then again, the mansion crumbling to the ground's a first."

"An assassin? Don't assassins kill sneakily in the dead of night? So how'd it get like this?"

"Yeah, at first it *was* like that. But when he gave her the slip, she got revenge by completely destroying the mansion before going back."

“Wait, what? She destroyed it in revenge... *What?!*”

I couldn't believe what he'd said, but then I thought back to what she'd been like when I first bumped into her, and suddenly it seemed plausible.

“If I recall correctly, she said Palinchron had slashed her torso. I'm sure that must be why.”

“He slashed her? He's never up to any good, that guy. I mean really.”

After learning that Palinchron was behaving as poorly as she was, I chose not to feel any sympathy for him.

“Uh, so is Palinchron not around here anymore, or...”

“He's not even in the country anymore, let alone this mansion. He ended up jumping a bit ahead of schedule and going to Laoravia's suzerain territory early. He pulled a runner with a smile on his face and a spring in his step.”

“With a smile on his face, huh? Leaving me in the lurch. I was in the middle of a deal with him.”

“That, you don't gotta worry about. I can pinch-hit for all the main points. Your 'deal' being the thing about slaying the Guardian, right?”

“Ah, yes, that's right.”

“Did ya kill the thing already? I figure if you show me the magic gem as proof, I'll spill the beans.”

“No, not yet. I got to the floor and met him, but...it didn't look like I could beat him.”

“So you succeeded in summoning it but can't kill it. I see. Then the Guardian of Floor 30 really is cooperative with the one who reaches it.”

He'd accurately surmised my situation from the little information I'd given him.

“You already know? You know that the Guardian isn't just some monster?”

“Yeah, I do...and it's a secret known by the Dungeon Alliance as well.” From his tone, it seemed he was pretty well-informed about the Dungeon. And about me.

“You must know about them too, Mr. Rayle. About the Guardian...about my bangle...and about Lastiara Whoseyards and Diablo Sith.”

“Yep. I do indeed know about your bangle. Palinchron’s a malicious guy at heart. He didn’t say anything, but he must’ve been enjoying how much you were sweating. You know what, I’ll tell you what I can,” he said, picking up on what I was getting at.

If it had been Palinchron, he would’ve picked up on what I was getting at—and seized that opportunity to stoke my anxiety further. Maybe the fact he was at Laoravia’s beck and call was just sparing me some grief.

“I’ll start from the beginning. Number one, you really do have the bangle to thank for maintaining the life you currently enjoy in this world. If you lose it, every ounce of happiness you have here will crumble away, and that’s a fact. Protecting that bangle is for your own sake as much as anything else’s. As for those two girls—Lastiara Whoseyards and Diablo Sith—I don’t wanna tell you about them, as it’ll upset you. I know that if you learn the truth, it’d start weighing on you heavily. And make no mistake, you *will* suffer for it. You’ll lose your happy life and start walking the path of hardship. Palinchron may think that’s just fine, but personally, I recommend you stay far, far away from it. That path isn’t the path a kid as good-hearted as you should go down.”

“So you don’t deny that those two have some kind of connection to me.”

“I’m neither confirming nor denying it.”

“Nor are you denying that these bangles are altering my memories, and Maria’s too.”

“I’m not confirming or denying that either. But please don’t misunderstand. The memories that are sealed away are terrible ones. In order to give you two a happy life, the memories that you don’t need have been made fuzzier. Think of it as a sort of therapy. It was through that process that you two attained happiness. A life where you’re not on the run from anything, where you’ve got nothing to fear. You’re truly so much happier than before, it’s no contest...and people exist to be happy. Especially kids like you and Mar-Mar.”

I didn’t think he could be lying. Though it was rude of me, I was double-checking via *Layered Dimension*, and looking at things such as his body

temperature and heart rate and so on, I saw none of the telltale signs.

“Surely you’ve got some small inkling of how tragic the day of that fire was? How hard it was for your sister Maria to endure? Looking at her eyes should give you an idea. If you regain your memories of that fire, your sister will have to face the agonizing and miserable truth...but if you yield to those bangles, you two will be able to keep the happiness you have now. That alone, I can guarantee you. I crafted the perfect plan to make sure of it. Stay on this path, and you get to lead a life as a hero of Laoravia where you want for nothing, and your sister will be happy too.”

From his tone, it was clear that he was truly looking out for me from the bottom of his heart. He was putting forth every effort to give us happiness. And once he threw my sister into the mix, I was left without a paddle. I could make all sorts of compromises if it only affected me, but I couldn’t if it affected the sister I loved so dearly. If it was what was best for her, I’d agree to it.

“If you still screw up the will to learn the whole truth despite all that, however, it’s a different story. I’ll tell you everything and make you two unhappy, if that’s what you want, and I’ll abandon all my plans. Or rather, ‘I’ll move on to the next plan’ is, I suppose, more accurate.”

Thus he gave me my second option. And the two choices before me were a difficult decision because their consequences were so apparent.

Mr. Rayle didn’t stop there. He also explained the significance behind my deal. “In our eyes, the slaying of the Guardian is a yardstick. If you’ve grown strong enough in body and mind to be able to take down such an entity—and if you still end up wanting to change your current situation after defeating that entity—then I’ve got no qualms about telling you the truth. I’ll lay it all out there. That’s what the deal is about.”

I didn’t sense any perfidy or malice in any of what he’d said. Unlike Palinchron, I could trust this man.

“I guess that’s about all I can tell you.”

“Thank you. You’ve explained a hundred times more than he ever did.”

“Palinchron didn’t even tell you a hundredth of what I just did?” He sighed.

“He never changes.”

I couldn't thank him enough. Thanks to him, I got a rough window into my current predicament. I also asked him to explain why they'd signed me up for the Brawl. Apparently, that was another part of his plan. He left the decision of whether or not to participate up to me. And as for Lorwen and Reaper staying at Epic Seeker, he agreed to it readily.

With that, I'd told him everything I could, and since he was busy with the work of repairing his mansion, we couldn't talk for very long anyway. I thanked him and left without delay.

On my way back, I consolidated what I knew. To summarize, Maria and I had some sorrowful past that Palinchron was concealing from us, though his reasons remained unclear. Snow also knew that, but her taciturn nature meant she stopped at a vague warning. And finally, there was Mr. Rayle, who sincerely believed that keeping the truth hidden was key to our happiness. But he was also conniving in a way, because he'd formulated a plan to set me up as the hero of Epic Seeker. Maybe if I regained my memories, I'd stop being that hero.

It wasn't enough. I simply didn't have enough information yet. Our harrowing past was still shrouded in mist. I assumed that those two girls must have something to do with it. Lastiara had called Maria her friend. Maybe Maria and I had once been friends or allies with them. I could infer that based on how Diablo Sith had acted. But Mr. Rayle was opposed to me returning to their side. He'd said those two would be a burden on me, and that reconciling with them would be a “path of hardship.” Perhaps they were at least part of what had caused our misfortune.

I poured my all into trying to piece it together. After Maria and I had stumbled into this world, I must have started going by the alias “Sieg.” Back then, Lastiara and Dia must have been comrades of ours. But a series of unfortunate events had triggered that fateful fire, leaving the party scattered. Epic Seeker then took us under their wing. The chances were good that that was when Maria injured her eyes too.

Wait...that doesn't make sense. Why was I the only one who went by an alias like “Sieg”? Lastiara called Maria by her real name. If I was going by an alias,

why wouldn't I make my sister do so too?

Actually, maybe it's not that weird. Maybe the bangle prevented me from realizing that the name Maria is an alias? Could Maria's real name be different? No, that's...

But her real name being different was what made the most sense to me. Another thing that stood out to me as weird was the fact I'd been Dungeon diving back then too. The reason I was diving was to cover the costs of Maria's treatment and to gain strength befitting the guildmaster of Epic Seeker. Would the siblings who ended up in a whole new world really enter the Dungeon, with the risks that entailed? What reason could we have had? I couldn't imagine it was to gain the strength to defend ourselves. Not when the Dungeon itself was the most perilous place in all the land. It didn't make sense to throw ourselves into the lap of danger in order to avoid danger. Did we do it for money, maybe? No...if our goal was to earn a living, there was no need to fixate on the Dungeon. There were plenty of jobs out there. What other reason could there be? To pay for Maria's treatment?

In order to cover her medical expenses, I needed a lot of money fast, and it was for that purpose that I'd been diving—I'd understand if that was the case. But that didn't gel with the sorrowful past that needed erasing or the day of the fire. It was the fire that had blinded Maria, and my memories had been sealed to hide whatever had happened.

Hold on a sec. Something's not adding up about that either. If that were true, then why not just block her memories as opposed to both of ours? Wouldn't hiding my memories be pointless? Did something bad happen to me too? Something as bad as Maria's blinding?

There was no way Mr. Rayle would mess with my memories for no reason. There had to be a reason, but I just couldn't see what it could be. I still lacked the information I needed. I could ponder until the cows came home, but it wouldn't give me an answer I could be certain of. Was regaining my memories really what I ought to do?

For some reason, I was gradually losing confidence. After all, I hadn't sensed any ill will from any of them—not from Palinchron or Mr. Rayle or Snow, nor

from Lastiara or Diablo Sith. From what I could tell, they all had good intentions. And they were all acting for my sake. That was what was so hard to understand. It was all so...*forgiving*. So *lax*. Nobody wished me any harm, and there was no real danger anywhere. My state of affairs was too unthreatening, and I was too happy.

But am I really gonna dig up my and Maria's dark memories? Really?

I got the sensation that someone was saying, "Why don't you just stay the course?" I heard the whisper in my ear. "If you keep to this road, you'll be able to safely attain happiness." It even appealed to the kid inside me, telling me I could become a hero.

I kept walking, spurred forward by that invisible something giving me an encouraging pat on the back. When I arrived at Epic Seeker, I was greeted by my comrades. Strolling through the corridor, our members started talking to me with smiles on their faces. They believed in me wholeheartedly. Meanwhile, Snow was waiting for me in my office. And when I strained my ears, I could hear Reaper and Lorwen kicking up a commotion. It sounded like they were having fun. Up the stairs, my baby sister was happy and safe. What more could I ask for?

And yet I was bleeding. Drops of red, dripping from my clenched fist.

"What's wrong, Kanami?" asked my sister, who was sitting atop her bed.

"Oh, no. It's... It's nothing."

It was nothing. I needed it to be nothing. If I tripped up and strayed from the rail tracks, I'd be consigning her to a life of misery. And yet, it was also true that my gut was pleading with me to remove the bangle. If removing it would clear up these headaches, this sense of discomfort, and this rage I couldn't explain, I had half a mind to do it. Little by little, my hand drew closer to the bangle. Little by little...little by little...

But right before my hand was about to touch it, I turned pale as a sheet. I felt a fierce chill down to my toes, racked by the fear that I was about to lose something more precious than life itself. My whole body froze up, and my hand wouldn't get any closer.

“Are... Are you okay, Kanami? You don’t look so good.”

“Yeah, uh, yeah, I’m okay. I’m just a little sleepy.”

I collapsed into bed. My head was running hot. I hadn’t ruminated particularly deeply, and yet my head felt so heavy and stuffy. It was almost like my thoughts were bound by chains. I couldn’t think freely. Even if I tried to move forward, those chains would hold me back.

“I’m...slee...py...”

My world turned steadily blacker. My hand had failed to reach my bangle, and I’d lost my strength. At the same time, my consciousness was falling toward the bottom of the deep dark.



Is this...a dream?

My fingertips felt as heavy as lead, and I couldn’t lift my arms. My legs were stuck in something, my body deprived of any freedom to move. It was like I was immersed in a muddy mire. I couldn’t even open my eyes, nor was I permitted to stir in the slightest. That was how deep the darkness I was floating in was. Then, a voice came from the void.

“Ah, I don’t care what ends up happening to you. That being said, your life going *that* smoothly does piss me off, so...”

A blurry figure appeared behind my eyelids. The silhouette was barely audible, but I could never mistake the owner of that voice. It was Palinchron Legacy.

I was now certain that this was a dream—a dream of the past. It was the memory of a defeat. The recollection had been triggered by some action I’d taken before falling asleep. I was remembering the words that Palinchron had imposed upon me. The *curse*. In the darkness, the flickering figure continued.

“Let’s make it so you value that bangle over your own life. After all, I do need ya to make protecting it priority number one. Hope ya don’t mind if that directive gets seared deep into your psyche.”

I was being shown all of the answers.

“Hm, I know. Why don’t I set it at the same level of importance as Aikawa Hitaki? That way I can rest assured he won’t touch it.”

He was saying diabolical shit without compunction as he made his evil magic energy creep into my body. The energy crawled around inside, meddling with my mind. Then the silhouette handed me something.

“Here, laddie. Or ‘Kanami.’ Put it on.”

And I took it. The me in the darkness took it. The light but sturdy bangle. It sat in the palm of my hand, and it felt heavier than its actual weight. It was like it was more precious to me than my life.

“That bangle is the next thing that you need to be protecting. Try overcoming the Vigesimal and Trigesimal Trials with that on. I’ve got faith you’re the one who can do it, pal,” he said with a smile.

“I’m just gonna have you think stuff that’s not *strictly* true” my ass. “I ain’t gonna touch the core of Aikawa Kanami” my ass. This was unforgivable. I knew that the winner took the spoils, and even if this was a matter of course from Palinchron’s point of view, I’d never forgive him. Even though I couldn’t move an inch, blood continued to drip from my clenched fist. That pain was forcing me to remember. *Do not look past this injustice*, it was telling me. *Whatever you do, do not forgive and forget. Do not let this man, Palinchron Legacy, off the hook.*

But this was a memory of the past. That sentiment would not linger past the memory I was watching play out. All I could do was lie there and dream it, this distant dream. And I knew that because I dreamed this dream every night. Once I woke up, I’d forget everything I saw. That was how it worked. When I opened my eyes, I’d wonder about the bleeding from my palm and try to remember my dream, only to find myself unable to, try as I might.

That was why I had no choice but to place my hopes not in myself, but in another. If I did now, my thoughts and feelings wouldn’t go in vain. I was able to convey this wrath I felt to the girl to whom I was linked. And while she was not the most dependable of people, that was better than telling no one.

Ba-dump.

Through the emblem on my neck, my thoughts flowed into a certain little girl:
*Don't play with people's futures! Don't let his lies go unanswered! Don't get
what you want mixed up!*

Please, I thought, hear my screams! And then send these thoughts back to me!

Please, Reaper!!!

Chapter 7: And Then It Fell to Pieces

Several days passed without incident. In the end, I was never able to so much as touch the bangle. I still had time for now, and it was still too soon to come to a decision. If the crossword puzzle of the truth still had blank squares, I just had to fill in those squares one at a time. And once it was finished, I could make up my mind about what was right and what was wrong. So I found myself starting to think that I should just maintain the status quo while taking my time picking up bits of the information that I was missing as I went along.

However, ever since I'd promised to fight Lastiara in the Brawl, she hadn't established contact with me. Nor had Diablo Sith. Snow, meanwhile, had no interest in my memories, and Mr. Rayle was sticking to the terms of the deal. Which meant that I wasn't getting any new information about my memories any time soon.

As such, I had no choice but to keep training in the blade alongside Lorwen until the Brawl, when I would be able to see Lastiara and Diablo Sith again. Besides, leveling up was always helpful. Being stronger was bound to be advantageous when it came to drawing information out of those two, and an increase in my MP would make keeping Reaper alive an easier task.

That wasn't to say I was neglecting my guild duties, of course. If anything, they were mainly what occupied my time. We ably completed assignments from the state while also taking up jobs that were of service to Laoravia. Lorwen and Reaper also pitched in when they had time to spare, which certainly didn't hurt.

I guess it had an effect, because Epic Seeker was flourishing, its reputation growing all over the nation. Inevitably, I started getting famous too, and every time I walked through town, I was greeted by loads of people—kids running around, traders at the markets, patrolling sentries, the residents of Laoravia, all sending smiles my way.

As Epic Seeker was doing a lot of the work maintaining public security in town

lately, the guild was popular with the locals. Though I had only chosen those jobs with my detection magic in mind, it seemed it had resulted in gaining the approval of the people.

Lorwen often looked on fondly. He gazed at them longingly, as if witnessing a blessed sight. From that, I could tell that the everyday happiness of the people living in this town was one of the things he had chased after. I was a little astounded by how small-scale his desires were. He was so easy to satisfy that if he was surrounded by a few dozen people giving him a round of applause, I wouldn't be surprised if he disappeared entirely. I occasionally overheard the kids in the neighborhood calling him "Master," and I wanted to think that it was just my imagination, but I could swear that was all it took for his magic energy to weaken a little. Was Lorwen himself even aware that was the case?

And so the days went by without anything particularly good or bad happening, and the Brawl was now around the corner. It was three days away when a notification from the Laoravian government came in that was different from usual. This time it was addressed not to Epic Seeker but to me personally. It was an invitation to a ball held by the state. And it appeared this was different from the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball. It was an actual ball meant as a social. From what I heard, it had been arranged after the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball became a place for competition.

As the head of the guild, I wasn't in a position to turn the invitation down. My participation was a foregone conclusion whether I liked it or not.



Clad in raiments that were more constricting than I was used to, I spoke to the usual guild members in the office of Epic Seeker about the ball.

"Huh. A ball, eh?"

"I couldn't be more envious," said Lorwen, who was seated on the window frame. "Getting invited to a place like that is proof you have prestige now."

"Well, I'm nothing but depressed. Apparently, I was invited because the royals of Laoravia have taken an interest in me."

"Catching the interest of the royals is enough to make you the object of envy.

Oh well. I may not be able to come with ya, but you'll have Snow, who's used to that kinda thing. If anything comes up, you can turn to her."

The fact that she would be accompanying me did ease my nerves a little. She was often called to such events due to being from a prominent noble house.

"So it's just me and Lorwen today!" said Reaper, who was floating near the ceiling. "My urge to kill's rising!"

Her rather disturbing remark made me uneasy.

Lorwen frowned. "Oh c'mon, not again. I'm only on a team with ya because you keep saying ya can't deal otherwise. Try anything funny and I'm kicking ya out of my party."

"Er, you and Reaper are slated for the final qualifier of the Brawl, right?" I asked.

Over the past few days, Lorwen had done the qualifying rounds. Needless to say, he was in no danger of getting eliminated during the final round either. What worried me was Reaper's inclusion in his party. She was going to participate in the Brawl alongside him. According to her, she'd be by his side lest he should die in some accident as opposed to by her hand, but I didn't know if that was what was truly motivating her.

"Yeah, we'll give it a light touch. I'll look after Reaper, so you go do what ya gotta do and don't pay us any mind."

"I'm told you're planning to take her to the final qualifier; is that gonna be okay?"

"Knowing her, she can take on your run-of-the-mill tough guys, no problem. I don't even think she'll get a scratch on her. Besides, if it ever looks like she *will* take a hit, I'll step in."

"No, I mean are the other participants gonna be okay?"

"Oh, you're worried about *them*... You don't gotta worry about that either. I'll also step in if it ever looks like she might get carried away."

I got the sense that over the last few days, Lorwen was coddling her at accelerating rates. He probably didn't really see her as a curse or a

personification of death anymore. For better or worse, his peaceful life on the surface was changing his perception.

“It’s almost time. Let’s go, Kanami.” Before I knew it, Snow was there, standing in front of the door to the office.

Her choice of attire was similar to the one she wore when she was called to the House of Siddark. This time, her bell-line dress was beige. She was looking really pretty, and she had her hair tied up, reminding me she was in fact the scion of a well-to-do clan. The pale skin visible on the nape of her neck gave a vibe of rectitude, while the long gloves suggested elegance and dignity.

“Yeah, sorry to keep you waiting. I’m ready.”

“No, you’re not. Tighten your collar.”

She put her hands to my neck and did it for me. I’d thought I’d tightened it plenty enough, but not in her eyes.

“Thanks.”



She nodded slightly. “Sure.”

She took me outside, while at the same time Lorwen and Reaper headed for the final qualifying round. A large horse-drawn carriage was waiting outside...or at least, something like one. Its make was slightly different from the carriages in my world.

An elderly chamberlain came out from inside and bowed. “Young Madam Snow...this way, please.”

I imagined he must be a chamberlain of the House of Walker. It looked like we’d be riding this carriage all the way to the venue, a Laoravian castle. We boarded as the chamberlain indicated and headed for the urban center. The carriage’s interior decoration was opulent and dazzling; one could very much tell just how high-status the clan that owned it was. No wonder the Walker family was considered one of this landmass’s Four Great Noble Houses.

In the time I’d been soaking in the carriage, we arrived at our destination, one of the country’s many famous castles. Even the local royals had made the trip here today, and for that reason, security was strict. The rows and rows of soldiers checked our identities over and over as we passed by. Then, when we reached the castle garden, we were dropped off.

“I bid you a good day, Madam Snow, Master Aikawa.” The chamberlain bowed and sent us on our way. It seemed he wouldn’t be accompanying us.

“C’mon, Kanami, let’s go.” After thanking the chamberlain, Snow walked toward the castle.

I’d decided to do whatever she told me to do for the rest of the day, so I nodded and followed behind her, strolling past the colossal garden that one might mistake for a botanical garden, through the gates that even an elephant could cross comfortably, and toward the great hall where the ball was being held. And then, at last, the doors to that great hall opened.

A world of splendor lay before my eyes. The ceiling was extremely high, and countless silvery-white chandeliers hung down from it. From all the performers holding musical instruments in the back, it was clear that this was a sort of concert hall. A huge windowpane lay on each of the massive hall’s walls. Each

was elaborately designed, raising the value of the whole space. It was no different from the ballrooms you saw in books and media, being exactly what you might expect from a hall for nobility. In fact, I was a little relieved that it was just as I'd pictured.

When Snow and I entered the hall, we drew some of the eyes of the crowd of people waiting and chatting inside. Some among them came right to us. Snow moved to a corner of the space as she greeted them with her flawless fake smile. It was so perfect that it offered a glimpse into how deeply experienced she was.

A man bowed, then spoke to Snow, with other people waiting behind them. Maybe it was polite to wait one's turn to call out to someone.

"Long time no see, Madam Snow Walker. As of late, you haven't been turning up at very many events of this nature. Do you know how many people were worried about you?"

"Long time no see. Since I have been devoting myself to my studies at Eltraliew Academy, I regrettably haven't had much chance to join. If I've worried anyone, allow me to express my apologies."

"Oh no, I'm simply relieved to see you so hale and healthy, madam. If it's due to your studies, it can't be helped. I must say, though—as a scioness of the most honorable House of Walker, you must be excelling academically. May I ask you about your school life?"

"Yes, of course."

Thanks to *Dimension*, I understood that the man was trying to force a friendly and intimate atmosphere amid the thick soup of tension. I could surmise that he felt a fearful, reverential awe for the Walker family's status, but he also wanted to cozy up to them somehow.

Before I knew it, I had come to understand the subtleties of such emotions via *Dimension*. Recently, it seemed that due to my many practice sessions with Lorwen, *Dimension* had me a bit *too* hyperaware. I had to keep it a little more subdued outside of combat or Dungeon diving. It was like having a lie detector activated inside my head at all times.

I watched their conversation play out from behind Snow. The man was evidently the head of a powerful merchant clan in Laoravia and seemed to have come to deepen his ties and friendship with the Walker Clan. He casually slipped in talk of a deal with the Walkers in the otherwise trifling chitchat, and whenever he got the chance, he tried to nail down assurances of profitable business negotiations. I committed the conversation to memory for future reference. And then, when the everyday-life topics of conversation ran their course, the man's eyes turned to me.

"And who may this gentleman be? It's rare to see a person of your stature bring a guard along, madam."

The man had me confused for a guards-knight. While I'd been careful about my appearance to an extent, it seemed I hadn't dressed quite fancily enough to be taken for the head of an organization. Since I wasn't super confident in my speaking skills, I kept my introduction short.

"My name is Aikawa Kanami. I work for the Laoravian government through the guild Epic Seeker. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"My word! Please forgive my rudeness. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Lord of the House of Talua, Korner Talua. Did you say Epic Seeker? As in the famed—"

"Yes, he is the *guildmaster* of Epic Seeker," said Snow, "a guild directly under the Laoravian government."

"Heavens, I knew it! So you're the rumored hero!"

I smiled a little. "Wait, 'hero'?" It seemed my reputation had reached frightening heights.

"I have been hearing the rumors for some time now, Master Aikawa Kanami. I heard that the Lord of the House of Regacy, Sir Palinchron, acknowledges your talent and so you have become Guildmaster of Epic Seeker!"

"Uh, yes, that's right..."

The man had started speaking so spiritedly that I found myself taking a step back. But Snow's smile was demanding that I stay and listen, so I couldn't run away. He sang the praises of Epic Seeker's recent successes at length,

complimenting me on my work every chance he got. Clearly, he was trying to curry favor and score some kind of business deal. I tried to keep my replies ambiguous, checking Snow's expression from time to time and making judicious use of the occasional interjection to show I was paying attention. When the topic of all things guild-related was exhausted, the man shook my hand. I could feel a piece of hard metal in his palm. Through *Dimension*, I could tell it was a gold coin.

"This is a token of our merchant house's sincerity and our regard for Epic Seeker. From one man who supports Laoravia to another, I'm wishing you and yours the best."

"Oh, oh no, I couldn't—"

"Take it, Kanami," Snow admonished me by way of the earring in my left ear. "It'd offend him."

The earring contained a magic gem. I'd put it on so that she could give me advice at any time. Thanks to her vibration magic, Snow could get by with whispering and I would still hear her loud and clear.

"I... I'll graciously accept it. It's thanks to the generosity of the Merchant House of Talua that Epic Seeker will be able to keep making great strides in Laoravia going forward. I thank you for your kind consideration."

I softened my expression as much as I could so that my words of gratitude came across as genuine. The man nodded, satisfied, before leaving. Now, I'd been saddled with a debt of gratitude to him. And that was from a single chance encounter with someone I didn't even really like. The horror of it sent chills down my spine.

Before the next person approached me, I asked a question. "Snow...is it just a never-ending train of them?"

"Of course. For a hero, this is an everyday occurrence."

"If at all possible, I'd like to avoid becoming indebted to any more of his ilk."

"If you deny them, you're just swapping debts of gratitude for grudges. If word gets around that the hero gave them the cold shoulder, things'll get ugly fast. I wouldn't recommend it. This is just another aspect of your job, so suck it

up.”

“This is in the job description?”

“There are cases where just by giving one’s salutations, they can net upwards of a thousand pieces of gold. And there are cases where making one person’s acquaintance expands your network of connections by a thousand. Not to mention the cases where shaking on one contract saves a thousand lives on the battlefield. It’s worthwhile work if you want to contribute to Laoravia.”

I didn’t know much about economics, but I was able to appreciate what Snow was saying, if only vaguely. And because I understood her point, I could only remain silent. In the end, the existence of a “hero” was a matter of national interest. They were trying to lionize me for that reason, and they didn’t mind that I was a newcomer.

I tallied the profits I’d made over a few minutes of chatting and my face stiffened. It was enough of a fortune to be able to pay off Maria’s medical expenses, which had been my goal from the outset. I knew the money wasn’t for personal use, but the excessive amounts I’d earned still left me in a cold sweat. I was worried I’d passed a point of no return without even realizing it.

Another caller was approaching me and Snow. We pasted smiles onto our faces, but when I saw the line of people waiting in the back, my smile stiffened. This conga line was what Snow and I had to negotiate, and just picturing all that wasted time made me depressed. But I couldn’t let it show, lest I failed to display courtesy to our present company.

I heaved a deep sigh; now I knew that this ball was the roughest part of the work I did for Epic Seeker. We kept greeting and repeating throughout this mind-numbing chore of an outing, the fake smiles remaining on our faces the entire time. But our efforts did bear fruit—several hours later, the line of schmoozers had come to an end at long last. We took a break, looking at each other.

“I finally get to breathe,” I said.

“Nope, there’s still more, Kanami,” she replied, crushing my hope before walking toward the center of the great hall.

Since I couldn't deal with any potential unforeseen situations without her, I had no choice but to follow. On our way to the center, a lady I wasn't familiar with started talking to her.

"Madam Snow...this way."

"I'm aware." Snow nodded lightly and followed her. She spoke to me under her breath. "Now I'm gonna talk to people from my clan. You don't have to do anything."

I nodded wordlessly. When it came to a clan as high-status as one of the four leading houses, I honestly didn't want to do or say anything.

On the way to the center of the hall, I spotted a particularly large crowd. And the person at the center of that crowd was most likely...

"Long time no see...honorable mother-in-law."

Snow had called the young woman her mother-in-law, which made sense since she didn't look anything like her. The woman sported glossy blonde hair, her eyes were sharp like a hawk's, and her look and feel were pompous and showy. The dresses the two were wearing closely resembled each other, but apart from that, they looked like total opposites to me.

"If it isn't little Miss Snow," she said, her words at once gentle and forceful. "Starting this year, I hear your name brought up a fair bit. It seems you haven't forgotten what I told you."

"Of course. It's my pleasure to dedicate my all to the House of Walker."

"Very good. That is your *raison d'être*, and you would do well not to misunderstand it."

And with that, the mother-daughter conversation was already over. Snow's mother-in-law immediately turned her back, as if to say she had fulfilled her obligation to trade some words of greeting.

Was the greeting with her clan over and done with now? Sure, it certainly helped me if it didn't turn into a big to-do, but that was way too cold and curt.

But Snow wasn't ready to end the conversation there. "If... If I may have another second of your time, madam!" she pleaded. "It's about my

engagement. As you know, I'm making a name for myself through my guild activities. And I'm confident that I will achieve great things through Epic Seeker going forward. Do you plan to hasten the wedding ceremony regardless?"

"I do," she said coldheartedly. "You earned prestige through one guild. That's not enough to change anything."

"Yes, ma'am...I understand," said Snow, eyes downcast.

The two Walkers left each other's sides. The distance between them was longer than the eye could see; to Snow, her mother-in-law might as well have been leagues away.

Now alone, Snow put on another smile and scanned the surroundings. "I guess it'll take Glenn a bit longer," she muttered as she watched a crowd in the distance. She walked back over to me. Her gait seemed so enervated.

"Snow, do you not wanna get married?" I asked her quietly.

"If I had to say, probably not." She didn't deny it. But she didn't make her desires clear one way or the other either.

"That's kinda vague."

"If I'm not vague enough, it turns into a big deal. There's even the distinct possibility that there'd be no recovering from the fallout. I've got no choice but to be vague."

I did remember all the pains she had taken to make sure the House of Siddark didn't feel slighted back during that one Dungeon dive. It seemed she was tied down by a cluster of high-society shackles.

"Even so, I think you should be clearer about how you feel...or is that just me being ignorant of the ways of the world?"

"Yeah. You really don't know how the world works, Kanami. But I think you're probably right *because* you don't. It's just, it's not that easy for me. Making my own choices scares me. Taking on responsibility scares me. Making mistakes scares me. So there's nothing to be done about it."

She was shivering, a brooding, fearful look on her face. This wasn't the aloof Snow I was used to. That naked frailty reminded me of that time in the

Dungeon we had helped Mr. Siddark construct those ley lines.

Dimension gave me a window into Snow's state of mind. There was no mistaking it. When she was up against a wall, she was truly this emotionally weak. Which meant that the aloofness of the Snow I knew was merely a facade. Her force of will was remarkably weak, even among girls her age. As a consequence, she couldn't even express what she actually wanted to her mother-in-law. Afraid of the responsibility that came with deciding things for herself, she was chronically unable to make choices. She was simply drifting with the current.

"Ha ha. It can't be helped. I'll just resign myself to it."

Snow smiled darkly and abandoned all hope. That was the easiest thing to do, so she did it. She simply accepted her lot. It was then that I finally understood this girl's whole way of life. What before had been a vague hunch turned concrete. Snow Walker had given up on everything there was to life. She thought only about drifting on the path of least resistance. Her bizarrely weak spirit left any and all decisions to other people. And that came out in full force whenever she dealt with the rich and powerful in particular. When she dove with Elmirahd Siddark and when she came face-to-face with her mother-in-law, her facade had crumbled.

As a member of the Walker clan, she was in a unique and special position, and yet her heart was disproportionately fragile. It was those two factors combined that had given rise to the Snow of today. She merely kept up appearances, never making any actual choices. She did whatever was easiest.

I reached out to touch her, but then—

"Hmph. Fancy seeing you in a place like this, oh rival of mine. If it isn't the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, Aikawa Kanami."

A pest of a man had entered the picture, and I knitted my brows slightly.

"Hello, Mr. Siddark," I stammered.

Elmirahd Siddark, of all people, appearing *now*, of all times?

He sighed. "You never change, do you? If you don't give as good as you get, it really deflates the fun of our rivalry."

“I’d like you to understand how significant it’d be if I *were* to make spiteful comments back at you.”

“I do understand,” he said exasperatedly. “That’s why I said it. It’s up to you how to interpret that.”

Was he admitting to setting up a trap for me? Or did he just want to trade some barbs with me for the simple joy of it? I detected less hostility from him than I’d been expecting. Maybe if I did as he said and clapped back at him, he’d receive it more favorably.

While I was standing there mulling it over with a frown, he smiled faintly and drew nearer to Snow.

“Sorry I didn’t say hi earlier, Snow. How did your chat with mother go?”

Snow managed to recreate her airtight smile. “How do you do, Lord Siddark? My chat with her went...without a hitch.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Things progressing without a hitch can’t be a bad thing.”

“Yes... Yes, of course.”

But having seen what she was like right before he’d come along, I was worried to death. She was excellent at putting up a front. I knew that behind that smile, she was feeling quite powerless. Yet I still didn’t have the influence or prestige necessary to interrupt an interaction between members of the leading noble houses.

“Ah, let me introduce this gentleman. This is Sir Kyne of the House of Cofelt so famous for seaborne trade.”

Just like that, the schmoozing with merchants began anew. This being another of my work tasks notwithstanding, I was getting sick and tired of it. I didn’t want to sit through a second round of this torture, and Snow seemed much the same—I hadn’t failed to notice her eyebrow twitch.

The man took a step forward and bowed to her. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I deal in spices in Greeard to the south, and...”

I got a bad feeling, and I looked behind the man. Naturally, a whole new line

of people had formed to survey our situation. Worst-case scenario, there would be even more of these schmucks than before.

Snow and I greeted the man who was introducing himself, hiding our inner horror all the while. We ended up meeting not just merchants, but also nobles from other countries. These were nobles from all over the land who were rising in status, as well as grandees from faraway, all of whom seemed to be seeking points of contact with the Walker and Siddark families. I was introduced each time as well, making it even more intolerable. And if I was finding it intolerable, I could only imagine the hell Snow was going through. I had no doubt that her exchange with her mother-in-law had left her in quite the state of shock. Under normal circumstances, I'd have liked to have taken her someplace nice and quiet to give her a pep talk. But with that many people standing and waiting, we had no time to relax or decompress.

When the introduction conga line was finally over, and we were inches away from freedom, a new topic of conversation got airdropped onto us.

"Now then, I hear that your and Madam Snow Walker's wedding is being finalized?"

Snow's expression froze for a fleeting second, and *Dimension* wasn't necessary for me to catch it.

"Yep, you heard right. Snow has had many fiancés due to her genius, but make no mistake, she's now tied to me and only me. Isn't that right, Snow?"

"Ah, uh, yes. Yes, that's right," she replied, her smile unfaltering.

"Allow me to congratulate you. In that case, I must prepare a present for you from my merchant house."

The other people who had taken a step back returned to the conversation. Perhaps they'd concluded that if it was a celebration being talked about, they were within their rights to pile into the discussion. Mr. Siddark didn't take them to task; he let it happen.

"Ha ha ha! I will say that it's not official quite yet, so please go easy on us for now. I will welcome your warmth when the time comes. We'll have to wait until at least after the Brawl." Now surrounded by merchants, all with their own

motives and schemes, Snow's expression turned darker and darker, bit by bit.

"Ha ha, I see. It appears I got a little ahead of myself. Please send my merchant house a notification once your engagement is formally announced. I shall send myriad congratulatory gifts in time for the wedding. Madam Snow, if there's anything you need, please tell me now. We shall do our utmost to provide it for you."

"Er, yes, thank you... uh..."

While her smile was still impeccable, her distress was apparent to me. I could no longer sit idly by.

"Please wait a moment."

I spoke quietly, but my voice did carry. The people around us, traders and nobles alike, stopped what they were doing and shifted their attention to me. My stomach churned, but I figured it was too late to turn back now.

"While they may be engaged, their wedding isn't set in stone yet. Please refrain from making remarks that add to Madam Snow's woes over something that has yet to be determined." By saying that, I was telling the crowd to butt out.

Snow was astonished. "Huh?"

"Wha?!" The crowd was confused.

"Oho." Mr. Siddark was impressed.

"It appears Madam Snow's not feeling well. If you could, please make way." My wording was polite, but I was basically daunting them into compliance.

I took her by the hand and strode off, and she let herself be taken away, mouth agape. The man I'd interrupted glared at me angrily, but I shrugged it off and went to a corner of the great hall and out through a door onto a balcony. I'd used *Dimension* to make sure nobody was there.

It was just me and her now, under the moonlight sky and out in the cold. I took a mat out of my inventory and covered the stone bench with it before having her take a seat. Then I put a hand to her forehead.

"You okay?"

“I’m okay. But now everyone’s impression of you has really soured.”

“I’ll bet.”

“From their perspective, it’s like you trampled over their chance to make a thousand pieces of gold. And you may have tossed away a chance to earn yourself a thousand pieces of gold. Everybody is worse off.”

I was ticked off. “Listen, Snow,” I replied in reproachful tones, “you are my Dungeon diving partner. How could I be swayed by questions of status or money when it comes to giving you a hand?”

“I see.” That response made her very happy. “Thank you. You’re amazing, Kanami. You can do what I could never.”

She had the biggest smile I’d ever seen on her. I’d warmed her heart.

“Just don’t stretch yourself so thin, okay? When the going gets tough, you oughta lean on somebody for help.” The words came spilling out. I couldn’t bear to see somebody suffer in silence by themselves like Snow. I couldn’t help but think, *Just ask for help from somebody already*. And so I’d acted the way I had. I reflected on my actions, but I didn’t regret them.

A light dawned in her eyes. “Oh, I see.”

Her expression was like she’d found something that could soothe her heart for the first time in her life. Her cheeks were red, her eyes teary. The moonlight illuminated her beautiful long hair. The lights of the Laoravian cityscape shone beneath the night sky. Under nature’s stage lighting, she was more gorgeous than anybody else at the whole ball. From the bottom of my heart, I was happy that I’d been able to save this beautiful girl.

Snow looked up at the stars and muttered those words again. “I see.”

Her whisper disappeared into the night.



“Kay. I’m all right now, Kanami. I’m feeling calm.”

We’d been enjoying the cool air on the balcony for a short while, and now Snow was back in business. Smiling cheerfully, she suggested we return to the great hall.

I reckoned her cheeriness was genuine, so I agreed. “Gotcha. Guess we’ll head back in, then.”

Just as we were about to go back, a man came out onto the balcony. “Ah, do excuse me.”

He had short brown hair and a soft, bland face. His attire was top-notch even for a noble, resembling the raiments Snow was wearing. I asked her who he was with my eyes.

“You look tired, Glenn.”

Glenn? Her brother, Glenn?

“Yeah, I am... I’m real tired. I’m *dead* tired. Augh, I wanna die.”

“There may not be anybody here, but heed your words more.”

“Ah, right, yeah. But talking to you is the only breather I get, Miss Snow. For real.”

I used Analyze right away.

【STATUS】

NAME: Glenn Walker

HP: 331/342

MP: 92/92

CLASS: Scout

LEVEL 28

STR 7.22

VIT 8.5

DEX 11.7

AGI 13.79

INT 10.01

MAG 5.26

APT 2.19

INNATE SKILLS: Good Luck 1.02, Dumb Luck 2.75

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Earth Magic 1.22, Weapon Combat 1.17,
Seeker 1.11

Hiding 1.56, Medicine Man 1.10, Pilferer 1.66



So this was Glenn Walker. The diver who'd been granted the title of "the strongest" within the Dungeon Alliance. His talents and Level were considerable, of course, but his stats were more lopsided than I'd been expecting. It seemed he was the type whose strong point was his battery of different skills, without engaging the enemy head-on. But honestly...if luck wasn't on his side, then Snow could even be...

Languidly, Mr. Glenn approached us. He greeted me with a friendly smile. "Nice to meet ya, kid. I'm guessing you're Kanami of Epic Seeker?"

I bowed my head deeply. "Ah, hello, nice to meet you too. I'm Aikawa Kanami."

"Wow, you're totally different from how Palinchron painted you. Sorry, I mean that in a good way. Don't misunderstand me, okay? I'm not bad-mouthing ya. Don't hate me."

"Uh...huh."

To be frank, *he* was totally different from what *I'd* imagined. This guy, the hero everyone wanted to be? This guy, the strongest man alive? It was just a little surprising.

After sizing me up, Mr. Glenn patted me on the shoulder with a mile-wide smile. "Oh yeah, I *like* you! You really are fantastic! I've been a big fan of yours since you know when. That was something else, let me tell ya. You're a *true* hero! You're nothing like the pathetic impostor I am!"

"Glenn!" said Snow, panicking. "You can't bring 'you know when' up!"

"Huh? Ah, yeah, I gotcha, Miss Snow. I...totally didn't forget, okay? I'm not lying, I swear."

They were both around the same height; if Snow hadn't said he was her older brother, I wouldn't have been able to tell who was older from this exchange.

Mr. Glenn cleared his throat, collected himself, and turned to face me. "In any case, I feel comfortable entrusting my little sister to you. I'm convinced after giving you a look-see and chatting with you—you're good people. I just know you are!"

“Uh, thanks.”

His opinion of me was extremely high for some reason. He patted me hard on the shoulder and sang my praises. Then he clenched his fists, clearly amped up. “Until now, I haven’t been able to do much of anything for you, Miss Snow, but I can at least help out with your wedding. I’ve finally got the clout I need to do that much. I won’t let those head-household people say a peep about it either! Probably!”

“Huh? Help out with our wedding?” I couldn’t let *that* pass without comment.

“What’re you saying? Glenn...” said Snow, who also wanted an explanation.

“Wait, aren’t you two getting married?” he asked bluntly.

“Uh, say what?!”

“Wha?!”

“Am I wrong? Because that’s what Palinchron’s been telling me this whole time. ‘I found somebody who’s worthy of being Snow’s husband. Could I ask you to use your power and act as matchmaker for them?’”

His impression of Palinchron was pretty bad.

“Ugh...that bastard...” I griped.

Mr. Glenn was in buoyant spirits. “For what it’s worth, I’m also very much in favor of you two getting hitched. Nothing could make me happier than having you as a brother-in-law. I admire you, Kanami. Palinchron and I will endorse you as Snow Walker’s husband-to-be! Leave it to me and I’ll make sure you two can get married, no matter what!”

Snow was trembling. “Nobody told me anything,” she murmured. “This... This is crazy...”

“He didn’t tell me either,” I said. “That rat fink, doing whatever he damn well plea—”

“He didn’t tell me, but...it’s an idea,” said Snow, mumbling to herself. “And not a bad idea at that. But wait, wouldn’t that mean...” She seemed to reach a conclusion. “Then... Then that’s...what it meant?”

Just like before, she was staring at her palm with a look on her face that said she'd discovered an option she'd never known before. Neither Mr. Glenn nor I knew what conclusion she'd come to, but I couldn't put my two cents in. Not when Snow's expression was this nebulous, this warped.

Her soliloquy continued. "So this is what he meant by 'do what I please'? In other words, Palinchron was saying the same thing?" Little by little, her expression was turning brighter, her faltering voice gradually resonating more clearly, her speech becoming full of energy in a way that wasn't like the Snow I knew. "Ah, I finally get it! Finally! *Finally!*"

Her characteristic listless diction had fallen by the wayside. It was like she'd turned into an ordinary girl. Her expression was sunny, as if she'd just shaken off some evil spirit, and she stopped staring at her palm. Mr. Glenn and I were both bewildered.

"Snow...what's wrong?" I said.

"Er, uh, Miss Snow?"

"Hey Kanami," she said, a pleasant smile on her face. "Would you mind it if you married me?"

That had to be the number-one heaviest question I'd ever heard in my life. Her sudden, un-Snow-like proposal had me feeling shaken.

"I'm sorry, *what?! Snow*, what're you talking about?!"

"Think about it!" she said, gripping my hand and smiling her innocent, purehearted smile. "If we get married, it solves everything! If you fulfill all of the Walker clan obligations as my husband, it solves every little problem I've got!"

Seeing her this doe-eyed, she was so much cuter than the languid Snow I'd known up until now that there was no comparison. But as cute as she was, this wasn't something I could give the nod to so readily.

"Walker clan obligations? What do you mean?"

"Yeah! Adoptees of the House of Walker have a duty to heighten the clan's renown. If my work isn't in the same league as Glenn's, they won't be satisfied with me. That they adopted me, that dragonewt scioness, isn't enough for

them... but *you* can make them satisfied with it! As a hero, you'd be strong enough!"



“So you’re telling *me* to heighten the Walker clan’s renown? As Kanami Walker?”

“Exactly. If Glenn and the House of Regacy aids us and supports our marriage, marrying you isn’t some pipe dream. They can just write me off and I won’t have to marry into another clan!”

“Wait, Snow, calm down a sec. I get that you’re feeling the heat, but this isn’t something we can go through with out of the blue. Getting married is no small affair. You should give it some more thought.”

At the very least, it wasn’t the kind of thing you could decide on impulse.

“I have thought about it. And this is the answer I reached. Marrying you *has* to be the easiest way out. And it’ll give me the most freedom! That’s why I wanna marry you!”

That was the worst proposal I could possibly think of. She didn’t like me for me. She wanted to marry me purely because it was convenient.

“I... I can’t. That’s just wrong. You’re saying you’d marry somebody because it gives you the easiest way out. There’s no way I could say ‘I do’ to a proposal like *that!*”

Of course I said no. I’d never say yes—at least not while she was acting this way. Yet it seemed Snow hadn’t been expecting that.

“Wait, what? Huh?” she said, a stiff smile on her face. “You’re not... You’re not gonna...save me?”

“I... I didn’t say that! But you can’t just slap me with *marriage* out of nowhere like that! Besides, I’ve got the right to choose who I wanna marry too!”

Her expression turned ugly. “You can’t be serious. That’s so unfair of you! I don’t get the right to choose, but you do? That’s so unfair!”

This was the first time Snow had shown me this much emotion. Reckoning that at this rate we’d reach a point of no return, I squeezed her hand back and responded in strong terms. “You can rest easy, Snow. *Everybody* has the right to choose who to marry. And if the House of Walker complains, I’ll do something about it! I promise!”

I tried to ease her worries with all my heart and soul, but it wasn't landing. She sidled up to me, tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Say, Kanami...you wanna just *give up* together? If we give up, we can rest easy *forever*."

"Would you listen to me?! I'm saying there's no *need* to 'give up'! I'll help you gain the freedom to make your own decisions! I have the power to do that now!"

"If you wanna help me, then how about we get married? That's the best option. Tee hee..."

She was making eyes at me even though she was still teary-eyed. She was so desperate to get me to say yes that she was forcing out a giggle. This was not how I wanted to see her. Needless to say, I shook my head.

"I can't do that. What I can do is help get you into a position where you can choose who to marry freely."

"If... If I'm allowed to choose freely, I choose you! You'll pamper me more than anybody would! You have the power to spoil even a mess like me! And there's never been a single person like that in my whole life until now! You're the only one who can give me the sweet life without having to walk on eggshells for the Walker clan!"

She squeezed my hand tight and drew closer, but I kept quietly shaking my head. She let go and drew back, wobbling unsteadily. Then she started monologuing once more, dropping to her knees and staring at her palm.

"Huh? But why? You carried *her* off with you...but you won't do that for *me*? Why? Did I mess up *again*? It's because it's me, isn't it?"

This is NOT normal. The Snow I knew would never behave this way. I used my menu-sight to check her Condition, but there was nothing there apart from light excitement. That meant this was how her heart was naturally. *Has she always been this weak behind her aloof facade?*

In the face of Snow's imagination-defying brittle heart, I had no words. Mr. Glenn, however, extended a helping hand. He was used to this.

“Miss Snow...I’m sorry. I sprang the idea on you so suddenly.”

He supported the light-headed Snow’s body and set her down on the nearby bench. She steadied her breathing and calmed down little by little. That was brother and sister for you. This probably wasn’t the first time Mr. Glenn had seen her in such a state. Deciding I’d better leave it to him as her brother, I figured I ought to just stand back and watch.

For indeed, that was all I could do. All I could do was watch in silence as she broke down crying. I couldn’t stop her from falling to pieces. And it wasn’t just her who was crumbling before my eyes at the moment. A lot was. I could practically hear my world collapsing under my feet, as if to say it wouldn’t let me maintain the crummy status quo. It was like somebody was urging me to hurry up and choose which path to follow. No, who was I kidding? “Somebody”?

It was *him*.

It was Palinchron.

Snow had started acting funny as soon she remembered whatever it was he’d told her. The only conclusion was that Palinchron had orchestrated things to end up this way a long time ago. A few days prior, I’d declared to him that I would expose his lies. But the scene before my eyes was shaking that resolve. I couldn’t take my eyes off the sight of Snow crying and trembling.

Dammit.

I could almost hear his voice now, calling out to me from the dark of the night. *If you expose the lies of Laoravia, you won’t be able to stem the tears of the girl who adores you so*, it threatened.

You, your sister Maria, and that girl over there will all become unhappy. Are you really okay with that? it whispered in my ear.

But if you become the hero of this here Dungeon Alliance, everybody can without a doubt achieve happiness, echoed his laughing voice in my head.

“Palinchron!” I growled into the night, quietly enough so no one could hear. I couldn’t help it; this scene of suffering he’d engineered was too much.

For some reason, I understood that this strife was the trial he'd spoken of. A while ago, he'd said I would be able to overcome "hairier trials." And one had just begun. No—maybe it had started before. Maybe it had commenced the day I first met Snow.

And something else was clear to me too: the time limit of this trial. It was the Brawl. If I didn't decide on something before then, I'd lose to him again. I just knew it. So once again, I had to do battle with my own destiny.

All in order to abide by that vow. That was what my gut was screaming at me.

The night wore on, the moon crested, and the clock struck midnight. With that, another twenty-four hours had come to a close. I had two days left until the Brawl. Two days until everything would come to a head. And I had to choose a path before that period elapsed. This time, I could *not* afford to fail—both for my own sake and the sake of the girl dissolving in tears before my eyes.

I wouldn't make the wrong choice again.

This, I swear!

Afterword

For the second volume in a row, the page count has reached the absolute limit...

Long time no see. Tarisa Warinai here.

The Laoravia Arc has begun. I think you kind readers are already aware, but this arc is also that old thing commonly called a tournament arc. The protagonist rises to the challenge and at the same time resolves the worries of a cast of characters, including themselves. It's a very tried-and-true story route, you'll agree.

We also have the heroine who's finally emerged onto the stage in earnest, Snow Walker. Since her personality is in a state of flux, I can't say she's hit her stride or shown her stuff yet, but I do think her disposition has come through a little in this volume. Not to state the obvious, but she'll also be involved in the Brawl. In fact, I get the feeling that almost all of the named characters will be involved in the tournament. As such, it might feel like a bit of a big party where everyone's invited.

Before I run out of space, let me express my gratitude for the publishing of Volume Four. The reason our protagonist hasn't hung up his mantle is entirely thanks to all of the fine folks who helped bring this series to the world. I sincerely thank you.

And then, I give big thanks to the legendary RPG that graciously agreed to a cross-promotion, *Wizardry*. You'll be able to see Kanami and the heroines on the screen, so let's all get into it together. It's a dungeon RPG that's very worthwhile, and you can take my word for it.

I sadly lack the space to say everything I'd like to, but I'll leave it there for now. Until next time!



Aikawa Kanami

"THESE
ARE ALL
BOOKS?!
THAT'S
SO MANY
BOOKS,
MISTER!"

"QUIET.
NO TALKING
IN THE
LIBRARY!"

Reaper

"IT SUCKS
BECAUSE WHEN
WE FIRST MET,
I WAS STRONGER
THAN YOU."



Bonus Short Stories

Let's Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 4

To my chagrin, Karamia Arrace, a girl who was full of herself and then some, had deigned to address me. "I don't know if you're in good with the headmaster, or *who* you are, but please refrain from any behavior that might throw this hall of learning into disorder. You're the reason that asinine 'Elt-Order' system was born, so we're quite cross with you at the best of times."

It seemed she had a bone to pick with me. And because I *was* actively looking for someone to throw a match for me, I replied very, very quietly.

"Please accept my apologies, but unlike you noble-born students, the results of these duels affect whether I live or die. I bid you have mercy on me. You can write me off as the headmaster's pet if you like, but in point of fact, I'm in the absolute lowest caste of students. I can't even be sure I'll eat, never mind buy textbooks. I would very much like to impress upon you that this duel is something I can't go without."

I just wanted to get past this hurdle. That was all.

"You can't go without this duel, you say?" she asked with irritation.

Something I'd said had rubbed her the wrong way. Yikes.

"In that case, I shall be the one to help you with a duel."

"Huh? Ah, no, that's quite all right."

"Oh, I insist. Since it was asked of me, you have no other choice," she said, grinning cheerfully. She had no intention of letting me go.

"It... It's okay, honest. Thank you, but allow me to decline. I'd be no match for you, after all!"

"Feh. Then it can't be helped. We don't have all the time in the world. For the sake of keeping the peace at this school, I suppose I'll end this right here. If I

break an arm or two, maybe you'll learn to behave a little."

"I'm sorry?"

Alarmingly, the conversation had taken a turn for the violent. I scanned my surroundings. None of the students stepped in to stop her, and of course not. She herself was in a position where *she* was supposed to be the one stepping in when this sort of thing happened. If I recalled correctly, she was the student council president—the enforcer of public order.

Liner was grinding his teeth. Annius was looking up above and going, "Uh-oh."

Everyone's reactions told me that at this institute, tyranny on this level was tolerated so long as the perpetrator was this Karamia girl. And really, I could expect no less of a noble among nobles, nor of this academy where social standing was the be-all and end-all.

"Time to break them."

Karamia's arm stretched my way. Responding to the imminent peril, *Dimension* activated on the fly. Though she was approaching me unhurriedly, the palm of her hand seemed weirdly big to me. Needless to say, on the outside, it looked like the soft hand of a young maid who'd never seen battle, but my menu-sight informed me that her muscles were many times stronger than the average adult male's. It'd be no different from being manhandled by a gorilla.

"Grah!"

The one saving strength of the student called Aikawa Kanami was his dimensional magic. It'd be no exaggeration to say that was all I had. Put simply, I had discerning eyes. Which was why I was able to react to Karamia's sudden assault and track it with my eyes. To dodge her incoming arm, I took one step aside. Seeing that, she frowned and took a step forward. To protect my arms, I lowered my dominant hand behind my back. In response, Karamia's arm came at me with the flexibility of a snake and the speed of a hawk, all of which I saw via *Dimension*. I tried brushing that arm away. Naturally, Karamia tried to brush away my arm so that I couldn't brush hers away. Figuring that it'd be bad if I let this play out, I then shifted where I was standing. She slid her foot across the ground, shifting her own footing in hot pursuit.

At some point, her expression had totally changed, smiling with the thrill of battle. The fight was silent but high-speed. It had turned into a proper martial arts give-and-take. Watching Karamia and I go at it, the students in the hallway were wide-eyed. But if there was one little, tiny problem...

“Ah!” I squeaked pathetically.

That problem was that I was Level 1 and she was Level 20. I could see her moves coming, but my body wasn’t fast enough to react. I’d tripped up and lost my balance.

“Huh?” said Karamia.

Due to that short back-and-forth, she’d started to think that I was an opponent who could keep up with her; she couldn’t have seen my sudden pratfall coming. I’d been unlucky; I’d been in a position where I couldn’t even do anything about it. And what should result but Karamia falling onto the floor with me. We’d been too entangled. And where was my hand? At her small bustline. It was so *distinctive* that at first, I thought I’d been touching the floor, so I was too late to take my hand off her.

“Wha... What the, hey, I, what?!”

Her face had turned red. No, it was worse than that. Her veins were showing so hard that it was crossing into *purple*. Now this was bad news. What once was a palm was now a clenched fist. And the magic energy in her body was now sinuously suffusing the whole corridor. But the bad news didn’t end there.

Because on that day, the hallway exploded.



“I’ll make this dumb-dumb do the duel later! Believe me, I will! So please, fall back for now, Miss President! Look at how everybody’s looking at you!”

That was how Annius had convinced Karamia to leave my beaten-up body alone for now, after she’d stepped in to save me. Now I was lying in bed in the infirmary, ruing the fact that Annius had taken the liberty of making that promise for me.

I can’t win the duel later either. And if I wind up dead, it’s on you, Annius.

After I told her as much—

“Hm? I think you’ll manage, won’t you?”

“If I could, I wouldn’t have declined her offer.”

“What about that thing in your pocket?” She pointed at the middle of the bed. It was all I had on me—the thing I’d made in class earlier.

“If you ask me, everybody’s underestimating you in more ways than one. You may be Level 1, but if you make use of the rules of a formal duel, I think you can make it work.”

In other words, she was telling me it all hinged on the conditions of the duel. It was very like her to think that way, given her forte was intel gathering.

She smiled impishly. “Doesn’t a Level One-er taking down higher brackets sound like a blast?”

Her grin told me I could count on her to help. And I could assume Liner would help too; he’d been fuming silently from a small distance away when Karamia had assaulted me.

I sighed. “Guess I’ve just gotta suck it up and go for it.”

My next duel would be skipping a whole ton of people. I’d be fighting the girl who was ranked third. But I did have some hope of victory. I took out the magic ring and smiled faintly. Annius and Liner smiled too. Thus did my path as a user of magic items stretch before me. Never realizing that if I simply raised my level, it’d all end in no time, this tale took me on a different road entirely. I also didn’t realize that things would also get insane if I did beat Karamia, so I continued to try my hand at the Elt-Order.

Will Linkar and Snow Walker

One day, in the Alliance, a certain band of divers were doing their final checks before the Dungeon entrance in the nation of Viaysia.

“All right fellas,” said Will Linkar, the tall young man walking at the fore. “Whaddy say we move on in? Today, our guild, our Epic Seeker, is gonna write a new page in the history of the Alliance. Let’s get amped and rarin’ to go. Am I

right, Snowy?” he asked me, the strategist of the group.

“Yeah, huh. Ah, but don’t forget that this is *my* plan. Don’t get that mixed up.”

“Right, I know. We know all the effort you put into the plan for today. And I hope you two siblings know what a huge help you’ve been to us.”

“Of course we have. We’re of the Walker Clan,” I replied cockily to the guildmaster of Epic Seeker.

Yep. He was the guildmaster and I was a member. As such, the age gap was significant, and our heights were different enough to compare to an adult and child. Despite that, my arrogance was unwavering, and I was trying to contend with the master, known far and wide as the strongest, as a “hero,” on his plane.

“Snowy...” said my brother, Glenn Walker, who was walking behind us, in worried tones. His prowess as a scout was number one in the Alliance even at such a young age, but he still didn’t show any signs of gaining much confidence in himself. Today was yet another day of him shivering in his boots and hiding behind the sister who was smaller than him.

“You’re a member of the House of Walker too, Glenn. Show some backbone. Otherwise, you’re putting the party in danger.”

“Ack, sorry.”

It was no exaggeration to say the success of a Dungeon dive hinged on the scout, so having him be this diffident was a big pain. All the more because for this dive, failure would not be tolerated.

Today, Epic Seeker was aiming for reaches of the Dungeon never tread by humans before. The members of the party included the “strongest hero,” Will, as well as the guild’s submasters and a bevy of elite divers besides. Glenn and I, meanwhile, were in the party as the rookies everyone was talking about.

Unfortunately, one of the submasters was absent. It seemed Mr. Palinchron’s schedule was the only one that conflicted. Then again, that guy’s abilities weren’t suited to combat. Concluding that it wouldn’t hinder the plan all that much, I decided to go ahead with it.

“Snowy, Glenny, we’re going in.”

The last of the chatter was over. At long last, the Epic Seeker party ventured into the Dungeon.

“Roger that, Guildmaster. You of course don’t need to worry about me. Quite the opposite, because I plan to show you how much more I contribute than you do. Heh heh! I’ll be the first to set foot in a part of the Dungeon no one’s ever seen before!”

I couldn’t afford to lose. To come up short. It was all for the sake of the homeland I’d lost—no, it was for the sake of my slaughtered family. If I didn’t come out on top over the “hero” called Will Linkar, I’d lose my purpose for being born, along with everything else. It was do or die!

Mr. Will looked on with kind eyes. “Ha ha. I’m expecting a lot from you, Snowy. And let me tell ya, that’s no lie. I believe from the bottom of my heart that you two genius siblings of the Walker Clan will become the *real* heroes one day.”

“The real heroes? Well, anyway, you won’t be able to pretend you’re not worried for very long! I’m planning for the titles of ‘the strongest’ and ‘the hero’ to be mine in the near future, so watch out!”

“You’re so dependable, Snowy. I mean it. Now I have to do my damndest too, ha ha.”

Mr. Will smiled faintly as he walked alone towards the dark of the Dungeon. His abundant confidence had me pouting; I followed him in, and Glenn followed me, our friends and allies in Epic Seeker behind him. Looking back, I got the feeling that that was everything to the guild.

And so we progressed through the Dungeon. There was Mr. Will, the “strongest,” and there I was, the descendant of dragonkin. Moreover, we had Glenn, the best scout in the Alliance, as well as the guild members who, back then, were believed to be the strongest there was. There was nothing in the Dungeon that could stop us. For better or worse—no, definitely for worse, we reached it: Floor 20, where the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, Tida, awaited.

At the sight of the monster that appeared within the darkness—the strongest monster in history—all of our breaths caught. Even Mr. Will, vaunted all over the continent as having no rival, broke into a cold sweat. At that moment, what

floated into our heads couldn't have been more different. All I thought about was how to defeat the shadow monster before my eyes, lest Mr. Will showed me up. Meanwhile, Mr. Will was thinking he absolutely had to save at least me.

I don't want to think about the outcome of that "battle." Because on that day, everybody but me and my brother died. That was when the Guardian of Floor 20 became famous, a legend that Dungeon divers would share rumors about among themselves for years to come. And it was when I learned that a so-called "real" hero didn't actually exist.

It was after this that a "hero" was artificially created, and Snow Walker and Glenn Walker would experience the same anguish as Mr. Will.

These were my memories. My loathsome, loathsome memories. That was the second of the three times I'd failed. The memories I'd made when I was young. The memories I wished I could forget.

So I gave up. I told myself that a "true hero" who could defeat that horrid monster wasn't anywhere to be found.

And then I crossed paths with him. The one who, some years later, *did* defeat it. The boy was so strong and so kind, he could have come right out of the pages of a storybook.

Which is why I...

I...

Palinchron and Hine's Duel

In order to let the young maid escape, I slipped off Sera's back, knowing that this parting would likely be our last. And since I was the one who said it would be the end, I convinced myself that was indeed the case. Never again would I see the girl. And yet I still couldn't find it in me to tell her I loved her. There could have been no better timing to communicate the feelings I'd bottled inside of me for so long either. It was because I'd missed my chance to tell her, though, that it dawned on me what I, Hine Hellvilleshine, truly felt for Lastiara Whoseyards.

Yes, I did love her in the romantic sense. There was no doubt about that. But

even more so, I loved her as a father loves a daughter. After all, when I met her, she'd basically been a newborn. However close to my age she looked on the outside, I knew what she'd been like when her heart had been callow and innocent, so who could blame me for that? It was only now after I'd raised her, secured her escape, and entrusted the rest to her that I finally caught on to my two different kinds of loves for her. And those twin streams of love made it all the easier to give my life for her like this. She was my first crush, a daughter to me, and my liege all at once. For Lady Lastiara, I could fight and fight and fight and fight.

"Heh. Heh heh."

There I was on a path in town on the outskirts of Vart, laughing. I'd just realized that my first crush had been what they call a love tragedy. I'd die here, without ever confessing, without my feelings ever reaching her. And yet the faint smile on my face wouldn't go away. This love tragedy wasn't sad in the least. In fact, my heart was dancing.

With that odd sensation in my heart, I scanned my surroundings. "Now then, I suppose I'll break the enemy's circle around me."

The cavalry pursuing me would be drawing close soon. They were probably Vart soldiers that Palinchron had arranged for. Pieces that he'd placed on the game board. And every one of them was the cream of the crop. As my body was at the end of its rope, I wouldn't be able to defeat them easily. I knew myself well. I could tell I was on death's doorstep.

The day before, I'd had to flee from the Head and the Vice Head's pursuit, and today I'd fought more than a hundred knights before fighting half of the Seven Celestial Knights. Moreover, I'd sustained a gash to my flank from a surprise attack. I was strong, but I was already past my limit. And yet for some reason, power was welling up deep inside me. I didn't know which stream of love it was coming from. Maybe it was both. All I knew for sure was that I could still fight.

"Sehr..."

The horsemen were on me now. I crafted my spell. Creeped out by the way I was smiling even in my near-death state, they surrounded me from afar. There were around ten of them. Too few for this. There were still many more chasing

after me.

“Wyyyyyyyynd!”

I dipped into my life force to draw on the magic. The wind blasted the Vart road with such ferocity that it was as though I were burning my very soul for fuel. I had next to zero magic energy left in my body, yet that spell had packed the most punch out of any I’d cast that day. And that marked the beginning of the battle.

Taken aback by how someone wobbling on his feet as I was could cast such a wide-range spell, they began to draw their swords and construct spells of their own. But I wasn’t about to let them. Not that easily.

“Fire away! Wynd!”

Enemies who were close by, I attacked with my sword. Enemies who were far away, I attacked with my wind. I did it all as flashily as I could, laughing my head off all the while, play-acting madness as I did battle and forcing them to bring in reinforcements. Coming to the conclusion that they couldn’t contain me with just ten soldiers, they sent out a messenger to marshal more, which was just what I wanted. Gradually, the net around me grew thicker and thicker. While I wouldn’t say it was all of them, I had successfully raised the chances of Lastiara slipping away, and that made me happy. It was like I was playing the role of reformed baddy, and I felt comfortable in that skin.

I crossed blades with the Vart soldiers, occasionally tapping into my life force to fire off a big spell like a signal fire. As a result of the protracted battle, *he* got here.

“Howdy there, Hine. So you’re the one keeping everybody occupied, eh?”

Enter Palinchron Regacy.

I owed him. He was the one who had invited me to play my part in this drama to begin with, and he was the production’s big bad. Maybe that was why I was able to have fun chatting with him despite his being my enemy.

“Yes, so it goes.”

Palinchron had the soldiers who were trying to capture me fall back. Even as

he drew his sword and approached me, he looked a little vexed. “Gotta say, though, I don’t think even you can beat me in a situation like this. We’ve had our matches in the past, but this is the first time you’ve had a handicap this big.”

“It’s true. I’ve never dueled at this great of a disadvantage before.”

“If you’d just give in and surrender, that’d make my life easier.”

This was the man who’d slashed me in the abdomen earlier. What’s more, we’d shortly be crossing swords with the intent to kill. But I still thought of us as friends, which was why we were able to speak on such a lighthearted note.

“No can do. Heh heh. To be facing each other one-on-one, sword against sword like this, really reminds me of the good old days. When we were kids, we used to duel each other all the time.”

So lighthearted we could even stroll down memory lane.

“Yeah, I do seem to remember that, vaguely. Come to think of it, almost all your old friends from back then have gathered close by. Glenn has probably also joined the pursuers—reluctantly, I’m sure. And since I had ol’ Rayle join in too, I bet Vohlzark’s tagging along. And now you’re here too. The ladies may be absent, but all the dudes you knew who are still alive are here.”

“Is that right? In that case, tell everyone I don’t need flowers.”

With those words, Palinchron now knew that I planned to die then and there; his expression turned more sour still. “That’s enough of the idle chit-chat. Sorry, but I don’t plan on humoring your stalling tactics any longer. Hope ya don’t mind if I take ya down real quick and let these guys through. You’re not gonna die here, and I’m not gonna be stopped. It’s just like old times. When it comes to the real big duel, you could never beat me.” He pointed the tip of his completely ordinary steel sword at me.

I knew that already. When we’d dueled each other as kids, I’d never *truly* beaten Palinchron. Not once. He’d battled me, the boy said to be the strongest knight in the history of the House of Hellvilleshine, and he’d never lost. They’d called him a wonder child for a reason.

“It’s true that at this rate, I’ll lose. After all, I have your curse to thank for the

fact I'm still standing. It's all in the palm of your hand."

I also knew that they didn't call him a wonder child just for his swordsmanship. His true worth lay in what only he could do—curses. It was only a few days ago that that curse had started eating at me, freeing me from all of my shackles and leaving me the way I was now.

"Looks like you're well aware, then. The curse I put on you is allowing you to go past your limits. In other words, if you dispel it, you'll succumb to your limits and drop on the spot. The battle's already decided. You only ever took a step forward because I pushed you. You were in checkmate from the off—"

"Not so, Palinchron. I'm all right now. I thank you for everything you've done for me till now. But from this point forward, I'll show you that I'm standing by my own power. *Sittert Wynd!*"

He was a wary one. He was only standing before me because he had absolute confidence he'd win. And the source of that confidence was the curse he'd placed on me. I used my wind magic to work at breaking the curse. It was a high-level spell that could take apart the opponent's enchantment. Through that spell, I took all of the magic placed on me—the curse—and dispelled it.

"What the?! Stop! If you break the curse, then—"

I was dying. Without the support provided by the curse, I started to crumple, and my heart also began to wither. But I soon put some strength back in my legs. I showed him that I could stay on my feet without his help. "See? I'm all right now."

I refused to fall to earth. It was *me* fighting now, not his puppet. The look I gave him told him that. He'd run up to me to try to heal me. He must have wanted to treat me that very second. But that I couldn't allow. If I yielded to Palinchron now, he'd be kind and have me fall unconscious. And that would mean milady would get captured. As such, I...

"Now then, Palinchron. What say we get on with it? I'll let them slip away if it's the last thing I do. I don't mind giving my life for that."

"Then you're really gonna die, Hine. You okay with that?"

"Have you been listening to me? I'm telling you—bring it on."

That's right. This was what I wanted. What *I* wanted. And as I'd told Lady Lastiara earlier, this was not a sad ending to my story. I was feeling the most uplifted I'd ever felt in my life. That was why I felt such gratitude for Palinchron.

"So this is what you wanted all along. And you're good with this?"

"I am," I replied without hesitation. If I could be said to have one regret, one tiny, minuscule regret, it was that I was leaving the friend before my eyes all alone with that frown on his face. I was too inexperienced to be able to save him, my friend. Yet my heart felt so light for some reason. Maybe it was because I had that boy to rely on.

Palinchron sighed. "Then I've got no other choice, do I? Let's do this duel, oh knight of Lastiara."

We'd known each other for a long time, so some things I just understood. And for reasons that eluded me, I just *knew* that while this duel was what *I* wanted, it was also what he wanted.

"If you would be so kind, my friend."

Our final duel would be fought in earnest, and it would be bloody, but we smiled at each other as we made our vows.

"I'm gonna beat you and take the Saint and the Apostle for myself."

"No. I'm going to win, and they're going to slip through your fingers."

We made those pledges with the carefree attitude of the countless duels we had in our youth. And so the last duel of my life commenced.

I dashed with all my might, and Palinchron intercepted with his singular sword. In terms of who'd live and who'd die, I was on the back foot here. It was a miracle my body was even able to move to begin with, after all. In terms of whether I'd get what I wanted, however, I thought the match was even. After all, all I needed to do was keep them occupied for a few minutes.

Blade clashed against blade, and a tangle of old memories intertwined inside me. My birth into the House of Hellvilleshine. How I lived my life shouldering so many expectations. Meeting my brother-in-law, Liner. Meeting with my friend Palinchron. Meeting the girl who'd dye my destiny. Meeting the boy I'd been

waiting for. And with memories flashing before my eyes, I won. After buying enough time, Palinchron's sword was now penetrating my chest. As for how I won, the reason was clear. Palinchron had been trying to win without having to kill me, and I'd kept fighting with full knowledge I'd die. That was all there was to it. Thus, I managed to realize my goal.

My consciousness was fading. Death was shrouding my world, and my soul was disappearing from this mortal realm. Yet I had no regrets. All I felt was a sense of satisfaction. And that was maybe why at the very end, what I found myself praying for wasn't anything to do with me or my liege. My final wish was for the wish of the dear friend who was there with me as I died, looking on with sad eyes, to be realized as well. And so the pawn called Hine did fall. The curtains closed on my ever-so-long performance, and darkness fell on the theater.

Lastiara, Dia, and Sera's Escape

The Day of the Blessed Birth.

Having fled the cathedral, a great many pursuers were dispatched to catch us. And then we left Kanami to fight Alty, who'd been lying in wait for him, and Mr. Hine had kept the commander of the pursuers, Palinchron, occupied long enough for us to slip away.

We'd slipped away...reaching the country in the south, Greeard, with half the number of people we'd originally planned. The first place we headed to was a cheap inn within Greeard. Under normal circumstances, we'd have relied on relatives or acquaintances of Mr. Hine or Serry, but that was no longer on the table. Palinchron had planned out his betrayal meticulously, so we couldn't choose the easier avenues of escape. We could safely assume that he'd placed traps in all the safe places we'd immediately think of. As such, we traded assurances of security for an inn in a corner of town, where an indeterminate number of other people stayed the night. In one of that inn's rooms, I finished treating Dia's injuries. The moment we reached this place, I'd worked on her wounds for close to an hour, and now I'd finally finished.

Dia sat up in her bed. "Thank you. You saved me."

But that bastard Palinchron had slashed her deep, leaving a visible mark. I felt quite some rage for the man who had lacerated such a beauty so mercilessly.

“Hff, hff, hff...” I was panting as hard as the gravely injured Dia. “I think we’re out of the woods for now.” I sat myself on the bed.

“Lastiara,” said Dia, with a serious expression, “what happened after I got hurt? Lay it on me. The blood loss made it all fuzzy for me, so I don’t remember much.”

“Well...”

I didn’t know how much to tell her. I knew she had Dungeon dived alongside Sieg, and that they were very close. If I informed her of the whole truth of our situation, she’d probably try to run off to save him. Naturally, I wanted to do that too, but with how utterly exhausted we were, we’d be lambs running to the slaughter. And that was the one outcome I couldn’t let happen.

“You’re hesitating to say anything. So it’s real, real bad, huh? The only people in this room are me and you. Did everybody else get caught?”

Dia was impulsive, but she was by no means dumb. She’d come to a reasonable conclusion based on what she’d gleaned from her surroundings. From that, I knew that it’d be pointless to keep mum.

“No, not everybody. We’ve still got Serry with us. I asked her to go collect intel for us, so she’s not here at the moment. Though since about an hour’s passed since I asked, I think she’ll be back soon.”

As soon as I said that, Serry, who’d hid her face using a hood, returned to the room. It appeared she’d finished looking into what I’d told her to.

“I have returned, milady, sainted Apostle.”

“Hi, Serry. So what’s the skinny? Tell us both.”

“It seems our Vart pursuers are suffering delays around the border. As might be expected, soldiers of one nation need to abide by the protocols to cross into another nation. I’m sure they will eventually cross over, but it’ll take them some time. And as I didn’t see any pursuers coming for us from the Greeard side, it looks as though we can rest a little bit longer.”

“What a relief!” While I’d more or less surmised as much judging by the actions of our pursuers, this was confirmation that crossing national borders led to a decrease in their numbers. That was why the soldiers had tried as hard as they had to catch us within Vart.

“Also, regarding the Day of the Blessed Birth, the rumors are already circulating in places where news reaches quickly. I heard people speaking of malicious insurgents breaking into the famous cathedral and kidnapping the princess of the holy celebration.”

As a wolf semifer, she had great hearing, and she’d made use of that trait in order to pick up on tavern talk for us as well. Her abilities were the most suited to spy work out of anyone in Whoseyards, and thanks to her, we learned one new fact after another.

“The rumors also say that some number of the Seven Celestial Knights turned traitor and that the Apostle’s whereabouts are unknown. I wouldn’t be surprised if in time, bounties are placed for the capture of each one.”

“What I’d like to know is what’s known about the fire that burned down Sieg’s house. You pick up anything on that?”

“That’s also what I was the most concerned about, so I searched for information making that my priority. But the fire is being treated as a separate incident than the kidnapping, so there wasn’t much information about it. All I learned was that the fire was put out right away and that there were no casualties. It’s being processed as a small-scale accident.”

“So no dead bodies were found. That means that Sieg and Mar-Mar are either on the lam like us, or they got captured. Or maybe the records were falsified.”

“The story goes that the ‘malicious insurgents’ are on the run, so at the very least, I don’t think they were captured in Whoseyards. However, in the event that they fell into Palinchron’s rotten clutches, the chances are high that he’s hiding them away.”

“Yeah, I think so too. That’s the kind of rat fink we’re talking about.”

Dia had been listening silently up until she heard that bit. “Sieg, in that man’s clutches?!”

She was in a tizzy now. She got out of bed, as if to say none of that other information mattered, and that was the one thing she couldn't abide by. She attempted to leave the room.

"Let's go. Any way you slice it, rushing to his rescue right now is our best option. The faster, the better."

"Wait, hold on, Dia. We haven't got enough information yet. If you rush out now, you'll just lose to Palinchron, who's waiting for you to do that. We need to at least find out where Sieg even is first—"

Besides, if luck wasn't on our side, then that Guardian Alty would also be lying in wait. And if that was the case, it was highly likely Dia would just get killed in the attempt. For the sake of saving both Sieg and Mar-Mar, we couldn't afford to make the wrong choice here.

"Don't worry, Lastiara, it's okay. As long as I don't get surprise-attacked, I can't lose."

"It's not okay. That knight named Palinchron Regacy *specializes* in surprise attacks. If you engage him straight on, he'll hit you with a trap for sure."

"Then I won't engage him. All I've gotta do is raze any place I think he might be to the ground."

Dia's overly extreme proposition left me in a cold sweat. "Are...you being serious?"

"Of course I am! I *cannot* let that goddamned Palinchron get off scot-free! As if I ever could! He betrayed us when it hurt us the most, the bastard! Thanks to *him*, Sieg got stranded in front of that Guardian! He was all alone!"

It seemed she'd lost control; she was trying to head off and find Sieg, her hair a mess now. But her gait was unsure. Just by making for the door, she threatened to crumple to the floor.

"Calm down! You're wobbling on your feet! If you don't get some rest, you're gonna wreck your body!"

I'd healed her to the best of my ability, but that didn't mean the blood that had left her body had come back to her. At the very least, she couldn't have

regained enough energy to be able to fight. I stepped in to hold up her tottering form, but she tried to brush off my hand.

“Don’t stop me, Lastiara! I need to go save Sieg. Sieg is my friend...and Sieg means the world to me!”

I could see madness seeping into her face as she tried to move forward. She kept repeating Sieg’s name over and over. It was like she’d been possessed—no, she’d gotten a *curse* placed on her, making her obsessed with saving her friend right this instant.

Serry had been refraining from acting until that point. She was no longer able to sit and keep quiet. “Please calm down, Great Apostle!”

But a second voice of reason had no effect either. Dia refused to stop. In fact, our voices may not have been reaching her to begin with.

She looked in a direction where nobody was and mumbled to herself, “Ah, I’ve gotta be quick! If I want *me* to stay *me*, I’ve absolutely gotta save Sieg! If I don’t, then why did I take the other me and...”

“The other me”? She was using two different first-person pronouns, the brash male one and the more neutral one. There could be no doubt about it; this wasn’t normal. I resorted to rough measures.

“You’re acting barmy! Sorry, but it can’t be helped! I’m pinning you down for now! Serry, stay right there!”

“But... But milady...”

Serry was a devout believer, so it must have been tough for her to lay hands on Dia, who was vaunted as the Apostle. And there was also the fact that if she intervened without her whole heart in it, it spelled danger. When we were escaping from the cathedral, she’d seen a facet of Dia’s strength. If Dia went into full berserker mode, then it could prove perilous even for a battle-hardened knight like Serry.

“I’m sorry, Dia!” I apologized as I moved to bind her.

There was about a meter separating us. As such, the battle was over in no time.

Dia incanted a spell as she turned around to face me. “Outta the way! *Flame Arrow!*”

Her right arm flew in my direction. I looked at the palm of her hand; the sheer concentration of magic energy gave me goosebumps. I gave in to instinct and wrenched myself out of the way.

That second, a flash of light blazed forth.

“Wha?!”

The name of the spell was that of a normal fire spell, but what had shot out could be likened to a spear of pure light, and that spear grazed my shoulder. The sheer firepower told me that if I got hit by one directly, I’d faint. And that if Dia wanted to, she could launch faster, stronger spears of light.

“Flame Arrow!”

I wasn’t given a second to breathe; a second shot was fired at me even as I lost my balance from the first. The rapid fire was fearsome, but now I’d seen this spell before, and besides, it wasn’t the type of spell one ought to use this close up to begin with. I moved away from where Dia’s palm was pointing; however fatigued I was, I wasn’t so weak that I’d lose to a mage under such circumstances. As I evaded her second shot, I swung around behind her and snaked both arms under her armpits from behind.

“Dia! If you go by yourself, this right here’s how you’ll end up!”

I lifted her light body up. But Dia wasn’t throwing in the towel yet. “Then I’ll just do this! *Flame!*”

Fire bled through her skin so as to burn me.

“Hot, hot, hot!”

My body stiffened, and for a second I was about to let go of her, but I endured the pain and kept holding the blazing girl in my arms. Dia was the first to raise her voice. Her expression a mix of bewilderment and worry, the madness diminished slightly.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Get off me, Lastiara! If you hang onto me any longer—”

“I’m not letting go!” I absolutely refused to unhand her. That scream was

close to a vow. “I don’t wanna let go of anybody anymore! That’s how I’m gonna live my life from now on! Sieg, Mar-Mar, and Mr. Hine all left my side, but I’m not letting you go too! That’s what I’ve decided!”

So many things had slipped through my hands in the space of a day, and I regretted that, but I wouldn’t make that mistake again! I had no desire to!

“Lastiara!”

My steely resolve must have gotten through to her, because her flames slowly weakened. A little more relieved now, I gently patted her head from behind.

“Please, Dia, calm down. It’s never okay to give in to anger like that. Like, for example...in plays and the like, it’s always those guys who die first, right? So calm down.”

“Plays? Well, I mean, I do understand what you’re getting at.” She nullified her body flames completely.

I noted from her expression that the madness was gone now, but I didn’t understand why she was so puzzled.

“Huh? Did I say something weird?” To me, the reasoning was ironclad, but maybe it wasn’t to her.

“No, you’re right, Lastiara. What’s important is taking Sieg back, not revenge. I’m sorry. My short fuse is a bad habit of mine.”

I freed her from my grip. “That’s a relief...though in your case, I’d say it’s less a ‘short fuse’ and more... You know what, never mind.”

It seemed Dia honestly believed that she’d done what she’d done just now because she had a short fuse, but from where I was standing, that wasn’t quite correct. In my eyes, she’d lost her cool simply because it had to do with Sieg. Most likely, whenever Sieg entered the picture, she lost all rationality. There was a chance that her psyche was even more precarious than Mar-Mar’s.

Dia hung her head. “What’s more important than getting back at that bastard Palinchron is Sieg’s safety,” she reflected. “And yet there I was, about to... When I get worked up, I’m really useless.”

From those words, I knew now that as long as Sieg wasn’t involved, she was a

nice and sweet girl.

“Phew. I’m happy you’ve calmed down now. For a second there, I thought you’d cook me to a crisp.”

“I could never do something like that! Sieg picked you to be one of his friends. I’d never harm a friend!”

“But you were aiming to knock me unconscious, weren’t you? Using that flash-of-light attack.”

“I... I did hold back, ya know?” she bragged as she averted her eyes. “That was around a tenth of my true potential. It wouldn’t have pierced through your flesh if it hit you head-on. Those *Flame Arrows* were for the impact.”

Oh no, no. If one had hit me, it would have been disastrous. I could tell as much from the cold sweat dripping down her face.

Dia’s personality was becoming clearer to me, little by little. She was the opposite of the overly cold and calm Sieg; she flew into a fury on a dime, losing sight of her surroundings. That meant that it fell on me to play the cool and collected one now, even though it didn’t match my personality either.

“All right, then, let’s just forget that happened. When fights break out between friends, it’s best to patch things up and forget. Because what we need to be focusing on first is getting back in shape.”

“Thanks, Lastiara. It’s true—once you and I get back in fighting form, nobody can stop us. If we do end up having to fight people, let it be after we’re back in shape.”

“Right-o! Besides, while we’re resting here, Sieg and Mar-Mar may even surprise us by coming to Greeard themselves. So first things first: we rest and we gather intel. You good with that?”

“Roger that. I’m choosing to follow your policies for now. I’m the type where the blood rushes to my head easily, so I think it’s probably better if I only act under somebody’s orders.”

“You got it. All righty, looks like we’ve got ourselves a plan. Boy howdy, am I ever relieved!”

We'd finally reached a stopping point. Dia and I shook hands with smiles on our faces, reaffirming our friendship. But then, we got hit by a proverbial splash of cold water.

"Er...not to interrupt you two..."

"Hm? What's the trouble?"

Serry was pointing at the wall. "It's just, there are holes in the building now."

Dia's *Flame Arrows* had punched holes about as big as my fist into the wall; the breeze was blowing in from outside.

"Ah," said Dia and I simultaneously.

"Milady, Your Grace...let's flee sooner rather than later. As much as I feel for the inn, we don't have the wherewithal to pay for repairs right now."

Serry was hurriedly beginning to dress herself in preparation to flee—reminding me of our party's current financial situation.

"Now that you mention it, you're right. All we've got are the clothes we happen to be wearing."

"And Sieg's the one holding onto my money for me," added Dia.

My current assets included the dress I'd put on for the ritual...and nothing else. All we had besides that was the wallet Serry usually carried on her person. And as might be expected, her pocket money wasn't enough to pay for repairs. Left with no other choice, I made an addendum to my plan.

"Uh, in that case, let me add a rider! Let's also change our base of operations and raise some funds! Step one, let's mosey. We can come back to this inn and apologize when we have the leeway."

A lover of justice, Serry frowned. "I hate to do it, but we have no other option."

Dia apologized. "Sorry, wolf lady. It's all my fault."

"Oh no, you're not to blame, Your Grace. I understand how you feel."

It seemed Serry also felt the urge to go out and punish Palinchron right then and there, so she replied warmly in order to console Dia.

“Yep,” I said, glomming onto that idea at full force, “nobody here’s at fault! It’s all Palinchron’s fault! He’s the one to blame!”

Awkwardly, Dia and Serry both expressed their agreement.

“Uh, yeah, uh-huh,” said Dia. “If it wasn’t for *him*, we wouldn’t be in this mess!”

“Uh, yes, that’s right,” said Serry. “There can be no doubt. Your Grace the Apostle isn’t to blame for the holes in the wall; it’s that damned Palinchron. Curse you, Palinchron. He’s acting as underhanded and unjust as always!”

Thus we kept telling ourselves that it was all Palinchron’s fault as we got our clothes in order and fled out the window. While we’d had a little trouble at the start there, the bonds tying this new party of three had solidified. At that point in time, we felt enough of a sense of solidarity to be able to think that way.



Two days later.

We’d changed bases, but now our war chest was good and empty. The pieces of silver that Serry had been carrying had finally run out.

That being said, in that time, Dia and I had returned to fighting form. Of course, since our pursuers from both Vart and Whoseyards, if not more nations besides, were slowly but surely crossing the border, we couldn’t sleep too deeply, so I couldn’t say we were operating at a hundred percent.

Then again, if we didn’t earn money somehow, we wouldn’t be able to eat, let alone stay the night at an inn.

“And so we’re here to earn us some scratch,” I said.

“It’s been a while since I came to the Dungeon,” said Dia.

We’d had no choice but to enter the Dungeon from the Greeard side. Serry was away gathering intel for us. We also needed one of us to stick around in Greeard in case Sieg reached the country and used *Dimension* to search for us.

Dia and I ventured away from the Pathway, chatting as we walked down a corridor unobserved by anybody’s prying eyes.

“What say we test how our bodies are holding up while practicing our party dynamics at the same time? There may come a time in the future where we’ll have to fight Palinchron or Alty, after all. So, er, how did you and Sieg fight before?”

“I guess for the most part, Sieg would detect enemies and wall them off for me, and I’d shoot them with magic from the rear.”

“Let’s crib off that for the time being. Leave the vanguard position to me!”

“Sure, thanks.”

We were aiming for the Floor 3 zone, a safe environment where we could earn just enough to cover our living expenses. I figured we ought to search for an area with as few other people as possible and fell monsters one at a time.

I spotted a quadrupedal beast-type monster. “Found one. Dia, aim for—”

“Flame Arrow!”

The second I said anything, that spear of light pierced the enemy’s hide.

“Wow, that was fast.”

“Well, once it comes that close, it’s already within firing range, so...”

“Could it be that I’m slow at spotting monsters?”

“Huh? Ah, well, er...compared to Sieg...”

It seemed I was, in fact, slow. But it couldn’t be helped. I chose to be happy we were able to hunt with such ease rather than fuss over who was stronger between me and Sieg.

“I must say, you’re packing some firepower. And most impressive of all, you didn’t expend any MP to launch that spell just now.”

“I can do a lot more besides. Alty taught me all sorts of stuff.”

“Alty did? Ah, I almost forgot, Sieg did ask for that.”

I’d conversed with the Guardian of the Tenth Floor before. But now that she had set fire to the house alongside Mar-Mar, she was our enemy. I had to wonder why she’d teach magic to Dia, who she’d had to have known would become an enemy. She could have come up with any number of reasons to

refuse the request.

My expression must have betrayed my puzzlement, because Dia answered my question right away.

“I’m thinking she wanted to make use of me in case that black-haired girl ended up a dud in her eyes.”

“Hmm, I wonder.”

I didn’t think she wanted to “make use of her.” Not really, anyway. I’d only known her for a short while, but that little-girl-looking monster didn’t strike me as the type to exploit others. Though in any case, she *was* our enemy now.

“Don’t you worry, I’m gonna make Alty rue the fact she gave me a power-up! Cuz now, I haven’t got any openings even during close-quarters and midrange combat! *Flame Arrow!*”

Dia used magic to announce she’d washed her hands of her former teacher. The spell had pierced the flesh of a monster quite a ways away. Her firing range and precision were superb. There was no longer any doubt—in terms of magical combat, she now exceeded even me.

“Wow, that’s incredible. Now if Serry can’t run for whatever reason, I can maybe still rest easy.”

Unlike Mar-Mar, who had difficulties fighting up close, Dia’s magic came with a sense of security. For starters, the speeds of their spells were leagues apart. Dia could fire overwhelmingly powerful magic without needing long-winded incantations. Moreover, her rapid-fire capabilities and fuel efficiency were both massive threats. And she could even light her own body aflame, like she had with me, in order to burn close-range enemies. It was truly no exaggeration to say she could fight at any distance. And that perhaps meant that there’d be no problem if we dived deeper floors than Floor 3.

“Nice. Looks like we’ll make short work of our moneymaking.”

“Yeah. Let’s go slay us some more monsters.”

And so we went down the corridors of the Dungeon in search of prey. Not a single monster posed a threat to us, of course, so we eventually decided to split

up and defeat enemies as we went. But even that wasn't enough to hunt monsters with efficiency. Simply put, it was hard to find monsters. It made me appreciate just how overpowered the dimensional magic that Sieg employed to detect them was. All said, though, Dia and I hunted and hunted monsters so that we'd never have to worry about money again.



And our labor bore fruit. I was now outside a money-changer's shop in Greeard, the smile on my face a mile wide.

"Man oh man, I didn't really pay attention to it before, but Dungeon diving really does pay a small mint. We may not have to worry about how or where we'll stay the night anymore."

Of course, when we were in town, we wore many layers of tattered clothes so as not to advertise the fact we were the rumored "goddess in the flesh" and "sainted apostle." I'd carefully burned the dress I'd worn for the ceremony to cinders. The person manning the desk at the shop took one look at how dirty we looked and reckoned we were novice Dungeon divers.

"I get the feeling that was my first *proper* dive in a while," said Dia. "Diving with Sieg, I'd always just snipe the enemies before I could even see them."

She gleefully put the money she'd earned into her pocketbook. I figured that before today, she didn't have much experience taking down monsters on her own power. It was just like Sieg to be so overcautious. At a guess, he'd been by her side at all times, never letting her go off on her own like I had.

"That money is money you earned fair and square, so make sure you don't lose it, okay?" I said. "Now then, let's go back to the inn, shall we?"

"Yeah, with this money, we can change inns today too. To be honest, yesterday's was so cheap it was *rough* staying there."

"Hmm, I dunno, I kinda liked it. I think it's got a charm all its own *because* it's so terrible."

Since we were on the run, we were being as careful as possible not to stay in one place for too long. And thanks to the day's earnings, there was no doubt we could shift to finer lodgings, a fact Dia was relishing from the bottom of her

heart.

We chatted as we made our way back to the inn of which we'd spoken. It was in a corner of town, an inn standing inconspicuously amid a back alley. To be frank, it didn't look like the sort of establishment that upright, law-abiding citizens made use of. Upon returning to the room we were staying in, my trusty knight came to greet us.

"Ah...I awaited your arrival." She bowed her head, smiling so broadly I thought she might even start wagging her tail.

"Oh hey, you're already back. So how're things going for you?" I asked in reference to the intel I'd told her to gather for us.

"It's going smoothly. I was able to meet with a knight we can trust. Which is to say, Ragne."

"Huh? Raggie? Are we gonna be okay?"

She had joined the other side back at the cathedral, so I felt a tad uneasy about coming into contact with her.

"There's no need to worry," replied Serry. "Ragne was more against the ceremony than she was for it. So much so that if I hadn't stopped her, she might have come with us."

"I see. So she was more on my side, huh?"

While I thought it was a shame that she'd sided with our enemies at the cathedral, it seemed Serry had told Raggie to do so in consideration for Raggie's position. The fact that the two were still friends put a smile on my face.

"Thanks to her," said Serry, "I've come to learn quite a few things. However, I do have some bad news to give you, milady."

"That's fine. I'm ready for it."

"First, there's word of Whoseyards confirming two people dead. The first is Hine Hellvilleshine. The second is the Guardian of the Tenth Floor, who is no more."

A pause. "I see. I knew it. Mr. Hine, he..."

“Yes, milady. It seems that he expended every ounce of his strength for the sake of his wish. As such, I don’t think he would want you to be sad...” she said, trying to console me in her clumsy way.

To be honest, I’d braced myself for that eventuality. After all, we’d been able to break free of that thick, despair-inducing envelopment of troops. And that could only mean that Mr. Hine had gone past his limits to keep on fighting. But that had also been the outcome he himself had wanted. So for his sake, I vowed inwardly not to shed any tears or stop moving. I was sure that if he was here, he’d tell me that was what made me me.

“It’s okay. To me, Mr. Hine was the greatest knight and the greatest teacher. I’m not sad. What I am is proud of him... And now we know that those two are dead. What about Sieg and Mar-Mar? What happened to them? Do we know anything about what happened afterwards?”

On that day, we’d left Alty, Sieg and Mar-Mar to their own devices. The fact that out of those three, only Alty was confirmed dead made me think that Sieg must have won the battle, but...

“I don’t know,” replied Serry. “Whoseyards is treating them as having fallen into nobody’s hands as of yet.”

“But they haven’t reached Greeard yet.”

If Sieg hadn’t fallen into somebody’s clutches, he would have come to Greeard with Mar-Mar by now. And he would have used *Dimension* to find us and meet back up with us.

“From what we know,” said Serry, “they’re most likely...”

“In Palinchron’s clutches, huh?” I said.

“Yes, milady. The chances are high that Palinchron got hold of the two and is concealing them. The bastard did come across as rather obsessed with that Sieg. It’s likely that he’s using him for some nefarious scheme.”

It was the worst we could hope for. Palinchron had basically won, and it was a victory for him and only him. Sieg, us, and the whole nation of Whoseyards was worse off, and only *he* had anything to show for it. I ground my teeth at his competence. So did Dia, who had been listening from close by. A vast quantity

of magic energy was leaking from her body, and it threatened to explode at any moment.

“I do come bearing good news as well,” Serry continued. “Thanks to Ragne looking into things on her own, we now know where Palinchron Regacy is. It seems he’s currently under the patronage of Laoravia. Apparently, he had to flee to the safest country for him since he’s persona non grata in Whoseyards. He’s now back with the guild he used to belong to, Epic Seeker, and it looks as though he’s up to something.”

“Laoravia, eh? That does make sense. Even Whoseyards is gonna have a tough time poking its tendrils there.”

Unlike Whoseyards, where the law was strictly enforced, Laoravia had a more free-spirited streak to it. While they were technically allied, they were the two nations in the Dungeon Alliance with the most tension between them. And the reason he was leaning on Laoravia and not Vart must be to be in an advantageous position when it came to future negotiations with Whoseyards. As always, his net of contacts was deep, and he was skilled at finding the right place to be during any given stretch.

“Lastiara,” said Dia, “I wanna go to Laoravia. Can I?”

Dia had waited for the conversation to settle before asking. And because she *was* asking for consent, it seemed she had a little bit of composure left. That said, if I did say no, who knew when she’d explode?

“Yes, let’s. All we know right now is where Palinchron is. So I guess we’ve got no choice but to go there. It looks like he’s the only one who knows where Sieg and Mar-Mar are, so...”

Best of all, Alty, who we considered the trickiest enemy to beat, was no longer in the picture. If Palinchron was all we had to contend with, I was confident that if we prepared meticulously enough, we could overpower him.

“All right,” said Dia. “Plus, you and I have polished our teamwork to a shine. Let’s go beat Palinchron’s ass and make him spill where Sieg is.”

“I suppose that’s our best option. If we stay like this, it’ll only get worse and worse.”

The number of people chasing us within Greeard was bound to increase at some point, and that would make even walking around town a struggle. We'd spotted a handful of Whoseyards soldiers just today. And without a doubt, there were more of them than the day before. With that being the case, it was better to come out and fight sooner rather than later.

"Ah, at long last," mumbled Dia with a smile. "It won't be long now. Just a bit longer, and Sieg..."

In fact, if and when she got pushed past her limits, some place in the Dungeon Alliance would turn into a wasteland. There was no other possibility.

"So it's settled. Let's head for Laoravia right away. We'll grab somebody who belongs to the Epic Seeker guild and make them cough up where Palinchron is. Then we'll make Palinchron cough up where Sieg and Mar-Mar are."

"Yeah, leave fighting that bastard to me. For starters, I'm gonna get him back for that slash. You can count on it."

"Your Grace, allow me to aid you. Let's smash Palinchron to bits together."

The two clasped hands amicably as they colluded. I added my own hand and announced the name of the operation I'd just come up with.

"Now then, commence Operation Retrieve Sieg and Mar-Mar!"

With that, we exited the room. Palinchron may have thumped us on the Day of the Blessed Birth, but now it was our turn. We weren't about to lose again. Not to anybody. And we wouldn't relinquish a single one of our allies. That was what I vowed to myself as I headed for Laoravia—all to grasp Sieg and Mar-Mar's hands in mine once again.

Snow's New Lifestyle

A few days had passed since I'd started my new life in the guild.

I took off my clothes, switching to lighter dress before drawing closer to the window of my room and looking up at the stars. Perhaps thanks to the countless pinpricks of light, the night wasn't dark. I could clearly make out the Laoravian townscape with my naked eye. And even though the sun was down,

the city wasn't sleeping or anything. There were lots of people who worked nights walking around, including Dungeon divers like me. The townscape wore on forever in this, the nation of Laoravia. The nation of freedom. Seeing all that, I felt a sense of liberation for the first time in a long while.

"Thanks to Kanami, every day is the easy life," I murmured, intimating the reason without varnish.

I didn't care if Kanami was listening in using his magic. Given how kind a guildmaster he was, that wasn't enough to incur his anger. It was a personality type that was rare in this day and age. But it could also be called the ideal personality for me.

That was why...as chilly as the night breeze may be, I didn't feel the least bit cold. If anything, my heart was nice and fuzzy and warm. So much so that if nobody was watching, I might even want to take off my underwear too.

"He doesn't feel like a 'true hero,' but even so, he's good people," I muttered.

It had been an offhand remark, but it struck at the heart of me. Because what mattered to me most was whether he was a true hero. And while Palinchron had said he *was*, I didn't think so. He wasn't really, but...he was like Mr. Will that way.

Will Linkar, the former and first guildmaster of Epic Seeker. Kanami maybe had a bit in common with that man. There was the distinct possibility that I was just thinking that because there simply wasn't anybody I could rely on quite like Mr. Will. That said, Mr. Will and Kanami were both kind souls. They were kind and strong and heroic, and at heart, neither liked being a hero. So were they indeed two peas in a pod?

Hmm...Kanami and Mr. Will, huh? They don't look alike, but...hmm...

"Wait, is it just me, or have I been thinking about nothing but Kanami lately?"

A few days had passed since Kanami had become guildmaster. I got the feeling that over the past few nights, I'd been ruminating over much the same stuff. *Wonder why...*

"Could it be? Do I *like* him?"

Nah...

I immediately shot down my own conjecture. After all, there was only one person I'd ever liked that way in my life. The girl who had asked me to run away with her all those years ago. The girl who both reminded me of Kanami and didn't. Her name was...

Eh, never mind. It's better if I don't remember.

"Ha, ha ha..."

My legs were shaking. Just from reminiscing a little bit about my third major screw-up—just from that hell flickering into view in the back of my mind, I was suddenly racked with the chills. And this body was a dragonewt's. A dragonewt could live even in ice, and still I felt horribly cold. This had reached the realm of illness. An incurable disease of the heart.

Staggering, I closed the window and slowly distanced myself from it. Those flickering images of hell—the last moments of the girl who had run away with me... I shook them off.

"He... He's different. Kanami's way stronger than me, so it'll be okay."

By putting that sentiment into words, I managed to put a gradual stop to the chills. I had faith that that girl's last moments wouldn't happen again. And the complete faith I had in that made me realize the reason that Kanami being in my life made my heart feel so warm.

"Ah. So that's it. That's what Kanami is to me."

Forgive me for my wording, but to me, he was super duper *convenient*. He was stronger than either me or Glenn, and he was even kinder than Mr. Will. What would you call a guy like that except convenient? The girl had been kind, yes, but she hadn't been strong enough. Yet Kanami had both strength and kindness in spades. That was what made me feel so ridiculously safe and warm.

"What I feel for him isn't *romantic*. What is this feeling?"

It was a slightly different feeling from what I'd felt for Mr. Will or that girl. And it was the first time I'd ever grappled with an emotion I couldn't name. It confused me, but I plopped myself into bed holding on tight to that feeling. I

was still in light attire, but my body had gotten so warm. The more I thought about Kanami, the better it felt.

Ah, another day, another night I can fall asleep without having to worry.

Thanks to Kanami, the nights I'd spent so fearfully were now this lovely.

I'll give Kanami my work to do tomorrow too. I'm sure he'll humor me and say, "Guess it can't be helped."

I could hardly wait.

"Tee hee hee."

That was why I was able to yield to slumber with a reassured smile on my face. I could relinquish it all...

Needless to say, that was in fact her first crush. It would take her a little while to realize that this warm feeling was proof that she did, in fact, love Kanami. Farther along this tale, her inner child will take a step forward, and she will come to recognize her first crush.

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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 4

by Tarisa Warinai

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