



Kotatsu Takahashi
Illustration by Kakao • Lanthanum

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BEFORE THE TUTORIAL STARTS

A Few Things I Can Do
to Keep the Bosses Alive



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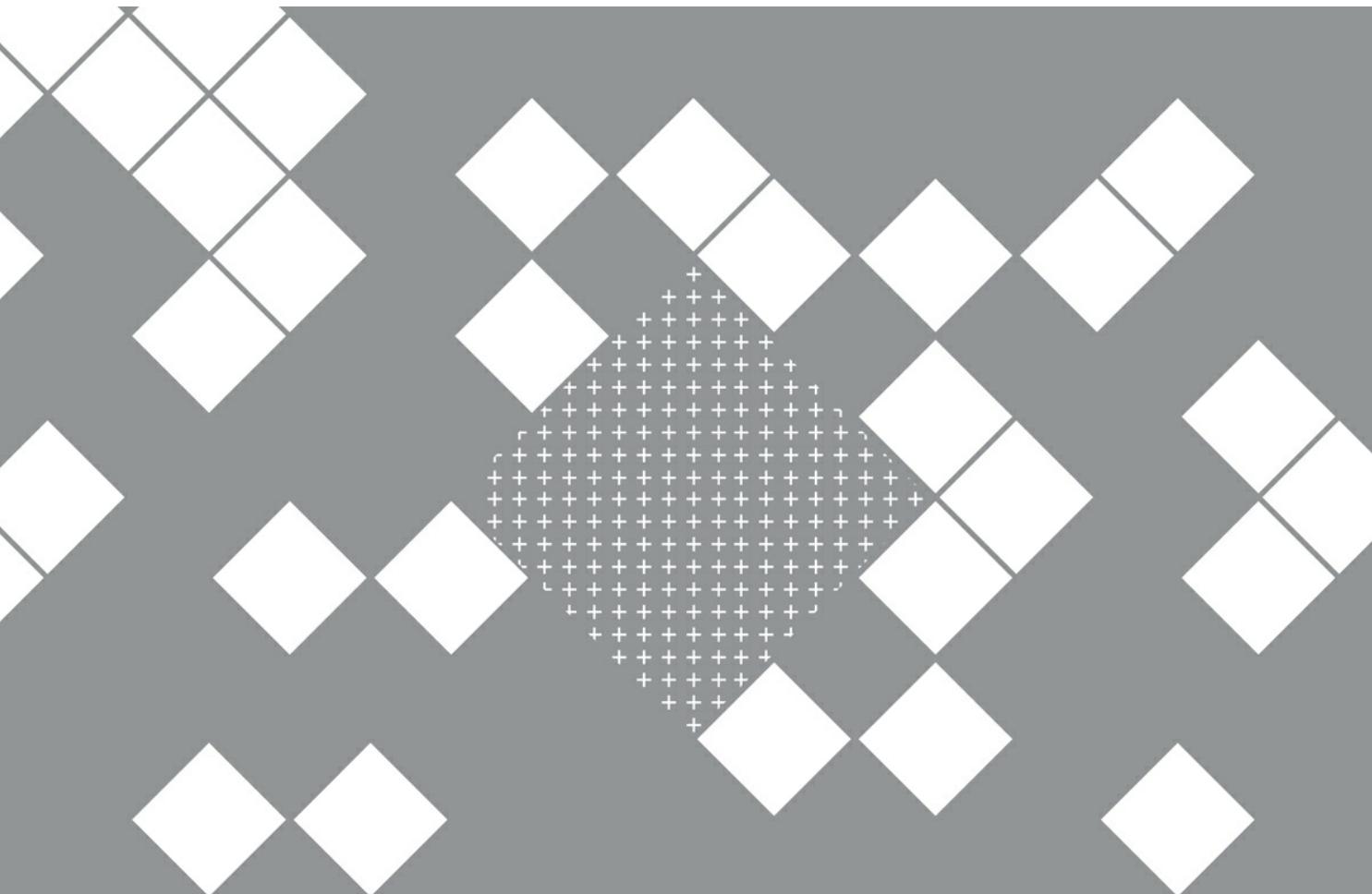
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TUTORIAL GA HAJIMARU MAE NI Vol. 1

**BOSSCHARA TACHI O HAMETSU SASENAI TAMENI ORE GA DEKIRU IKUTSUKA
NO KOTO**

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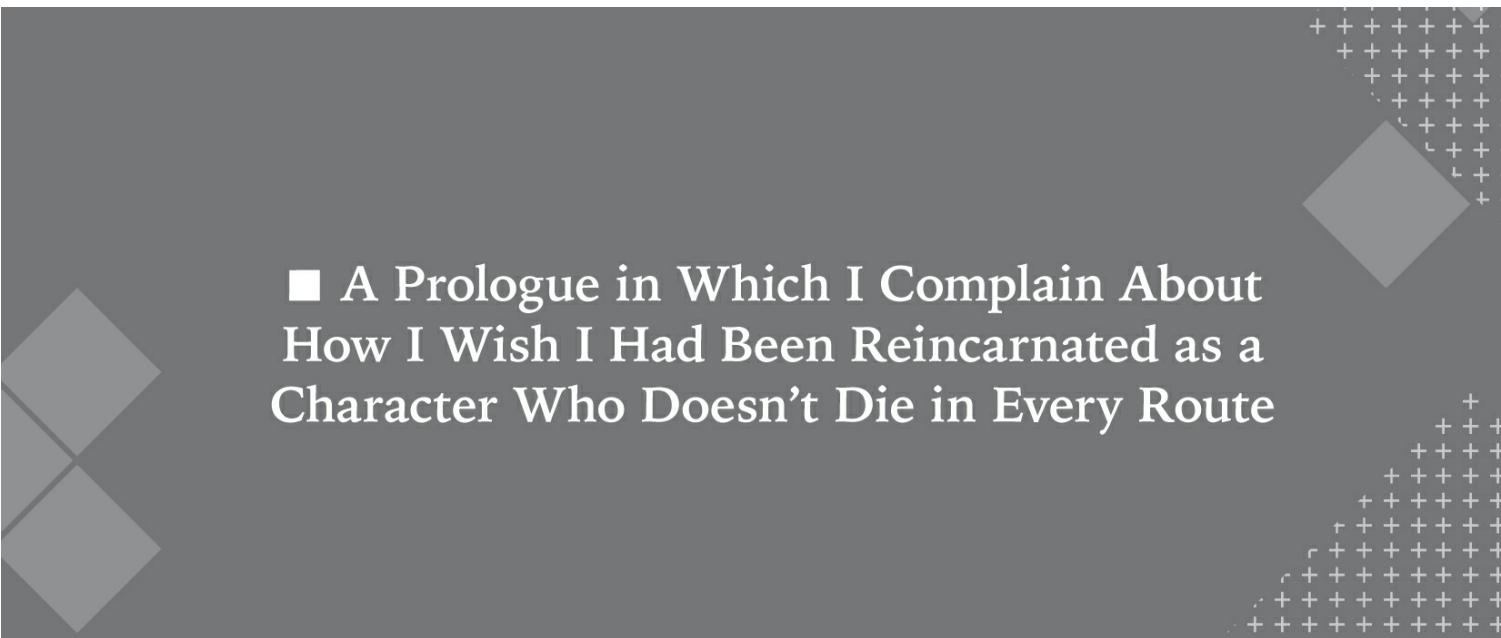
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Afterword



■ A Prologue in Which I Complain About How I Wish I Had Been Reincarnated as a Character Who Doesn't Die in Every Route

I spent most of my life playing dating sims and reading web novels.

I got my work done, I read web novels, I ate food, and I played dating sims. That was my life, day in, day out.

I'm sure to the outside world, it must have looked like a boring, lonely existence. But I loved my life. I was perfectly content.

I mean, sure. Every now and then I would think about the future and get a bit depressed. I was your typical loser, after all. I wasn't married. Heck, I hadn't had a girlfriend since the day I was born.

But I was fairly well off financially. Plus, I had the best friends a guy could ask for: dating sims and web novels. Thanks to them, I was never lonely.

...I wasn't lonely, no. But occasionally, there were moments. Moments where I would feel incredibly empty. And, childish as it was, I would begin to envy the protagonists of those dating sims and web novels.

"Maaan. If only I could live in a world as fun as that," I would say.

But I wasn't greedy. I didn't need to be the protagonist. I would be content to be his friend, or even some minor background character. Heck, I wouldn't even

have minded being a punching bag for the more important characters.

...Yeah, there were times when I had thoughts like that.



“But this...this is not cool!”

I, Kyouichirou Shimizu, stood in front of a mirror and screamed.

Of course this would happen! When I woke up and stared into the mirror, I saw the face of a villain from a game I knew very well. And he looked just as shocked as I felt.

The clear glass reflected the face of a scoundrel. His hair, made ash-gray with cheap bleach, was painfully pathetic.

None of this made any sense. Or, rather, it *did* make sense. But I didn’t want to believe it.

“Did I get reincarnated? Or maybe I’m just possessing this guy. But am I seriously...Kyouichirou Shimizu?!”

The answer to my question stared back at me from the mirror. No matter how I might try to convince myself otherwise, I was now this character from a familiar game.

Hoping it was all a dream, I pinched myself. It hurt.

This is real.

It was all real. I had really, actually become freaking *Kyouichirou Shimizu*. Talk about shocking. Talk about *depressing*. The more I came to terms with my situation, the more anxiety and dread seeped through my body.

“Why? Why *this guy* of all people...?”

It’s time for a confession. Yes, it’s true, I always wanted to be zapped inside a dating sim.

There was no use trying to hide that fact. A faint pang of yearning still throbbed deep inside me.

But I didn’t mean like this. This was bad news.

Kyouichirou Shimizu.

That was the name of a pathetic villain from the legendary dating sim RPG series *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*. He was the poster boy for low-level bad guys. What's worse, he was guaranteed to die no matter which route the player took. And now *I was him*.





Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia was one of the best-selling domestic RPG titles in years.

The *Dungeon Magia* series was renowned for having it all—charming characters, a vast fantasy world, a complicated battle system, and a plot full of laughter and tears. And what's more, the RPG elements were famously difficult.

In a series like that, you could say this guy kind of stood out.

Kyouichirou Shimizu.

He was a character in the first game, *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia* (people tended to refer to this one by its full name). Kyouichirou was the first miniboss the main characters faced.

Now, some people might think that being the first miniboss to appear in an epic series would be an honor. Unfortunately, when it came to this guy, that couldn't be farther from the truth.

The selling point of *Dungeon Magia* was the freedom allowed by the story's various branching paths. And yet, only this guy—only Kyouichirou Shimizu—was guaranteed to die right at the beginning. *In every. Single. Route.*

The series was renowned for rewarding players for using different play styles and joining different in-game factions by revealing new aspects of each character's personality and life. But there was only one aspect to this guy's character: He was guaranteed to die during the intro.

Even worse, all his dialogue was stuff like “Nyeh-heh-heh! Bow down before the might of my Astral Skills, you foooooools!” and other similarly pathetic lines, all uttered with zero sense of shame.

To be clear, *Dungeon Magia*'s world wasn't set in some postapocalyptic wasteland where you'd find mohawk-adorned gangs roving from town to town committing unspeakable acts. It took place in an isekai-style fantasy world full of swords and Astral Skills (essentially magic) mixed with a bit of science fiction and some school-life elements thrown in for good measure.

In a world like that, a guy like Kyouichirou who cries out “Nyeh-heh-heh!” as he attacks the main characters was clearly bad news. He stood out from the rest of the cast like a sore thumb.

But that by itself wouldn’t be such a big deal. Well, maybe it would, but most people could probably let that stuff slide.

Unfortunately, and to my horror, that was only scratching the surface of how much this guy sucked.

Kyouichirou Shimizu...was incredibly weak. Unreasonably, unbelievably weak. He was so weak that his very existence was a joke.

I guess none of this should come as a surprise. At the end of the day, the guy was only a miniboss for the tutorial. His entire boss fight was designed to teach players how to play the game, after all. It made sense his abilities were limited.

He was weak by design. The developers had made him that way. He was exactly as weak as the tutorial needed him to be. (The very next fight was genuinely challenging, mind you, which made Kyouichirou stand out even more.)

But even if you took away all that background, things still didn’t look good for this guy.

Why? The reason was simple:

This absolute loser of a miniboss had to take on a three-member party with *no weapons or armor*. And he only got a *single turn* every round, compared to the protagonists’ three.

So, imagine you’re playing the game: This miniboss with a weird speech pattern suddenly appears in front of the protagonists.

Most players probably feel a bit nervous. He’s the game’s first tough enemy, after all. What they see next is shocking but not in the way they might expect.

His attack pattern is as follows: (To be honest, the length of time between attacks varied based on character speed in the first *Dungeon Magia*, so it was a bit different for everyone. But it was more or less like this.)

First turn: The enemy uses an Astral Skill to make one player fall asleep (single

target).

Second turn: The enemy uses an Astral Skill to lower one player's defense (single target).

Third turn: The enemy punches one player (single target, stupidly weak).

Fourth turn: The enemy uses an Astral Skill to make one player fall asleep (single target).

...And so on, in an endless loop.

Is it clear yet?

This guy wastes two out of every three of his precious few turns inflicting status ailments (and only on one character at a time, at that!).

And after all that setup, his punches were a complete joke.

Even if he hit a character with a status ailment, using the weakest healing skill in the game once was enough to get them back to max HP. The fact that he spent two full turns setting up for an attack that was barely worth healing was genuinely incredible.

If he—I-faced a player one-on-one, I might have stood a chance. I might even have been a pretty strong miniboss. Despite the low-powered attacks, the strategy itself wasn't terrible. Gradually weakening foes with status ailments was a solid tactic.

But reality was cruel. As if fighting one-against-three wasn't brutal enough, one of the three protagonists was a holy woman—an absolutely broken healer character.

I only got one turn for every three player turns, and their party had three people, including the game's strongest healer. In other words, Kyouichirou's chances of winning were *nonexistent*.

And then, after getting his ass handed to him by the player's party, the real intro boss shows up out of nowhere and devours the pathetically weak, smack-talking Kyouichirou Shimizu. *RIP. Game over, Kyouichirou.*

He talked some smack, got his ass kicked, was eaten, and then died.

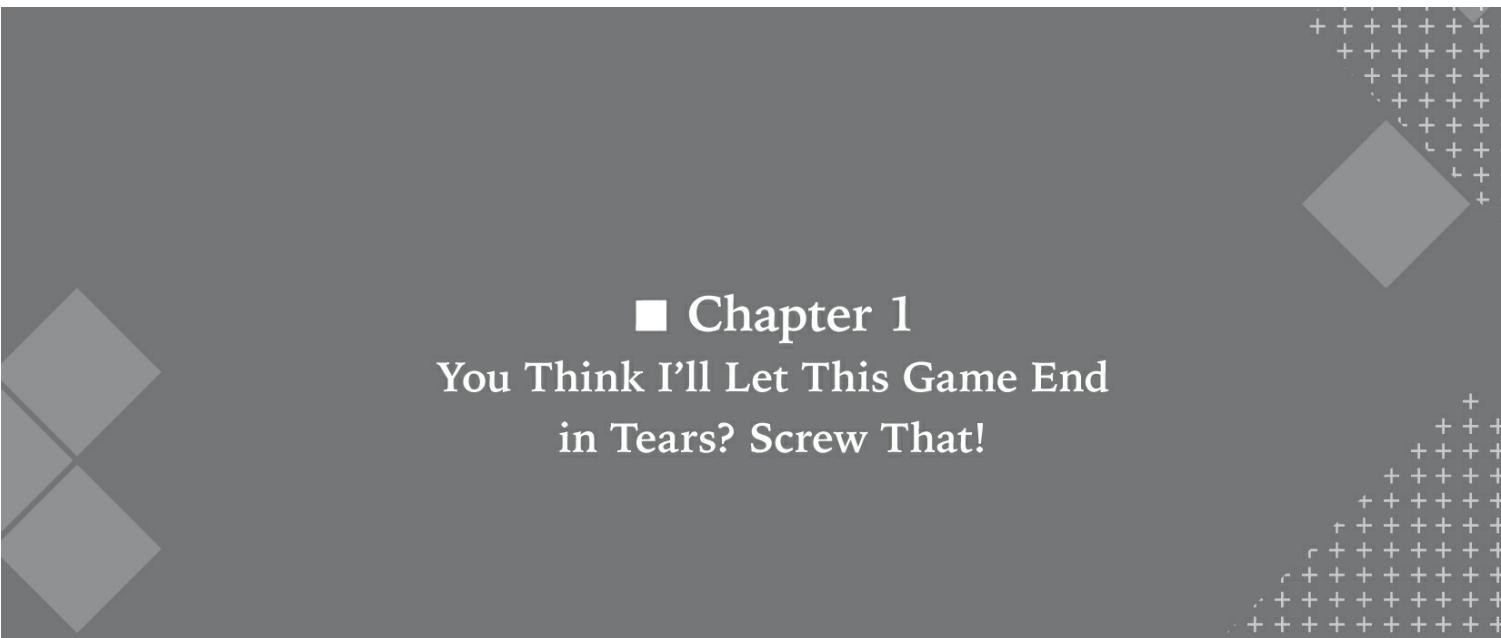
Within the *Dungeon Magia* series, this ultra-pathetic fate was reserved for Kyouichirou and Kyouichirou alone. As him, the only thing I had to look forward to was dying a horrible death. *What luck. What joy. Ha.*

“Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha... Ngh... Sob.”

I started to cry. And I kept crying and crying. Knowing exactly how my life would end brought me no comfort, only dread and sorrow.

“This...this is too much. This is just way, way, way too muuuch!”

And so, I was suddenly thrust into my new isekai life in the worst way imaginable.



■ Chapter 1

You Think I'll Let This Game End in Tears? Screw That!

I heard someone running up the stairs, and a voice called out, “Kyou! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Oh crap! I must have made too much noise and now the other people in the house are suspicious.

I panicked. *What should I do?*

But before I could think of a plan, the door to Kyouichirou’s room flew open.

“You’ll upset the neighbors if you keep making so much noise!” said a young woman in a school uniform.

She was slightly older than me, and her beautiful flaxen hair was tied back in a French braid. Her eyes made her look kind, but she was currently squinting at me as though she were trying with all her might to convince me that she was angry.

“Oh, uh, I’m terribly sorry about that,” I said. “This is, umm. Well, you see...” But that’s as far as I got before I realized who I was talking to. “Fumika? Is that you?”

Her gentle eyes. Her full hourglass figure. And, most of all, her voice—the

whispy tones of my favorite voice actress. For a second, I wondered if her voice actress was here, putting on an act. But no—though the voice was the same, she wasn't acting. She was saying those lines for real.

Oh, that voice! The way she moved! Her presence! There was no mistaking it. This was Fumika from *Dungeon Magia*, in the flesh.

One of my favorite characters from a dating sim was right in front of me—a girl I'd even dreamed about. I was practically shaking. It was enough to make me completely forget that I was Kyouichirou.

Wow! The real Fumika! She was so damn cute! Just seeing her lovely form in front of me was purifying my unclean heart.

As I sat there mulling over how *Dungeon Magia* was truly the best game of all time, Fumika frowned at me.

And, in that beautiful voice, she said, “Why in the world are you calling me by my name? You always call me Sis! If this is some prank, I’m going to be mad, you know!”

“I-I’m sorry, uh... S-Sis?”

What was that? Fumika? She was *whose* sister, now?

“That’s right! I’m your dear sister. And don’t you forget it! ...What’s the matter, Kyou? Why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“Kyou?”

I forgot I was still Kyouichirou!

Wait. Hold on. Fumika is Kyouichirou’s elder sister?!

What kind of a sick joke is this? Ha-ha, what a laugh! This little plot detail was news to me. Absolutely none of the official reference books mentioned anything about this. Kyouichirou’s and Fumika’s faces looked so different they might as well have been from completely different species. *And now you’re telling me they’re brother and sister?*

“...Wait. Hold on a sec.”

It was hard to believe at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I

realized it wasn't all that far-fetched.

Fumika's last name was never revealed anywhere in the game. And, come to think of it, during a special quest event, she said something along the lines of "My dear brother was recently attacked by spirits..." I always wondered who she was talking about.

But Kyouichirou? And Fumika? *Family*? That meant her full name was Fumika Shimizu.

This shocking revelation almost made my poor brain explode. Fumika was my sister. Fumika was *my* sister. Fumika was *my sister*. I was moved. I was incredulous. I was ecstatic. My brain was about to liquefy and start leaking out my ears.

After watching me panic for a moment, Fumika sighed and said, "What is it? You're acting so strange today, Kyou."

Even exasperated, she looked positively gorgeous.



I took a moment to reassess the situation.

I was now Kyouichirou Shimizu, the extremely weak weirdo jerk of a tutorial miniboss from the incredibly popular dating sim RPG *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*.

If my life followed the same course as the original plot, a miserable future awaited me:

I would mouth off to the protagonists, get my ass handed to me, and then a boss enemy would come out of nowhere and eat me whole.

But I wasn't about to let that happen. *No way in hell*.

In other words, I was going to have to lower every death flag leading to Kyouichirou Shimizu's seemingly inevitable demise. That would be my first order of business.

To achieve that, I was going to have to start collecting information. And the first thing I needed to know was...

“Say, Fumika... Err, I mean Sis. This might be a weird question, but what year is it? On the imperial calendar, I mean.”

It was lunchtime, and Fumika and I were sitting together in the living room. I was stuffing my face with the hamburger steak and grated vegetables Fumika had prepared. I figured it would be best to come right out and ask her *when* this was in the timeline.

To be honest, I was still recovering from the shock that *the* Fumika, now my sister, had served me a home-cooked meal. I was in heaven. The taste was unbelievable. And more importantly, it was filled with love. If I had been anyone other than Kyouichirou, everything would have been perfect.

“What sort of question is that?” she asked, puzzled.

Her reaction was completely understandable. What normal person would randomly forget what year it was?

“Well, it sort of slipped my mind. Isn’t that just like me?” I answered casually. That seemed like the most believable excuse.

Based on Kyouichirou’s appearance, I was pretty sure he was that kind of guy... Probably.

“What am I going to do with you? If you’d stop getting into silly little fights all the time, I bet your memory would improve!”

“S-sorry, Sis.”

It seemed like I was on the right track. Still, this guy must’ve been on another level if that was a believable reason to forget what year it was. How depressing to think I was now him.

“It’s Imperial Year 1189,” Fumika said. “You had better remember it from now on!”

“Thanks, Sis. By the way, this food is incredible. Especially the soup. It might be the best soup I’ve ever had. The hint of yuzu compliments this sea bream broth perfectly!”

To keep her from getting suspicious, I covered up my question with praise for her cooking. I wasn’t lying, either. Each dish she’d made was incredible, and it

seemed like a natural transition.

Fumika was gorgeous, and a good cook to boot. How could any woman be so perfect? And since it was 1189, counting backward from the start of the game, that would make her sixteen... *Wait, sixteen?!* That would put her in her first year of high school. In the world of *Dungeon Magia*, that translated to year one of general upper academia. Despite being a student, her housekeeping skills were unreal. I was in complete awe.

“Hmph! Flatter me all you want—you won’t get anything beyond a second helping.” She grabbed our empty bowls and hurried off to the kitchen.

The slightly embarrassed look on her face as she left the room was so cute. I couldn’t help noticing that she’d snagged herself a second helping as well. Absolutely adorable.

So, it’s 1189, huh...?

I watched with pride as my sister filled both our bowls with more seasoned rice. Meanwhile, I crunched a few numbers in my mind.

If the memories I had from my previous life were correct, *Dungeon Magia*’s story began in Imperial Year 1192. I had woken up in 1189, right at the beginning of spring. In other words, there were about three years until Kyouichirou would mouth off and get himself eaten for breakfast.

That’s not a ton of time, I thought, but it does give me some breathing room to figure this out.

If I had three years, then, surely, I could do something to alter Kyouichirou’s fate.

Pathetic as it sounds, that’s what I believed at the time.

But I was wrong. I was so very, very wrong.

There would be no grace period for Kyouichirou Shimizu.

In due time, I would find that out the hard way.



After we finished dinner, I continued trying to gather intel.

"Kyou, are you sure you're feeling all right?" Fumika asked, her expression grave. It seemed I'd started to genuinely worry her.

But thanks to my interrogation, I was able to get the gist of Kyouichirou's life up to this point. I might have caused my sister some concern, but in the end, it was worth it. I'd done really well, in fact, if you ignored how embarrassed I felt asking all those questions.

What I learned from my sister could be roughly separated into three points:

Fact 1: The Shimizu siblings lived in a residential area of a dungeon city called Sakurabana.

A dungeon city was exactly what it sounded like—a city full of dungeons.

Dungeons and Spirits were the basic elements of *Dungeon Magia*. The world's power supply was obtained from mysterious stones harvested from dungeons. And with the help of the spirits, everyone was able to use what was essentially magic. By holding out their hands, priests could heal the wounded. And instead of matches, anyone could light a barbecue with the snap of a finger. That was the type of city Sakurabana was. To the city's residents, these strange powers were the most ordinary thing in the world. And the same went for dungeons—a workplace straight out of a dream.

The Shimizu siblings lived a quiet and modest life, hidden away in a small corner of this magical metropolis.

My sister was sixteen and enrolled in upper academia, and I was fourteen and in middle academia. Back in my original world, she'd be a first-year in high school, and I would be a second-year in middle school. Neither of us had been trained as adventurers. We were an ordinary brother and sister living ordinary lives.

Fact 2: The Shimizu siblings lived alone.

Kyouichirou and Fumika's parents had died many years prior in a cave-in.

To be honest, I was prepared for this. When she appeared in *Dungeon Magia*, Fumika said she lived alone, despite being only eighteen. So it came as no surprise to me that our parents had already passed away. Despite that, the story was surprisingly painful to hear.

They'd left my sister all alone while she was in the prime of her youth—it was a real tragedy. How could they do that to their daughter when she wasn't even in high school yet? She was far too young to play mom to a brother like Kyouichirou!

And my sister's situation was even worse than that...

"Thank you, Kyou. It feels like you've really grown up. I never expected you to help me wash the dishes like this," she said, reaching out to pat my head. But, her palm still hovering above me, she was overcome with a small coughing fit. "Ngh... I'm sorry. Give me a moment..."

"Sis! Are you okay?!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Ngh. I'm still not over my cold is all."

She pretended she was all right, but it was clear that she was still in pain.

And besides, I already knew—I knew that her cough wasn't from a cold. And I also knew that what lay waiting inside her would take her life in only three years.

Fact 3: This world was the same one I knew from *Dungeon Magia*, and that meant that Fumika Shimizu would die in three years.



Dungeon Magia had a reputation for excellent storytelling.

The humorous parts had players rolling on the floor. The fierce battles worked people into an absolute frenzy. And the ending of each of the different heroine's routes was a heart-wrenching emotional finale guaranteed to make anyone ugly-cry.

Each game was hilarious, cute, exciting, and emotionally devastating. The plot's composition and writing were so flawless that one might question whether a mere human was capable of such genius. Every game in the series was truly god-tier.

And within that expansive story, Fumika's narrative truly encapsulated the feeling of helplessness.

Her most famous story event was called “My Last Moments with You.”

The protagonist meets her by chance in late summer and befriends her. Then, after being with her in her last moments, he quietly sends her off.

Her story was one devastatingly moving scene after another. Her brave words to the protagonist as she lays in her hospital bed, how he runs all around trying to find a way to heal her, the sincere thanks she offers him in her final moments. I could think of countless heart-rending sequences. But right now, there was only one point to focus on—if I didn’t do something, my sister would keep hurtling toward certain death.

If the world we were in now followed the plot of the game, my sister was being eaten from the inside by a curse. If I remembered correctly, she had fallen victim to a mad shaman who cursed her without her even realizing it.

The curse was slow and terrible. It crept through the host’s body, gradually consuming it until, one day, it claimed the victim’s life. It was activated by a special Astral Skill combined with a certain item, and the worst thing about it was that as it progressed, it gradually became immune to all forms of healing.

By the time the protagonist met my sister in the game, it was already too late—no healing item or Astral Skill could cure her. The protagonist could only struggle in vain as they watched her die.

It was cruel. It was beyond evil.

What sort of unjust god would assign these two siblings such abominable fates?

I bit my lip as I considered the Shimizu family’s unending bad luck.

How could this world be so cruel? Why should a brother and sister who had lost their parents at such young ages and struggled to fend for themselves both meet such untimely ends?

If this was just a game, such a thing was understandable—their deaths were necessary to give the heroes a chance to shine. They were just sacrifices to make the story more interesting for the player. I understood all that. I welcomed it with open arms!

But now that it was my reality—now that I had taken up residence in the body of Kyouichirou, I finally realized how unreasonable it all was.

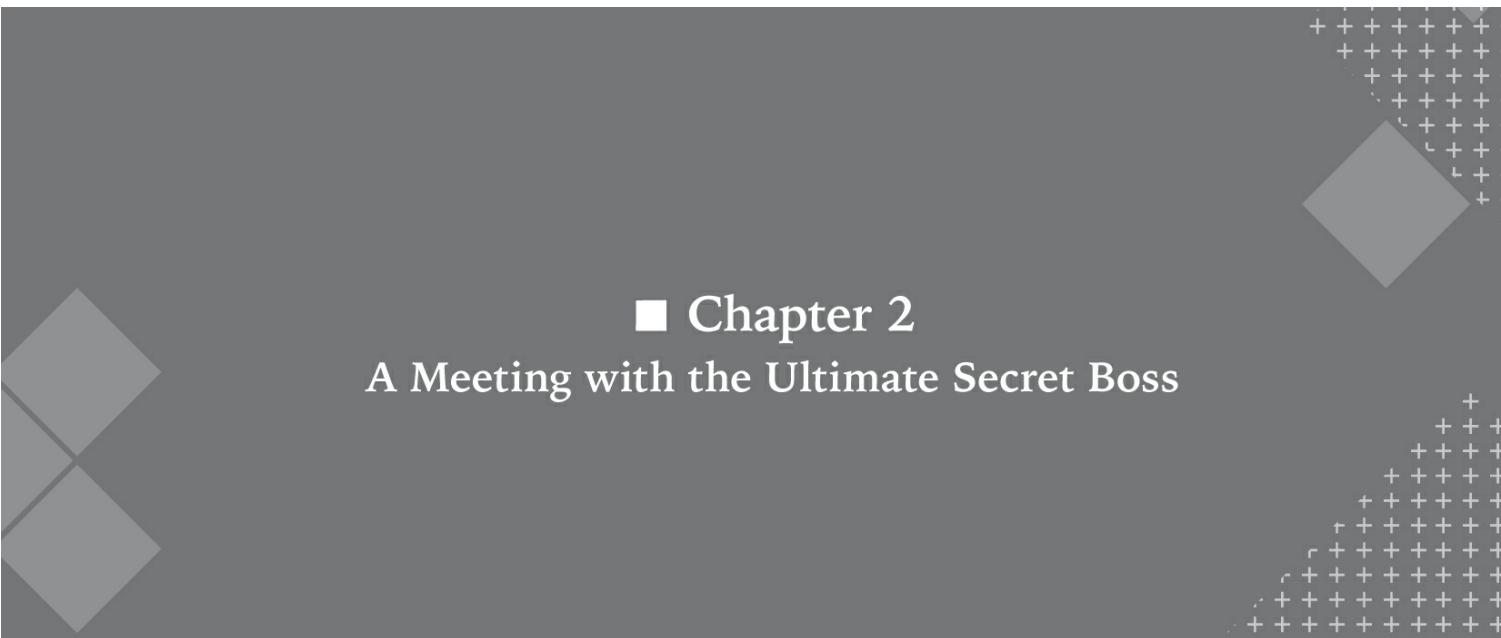
I was supposed to be a punching bag to make the heroes look good? We were supposed to die to serve some higher purpose? Screw that! I wasn't about to let some game plot ruin my life and my sister's life for stupid reasons like that.

"I've made up my mind, Sis," I said, rubbing Fumika's back as she coughed painfully.

It took me a moment, but I slowly transformed the torrent of thoughts swirling through my mind into words. I made her a promise and swore to rebel.

"I'm going to tear down every unfair plot point in this damned world with my own two hands."

If the official plotline was out to kill us, then I just had to stop it in its tracks!



■ Chapter 2

A Meeting with the Ultimate Secret Boss

◆ Shimizu Home: Kyouichirou's Room

After putting my sister to bed, I shut myself in my room and began thinking. I let my mind wander, hoping I'd come up with something resembling a good plan.

I knew that if I sat around doing nothing, my sister and I would die. I'd give my life to become a stepping stone for the story's heroes, and she'd give hers to make some unseen player cry.

I wasn't going to let that happen. *No way. Screw that BS.*

"I'm gonna save you, Sis. I swear," I mumbled. As I spoke, I racked my brain, scribbling down all the ways I could think of to accomplish my goal.

My first idea was to find a certain character who appeared in the game and specialized in curses and have them lift the one on my sister.

Thankfully, it was three years before the game's plot would take place. My sister's symptoms were still mild, making this plan a pretty good bet. There was just one problem...

“My name is Belfehgi. I am a wandering disenchanter. Why have I come? Hoho. The same reason as all the other adventurers. A pleasure to meet you.”

When I thought about it, I realized they wouldn't show up in the city for another three years. That wouldn't work. By then, it would be way too late.

The holy woman whose heals were basically cheating didn't show up until the main plot began, either. It seemed relying on any characters from the game would be tough.

...If the characters weren't going to help me, then what about an item?

The curse was still in its early stages, which meant that an all-powerful healing potion—an Elixir—might just do the trick.

If this really was the world of *Dungeon Magia*, then I knew of a dungeon with a hidden Elixir. And I, of all people, knew exactly how to beat that dungeon. If everything worked out, I could snag the Elixir.

...Or not. I almost forgot: I'm Kyouichirou.

I wasn't some all-powerful Astral-Skill-wielding crazy-strong hero. I was a loser who died in the tutorial. I had no companions, and I was weak as hell. I didn't even have any spirits yet. I was screwed.

“...I've gotta think about this from a different angle.”

I had been tackling the situation from the perspective of a gamer who played dating sims. I needed to start thinking from the point of view of someone who liked web novels.

Protagonists of stories who get reincarnated in another world almost always have some power that essentially allows them to cheat the system.

There were all sorts of patterns. The power could be a blessing bestowed on the protagonist by a god, or magic they attained through training in their youth, or any number of other possibilities. In these kinds of stories, a power granted from some external source was that special spice that made the whole narrative work. And the protagonist always got to show off their abilities early on in the story.

With all that in mind, I thought back over what I knew about my own stats.

Kyouichirou Shimizu. Skills: minimal. Talents: few. A real jerk with no companions and no friends. His only redeeming feature was his beautiful angel of an elder sister. That was it.

...It was hard to believe I was so pathetic, but that was now my reality.

I was weak. Overwhelmingly weak. Some random Chihuahua was probably stronger than a weak-ass loser like me.

What could I, the poster boy for loser characters everywhere, do to get more power as quickly as possible?

The answer had to be spirits—the most important tool for increasing one's strength in *Dungeon Magia*. With the help of spirits, the people of this world were able to wield supernatural powers. If I wanted to go on the offensive, that was where I had to start. But there was one problem...

...Which spirit should I go for?

Even in the first *Dungeon Magia*, there were hundreds of different spirits. Trying to find one that perfectly suited my needs while relying only on my memories of the game would be a real challenge.

I had to think about their capture requirements, their relative strengths, and what I would be using them for.

It wasn't a simple matter of picking the strongest one, nor could I choose whichever one I thought I could handle. What I needed was a spirit suited to my goals. If I couldn't manage that, I wasn't getting anywhere.

This is going to be tough as hell, but you gotta think like your life depends on it, Kyouichirou. Thinking's the only thing I can do now. No slacking. No compromising. No quitting. Just think! Think, think, think!



After what felt like hours of deliberation, I wrote the following on the notepad in my room:

What I need:

A spirit powerful enough to help me clear the dungeon with the Elixir.

Bonus points if the spirit itself is powerful enough to dispel my sister's curse.

Must be easy enough for me to capture as I am right now.

After I finished writing, I looked back over my notes. It all sounded like wishful thinking.

The spirit had to be crazy strong but easy to capture. If I could find something that convenient, I'd basically be cheating. Well go ahead, call me a cheater! If it meant saving my sister, abuse like that would be nothing. Still, I doubted I'd be able to get my hands on such a perfect spirit.

Ugh! I'll take anything! Just let me save my sister! Please...!

"...Wait. Hold on a sec."

Right then, I realized something.

My sister. *That's right... Sis.*

My sister was guaranteed to die during the events of *Dungeon Magia*. Whether she died alone or passed peacefully under the heroes' care, there was no preventing Fumika Shimizu's death. Saving her wasn't even an option.

But why would the game's developers force such an awful fate on my sister? I could think of two possible reasons, and both of them were complete BS.

The first was to make the story more exciting. My sister's death would have a dramatic impact on the protagonists. After experiencing Fumika Shimizu's plotline, the heroes would keep her memory in their hearts. They would mourn her, and that would strengthen their resolve to fight.

"We won't allow anyone else to die like she did."

"Fumika. Please watch over our travels from heaven."

I vaguely recalled them saying some stuff in that vein. Basically, my sister's role in the game was to die so the main characters could grow from the experience. That was the first reason.

I bawled my eyes out during her story, too. But now that I was a part of this world, I thought the whole thing stank. None of this was fair.

So, what? She's supposed to give her life so the heroes can grow as people?

What a load of garbage. My sister's gotta die for a stupid reason like that?

...But all that aside, the second reason was much more important.

It was true that my sister's death had narrative significance and helped the heroes grow as people, but that wasn't the whole story.

Fumika Shimizu's death also served an important role in terms of game progression. At the end of her story, while she's on her deathbed, she uses the last of her strength to entrust the heroes with an item.

"Please offer flowers to this shrine's god in my place," she tells them. *"I fear I am no longer able to do it myself."*

She then gives the protagonists the key to an old, decrepit shrine. After she dies, they fulfill her final wish and offer flowers in the spot she requested.

It's a really beautiful scene. At the time, it hit me right in the heart. *But now I realize it was just some crappy, emotionally manipulative cutscene!*

In any case, the heroes later find out that the abandoned shrine, its worshippers all lost to time, holds an incredible secret. Deep within its deserted grounds lies the game's secret boss.

This fact only becomes clear after the last boss is taken down and the game is cleared. There is a special item called the Codex of the Conqueror, which only players who beat every single dungeon and complete every challenge in the game can obtain. And when you read aloud that most ancient of documents within the grounds of that shrine... Surprise! The player stumbles upon a secret boss! What a momentous occasion!

...Yeah, right! What a load of crap. I can't think of any reason to celebrate! Why does a parting gift from my sister have to be the key to unlocking the secret boss fight? Personally, I'd like to have a word with the developers. Why the hell did you have to make my sister's death one of the steps in unlocking the secret boss?! You absolute pieces of—!

...Well, whatever. As much as it pisses me off, I can use this.

The whole thing made me want to throw up, but if I could turn this god-awful scenario on its head, I could use it to my advantage.

On a basic level, there were only two conditions for triggering the secret boss:

1. Get the key to the shrine.
2. Read the Codex of the Conqueror aloud inside.

In other words, beating the last boss, clearing all the dungeons, and so on was all totally irrelevant. And it would be a snap for me to fulfill the two conditions.

The key's original owner was my sister, after all. I just had to borrow it from her. And as for the Codex of the Conqueror... I didn't need it. My brain—chock-full of dating sim trivia—already contained every word.

The real problem was what I would do once I was in. But I wasn't going to worry about that now. If I used my knowledge of the game world and maybe risked my life once or twice, then, in theory, I should have a chance.

I'm gonna do it. Hear me, secret boss? I'm coming for you!

I knew all too well that this plan of mine was crazy. But the reason I was so determined to meet the secret boss anyway was because I was sure *she* of all people could break my sister's curse.

Even I wasn't sure why I was so desperate to do this. Nevertheless, I pulled an all-nighter and finally came up with a plan of attack.



The next day, I borrowed the key from my sister and, still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I headed straight for the old shrine.

I was able to find it more easily than I'd expected thanks to the map on my smartphone and my sister's directions.

It's still unreal to think that I'm riding a bike through the Sakurabana. In my wildest dreams, I never thought I'd see the day.

The cherry blossoms along the road swayed in the breeze as I pedaled through avenues lined with modern-looking buildings. At a glance, it seemed like any other large urban center. But now and again I would catch a glimpse of a massive tree as tall as a skyscraper. I didn't think I'd ever get tired of this scenery.

At first, it looked like the giant cherry trees were growing up between the rectangular buildings, but in fact, it was the other way around. The city blocks had been constructed around the trees.

And it wasn't just one or two of them, either. There were easily over a hundred of these massive trees surrounded by buildings made of reinforced steel.

I wouldn't quite say the city was in harmony with nature, but the cherry blossom petals that rained down everywhere you looked were a sight to behold —beautiful beyond words.

Wow, I thought, I'm really here. I'm really in the world of Dungeon Magia.

I took in the scenery as I rolled along, and before I knew it, I had arrived at my destination.

The shrine was ancient, its faith lost to the ages. Long ago, the ancestors of the Shimizu family had taken care of it. But no one served there now. My sister, who had received the key from our mother and stopped by regularly to clean the grounds, was its only visitor.

No one would expect to find a secret boss in a place like this.

I pulled out my sister's key and put it in the gate. As I turned it in the lock, I heard a satisfying metallic sound.

Let's take a peek, shall we?

I pulled out a flashlight from my backpack and cut straight across the dimly lit shrine grounds.

It was dark, and I felt like something might jump out and attack me any minute. But I reached my goal without any trouble.

This is it.

I pierced the darkness with the beam from my flashlight and illuminated the shrine's holy object.

A single statue depicting a young woman sitting in a full lotus position stood alone in the vast space. There was something beautiful and ephemeral about her. This stone idol was the only thing remaining of this shrine's long-dead faith.

If I read the Codex out loud in front of this statue, it should open the path to the secret boss...

“Might as well give it a shot.”

I recited the words of the Codex from memory.

“O heavenly lord! O illuminator of all!

Shine thy holy light and cast aside time’s curtain!

Now that all is lost and gone,

Come! Lead us this day to the ends of fate!”

After I finished reciting the short, slightly cringe-inducing poem, I held my breath and stared at the stone statue.

I was fairly sure I had gotten it right. If I hadn’t, my whole plan was sunk.

Please, secret boss. I’m begging you. Answer my call, I prayed. I put my whole heart into it.

I knew it was pretty lame to start out my new life in another world by praying for help, but what choice did I have? Kyouichirou wasn’t strong enough to worry about morals or virtue.

“O heavenly lord! O illuminator of all!

Shine thy holy light and cast aside time’s curtain!

Now that all is lost and gone,

Come! Lead us this day to the ends of fate!

O heavenly lord! O illuminator of all!

Shine thy holy light and cast aside time’s curtain!

Now that all is lost and gone,

Come! Lead us this day to the ends of fate!

O heavenly lord! O illuminator of all!

Shine thy holy light and cast aside time’s curtain!

Now that all is lost and gone,

Come! Lead us this day to the ends of fate...!"

I continued reciting the words of the Codex like a desperate plea.

C'mon, ultimate spirit. I need you to appear. We need your power. Please! Help my sister (and also me while you're at it)!

Activation Protocol Confirmed // Biometrics Cleared // DNA Profile for Shimizu the Undying Confirmed // Topological Texture Overwrite Complete // Commencing Transmission to Fourth-Dimensional Plane.

A robotic voice reverberated through the darkness as the stone statue released a torrent of dazzling light.

This was it. This was what I had been waiting for.

A light pierced the darkened shrine. An emotionless voice called out from within.

This was...

"The secret boss cutscene!"

There, in the shrine as it was bathed in white light, I raised my arms and flexed my muscles, striking a victory pose. And then...

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #????, "Eternal Cycle of Rebirth"

When I opened my eyes, a familiar room stretched out before me.

That white ceiling. Those marble floors. The four massive spiral staircases in the center leading up to all those doors on the upper landing...and, sure enough, there was the massive clock.

In an instant, I was overcome with emotion, excitement, and above all else, a sense of certainty. All these feelings danced inside my chest.

This is it! The secret boss's dungeon!

I would never forget this place. Back in the day, I must have visited it

hundreds of times. This was the spot. There was no doubt in my mind.

This is absolutely wild, I thought. The tutorial miniboss just broke into the secret boss's dungeon. I must look ridiculous. I'm so out of place in here it's actually kind of moving that I managed to get in.

...Hey, Earth to Stupid. This isn't the time to get sentimental!

I looked up toward the second-floor balcony at the gargantuan wall clock installed in the center and saw the minute and hour hands meet at the top-right at twelve o'clock. Then I watched as the minute hand slowly ticked backward, moving counterclockwise across the clock's face as the hour hand sat perfectly still.

I thought back to my gamer days. If memory served, I needed to get to a *particular place* before Mr. Minute Hand met back up with Lady Hour Hand.

In other words, I had one hour.

That was all the time I was allowed to get where I was going. When it was up, it would be game over—the way forward would be sealed forever.

I had exactly one chance. If I messed this up, I'd never be able to meet the secret boss.

I dashed up the closest spiral staircase to my right, desperately trying to keep myself calm as fear and anxiety shot through my body.

The door to the second area is at the back and to the right on the third floor!

I followed the map in my brain to the letter and reached the door before my first minute was up. Then I turned the chalk-colored doorknob to progress to the next area.

The secret boss's dungeon was your classic warp puzzle. Pick the wrong door or go down the wrong path and—*hey, presto*—you were sent back to the starting point. And this place didn't pull its punches—there were twelve areas with twelve possible paths *each* (not counting the boss room). It was a real pain to navigate.

Twelve paths, twelve areas. Pick the wrong route even once, and you were screwed. You had to choose correctly twelve times in a row within the one-hour

time limit or it was game over. I'd seen lotteries with better odds than this place.

And this dungeon wasn't empty, either. There were enemies roaming the halls.

...There they are. The Knight Guardians.

After following the correct route and making it safely to the second area, I found myself in a room with red carpeting and whitewashed walls that reminded me of a museum. There, I was greeted by knights in pure white armor who were almost seven feet tall.

They patrolled their posts mechanically, their armor clanging as they circled the same area over and over. If they spotted me, they would initiate combat.

Needless to say, if the tutorial's miniboss tried to take on an elite enemy from the secret boss's dungeon, the latter would kick the former's ass.

If I used the dungeon's design to my advantage, there was a chance I could have held my own in a fight. But unfortunately, I was still Kyouichirou. Nothing good would come from a useless scrub like me getting greedy. I had no choice—I would have to avoid all the enemies.

The correct route is left, right, and then straight down the middle. The pattern repeats twice, and then I take the blue door on the right. But I've got to watch my timing. The knights look behind them every three steps.

.....NOW!

I took a deep breath, then ran with everything I had.

I wasn't sure how well my old strategies for avoiding these guys were going to translate, but I pushed forward and hoped they'd stick to their designated paths.

My body strained and sweat cascaded down my face as I ran full tilt. Every time I passed an enemy, my heart throbbed in my chest. It felt like I was going to die.

...There it is. The door to the third area.

My sweaty hand reached out and gripped the blue door's knob. Then I gave it

a yank and proceeded to the next area.



Relying on my prior knowledge of the game, I made my way deeper and deeper into the secret boss's dungeon.

The layout of the map, the enemies' movements, and each area's unique traps—every one of them were complicated, tough to deal with, and downright unfair.

My prior knowledge of the game was the only thing that got me through it all. If I hadn't played this game before (and to be honest, if I hadn't remembered everything to an insane level of detail), I would have probably run out of time wandering around in circles somewhere back in the second area.

Luckily, that didn't happen.

"Yes! I did it! You hear me, you lowlifes?!"

My face was drenched with sweat and tears. I wiped it with a handkerchief as I eyed a treasure chest directly in front of me, painted all in white.

I had reached Area 11. I was one step away from the final area.

The treasure chest was about the size of a microwave and was hidden away in the corner of a mysterious room covered in colorful stained-glass windows. This was the reason I had fought so hard to make it here.

I checked my smartphone. *Great. Still only 12:45. Plenty of time to spare. I can't believe I made it.*

This chest was special. In *Dungeon Magia*, dungeons were procedurally generated. In other words, the layout and contents were different every time you entered. So, treasure chests like this which contained guaranteed drops were incredibly rare.

Plus, I was in the secret boss's dungeon. This chest's prize was guaranteed to be an item of incredible power...

"Yesss!"

Inside, I found exactly what I was hoping for: Laevateinn, the Key of Sealing.

This was a super-ultra-rare legendary item that only spawned during a player's first run through this place.

In this dungeon, which had a totally absurd rule requiring all party members to temporarily revert to level one, whether or not you were able to get Laevateinn made all the difference.

Those who entered had only one chance per playthrough to get this dagger. There were no second tries.

...I know what you're thinking. Those are some crazy conditions just to get your hands on a single item. I was angry even now as I stood in front of the chest.

But *Dungeon Magia*'s development team was always doing stuff like this. Were they just bullies? Were they rotten to the core? Well, to the fans of their games, these sorts of brutal challenges were all part of the charm. That said, the conditions to obtain Laevateinn were on a whole other level. It was practically an exercise in masochism.

Having to win a crapshoot twelve times in a row while progressing through a dungeon filled to the brim with tough enemies, adhering to a hard time limit, and doing it all at level 1, *just* to get a weapon to help you out, did not strike me as particularly helpful.

And yet, despite all that—or, rather, because of it—getting my hands on it felt incredible. It was so damn awesome! I'd snagged Laevateinn! To an outside observer, a legendary super-ultra-rare weapon like this falling into the hands of the tutorial miniboss probably brought to mind the saying “casting pearls before swine.” But what did I care? I was pumped!

Damn! This rules! I can't believe it! Getting a legendary weapon before the game had even begun was tantamount to cheating my way to the top, and it felt incredible!

...This thing's so dang pretty.

I sighed, staring at my sharp new companion.

The fifteen-inch dagger sat snugly in its unadorned scabbard. Despite its lack of decoration, it was a beautiful weapon.

The blade glittered white. Strangely, the handle felt both sturdy and malleable in my hands. Its elegant scabbard was likely made from spirit stone. It was pearly without the slightest imperfection.

With this thing at my side, I could finally take *it* on.

Gripping my legendary weapon, I left the warp dungeon from hell behind me and prepared to take down the guardian protecting the secret boss's throne room.

◆ Dungeon: "Eternal Cycle of Rebirth," Area 12

For Kyouichirou Shimizu—the pathetically weak tutorial boss—the rule resetting everyone's combat stats back to level 1 might have actually been beneficial.

If players were forced to clear the dungeon at level 1, that meant that even people at level 1 were capable of taking it on.

And now I had acquired Laevateinn.

This legendary super-ultra-rare weapon had a special ability that vastly lowered the difficulty of this dungeon. Receiving it was like being thrown a life raft as I drowned in the ocean.

Adding this overpowered weapon to my already vast knowledge of the game, I felt less like a pig with a string of pearls and more like an overpowered cheater. Crappy tutorial-boss stats or not, I was more than prepared to mop the floor with the *guardian*.

Vreeeeeeee!

...Or so I thought.

Ahead of me was Area 12, the final stretch before the secret boss's room. Marble flooring and stained-glass windows full of beautifully dressed angels lent Area 12 a hint of the sublime. Or they would have, if not for the presence of one particularly large, very out-of-place figure.

Farther back in the room was a white bird with a massive crown on its head. Its majestic wings were just for show. This thing couldn't fly. But even

grounded, it was no pushover.

“...I was really hoping I wouldn’t run into you, Vidofnir.”

As soon as its name left my lips, the snow-white chicken let out another ear-piercing screech as its massive avian body began to lumber forward.

Suddenly, a desire to flee welled up from the depths of my soul and grabbed hold of me.

How’s an average human middle schooler like me supposed to take on a sixteen-foot bird?

And I’m Kyouichirou Shimizu! I’ve been reincarnated in this body for all of one day! Me, “an overpowered cheater”? What am I, nuts?! Even with Laevateinn, I’m just a grubby little piggy. What the crap am I supposed to do with all these pearls?!

I need to run. I’ve gotta get the hell out of here. I don’t care about how powerful this thing is or that I can’t avoid it. All I care about is not dying. I don’t want to die. I want to live. I got the ultra-rare legendary weapon. Isn’t that enough? If I stay here, I’m totally—

“Hmph! Flatter me all you want—you won’t get anything beyond a second helping.”

My sister’s words from the day before suddenly echoed in my ears.

My sister. She was so kind, and such a good cook, and just a little bit of a glutton. She meant the world to me.

I didn’t know what it was, but picturing her in my mind’s eye made something stir inside me. She was more than just a favorite character to me now, and I could feel all sorts of emotions welling up from deep inside me.

...Oh. I think I get it.

No matter how much of a hard-core *Dungeon Magia* nerd I was, it *did* seem weird that I would risk my life for a character I had only just met, even if I was a huge fan.

But what if these feelings *didn’t belong to me alone*?

“Damn it! Come on, Kyouichirou, you piece of crap! Let’s do this!”

I took a deep breath and gave up on running away.

I was scared. I knew my own limits. But there was someone inside me screaming with everything he had, demanding we save Sis.

The beastly chicken was roughly sixty feet away from me. If we kept moving, the two of us were bound to collide.

...Usually, I’d assume its first attack would be physical. But...

I thought back to my gaming days and remembered Vidofnir’s attack pattern.

Its first move wasn’t physical at all.

Vreeeeeeee!

The monstrous rooster let out another piercing screech as white spiritual light radiated from its body.

This was Crown Pressure—a skill that gradually sapped an opponent’s spiritual power (what would be called MP in most other games).

This attack would usually be a death sentence. As if being forcibly returned to level 1 wasn’t bad enough, having your spiritual power sapped would remove one of the few options you had left to fight back.

But I’d been a pathetic loser from the very start, and I didn’t have any spirits to use anyway.

And that meant...

“Your skill’s useless against me!”

As I shouted, I sliced at the demonic bird. In a flash, I lopped off its right leg.

Laevateinn’s unique ability was called Karmic Sever: “If an object touched by this dagger’s blade is attached to a sentient life-form, that object is guaranteed to be severed.” It was a very overpowered ability.

I remember players describing it as dealing flat damage that ignored defense. And now this divine weapon danced in time with the movement of my hands.

It twirled gracefully, taking with it an arm, tearing into the bird’s stomach,

stabbing its tender throat, and slicing its wings to shreds.

The creature had no time to resist my onslaught. *Dungeon Magia* may have been a turn-based RPG, but unfortunately for this overgrown chickadee, I wasn't playing a game this time around. In real life, the strong take as many turns as they like, and the weak writhe in agony.

I sliced, diced, cut, slashed, gashed and minced. I murdered that chicken.

My mind was blank. What came next didn't matter.

I knew if I didn't cut this punk down to size, my sister and I were going to be losers forever.

I had to win. No matter what. *I'll take this thing down, meet the secret boss, and then I'll... I swear I'll...*

"I. Will. Save. My. Sister!!!"



When I came to my senses, Vidofnir was already dead.

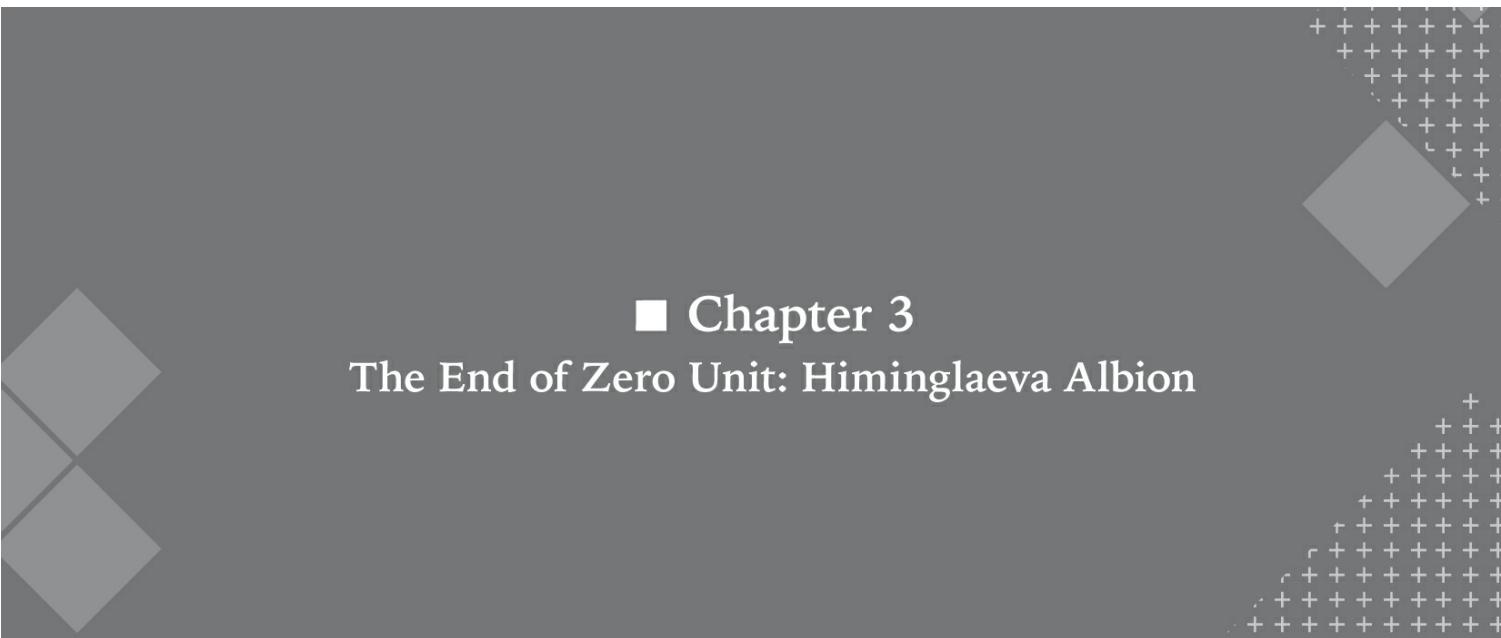
A deep sense of relief washed over me as I watched the massive bird dissolve into flecks of light and disappear. Then I walked over to the fourth door on the left.

Hope you're ready for me, secret boss. I think it's time we had a chat.

There was nothing left to get in my way.

All I had to do was go through that final door.

I reached out and grabbed the knob...



■ Chapter 3

The End of Zero Unit: Himinglaeva Albion

When I came to, the world around me was completely white.

Even the horizon was rendered invisible. And there, in the center, stood a single young girl.

She, too, was white, from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head.

A white-colored girl in a white-colored room. It should have been difficult to even see her, but to my eyes, she stood out clearly.

She was anything but normal, after all. The very sight of her made that clear. She was special, divine, and remarkably beautiful.

My gaze fell on her equipment.

She was wearing an immaculate armored dress with a pure white military overcoat. Several swords hung at her hip. She looked like she was going to war —like she existed only to fight. And yet she had an air of innocence that contradicted her mode of dress.

Her facial features were perfectly balanced, as though crafted by the hand of a master artisan. Her luscious, vibrant lips were like a single rose that had somehow wandered into this pure white world.

Her hair was of particular note. It was completely white, cut short, and meticulously maintained. Pure as the driven snow, it shone with a mysterious luster. Just looking at it drew a sigh of longing from my lips.



Her beauty transcended human logic. She was dignified, sublime. There could be no mistake. This was the secret boss.

This girl was the strongest spirit in the first *Dungeon Magia* and one of the Ultima—beings from across the series who were in a class of their own.

“Confirm. Are you the individual who activated this unit?” she asked flatly. This was Himinglaeva Albion—aka Ultima IV, the End of Zero Unit.

“That is correct,” I responded. She was so divine that I couldn’t help answering with utmost courtesy. “I am the one who summoned you.”

Her aura alone completely overpowered me. I couldn’t imagine defeating her. Hell, I could barely imagine fighting her.

The hero really was something else. Sure, he’d only arrive here after clearing the whole rest of the game, and with an entire party in tow, but still.

“Oh crap, that’s right,” I said, remembering where I was. “The fight!”

I immediately got down on my hands and knees and prostrated myself with my forehead against the ground. I needed to show the secret boss that I meant no harm.

“As you can see,” I told her, “I bear you no ill will. I beg of you, please spare me from the Ceremonial Trial.”

The Ceremonial Trial was the official name of this boss fight, and it began like this: After clearing the rest of the game, the heroes release Himinglaeva. However, once awakened, she declares, “Unauthorized access detected,” and enters battle mode before the heroes can get a word in edgewise. Then and there, the Trial begins, and the heroes fight Himinglaeva.

Pretty standard stuff, right? Makes perfect sense. It was natural for a secret boss to challenge a player to fight immediately upon encountering them.

But, natural or not, this was now a matter of life and death for me. Laevateinn would not be enough to bring me victory, either—nothing would. I could get as strong as I liked, and I would never stand a chance against Himinglaeva.

So I chose to put my all into begging for mercy. I threw myself at her and pleaded for reprieve.

“Please, I beg of you! Have mercy on me! I, Kyouichirou Shimizu, am a mere peon in your presence. I am no more a threat than a Chihuahua off the street. Should you choose to ignore my entreaties and fight me, I assure you that your very first attack would end me. Nay! I am confident a mere glance from your eminence would be enough to make me crap my pants to death. If you would only understand that, then I, the crap-stained Kyouichirou, would be as happy as a man blessed with infinite riches. Oh, I know! If it would please you, I could lick one of your shoes. I would gladly do anything to demonstrate my reverence, O Goddess. Heh-heh-heh...”

Wait. Where was I going with this again?

“Inessential / Incorrect response. You have been deemed qualified. Ceremonial Trial not required. Additionally, this unit has assessed your linguistic skill level to be as follows: abominable and beyond comprehension.”

My determined entreaties seemed to have done the trick. The young girl in white decided to forego the Ceremonial Trial.

Part of me was relieved, while another part began to wonder if I hadn’t gone a little too far there. *Well, best to just not think about it.*

Besides, something else had caught my attention. Something that was way more important than my worthless dignity.

“I’m qualified?” I asked her.

The secret boss nodded. “Response: ‘Qualified’ individuals are as follows—those with familial ties to the special bloodline with exclusive access to Ultima. Bloodline of Shimizu the Undying has been detected within you. Thus, this unit has deemed you qualified.”

I got the feeling I’d just become privy to a facet of this game’s backstory that even years of gameplay had never taught me.

Of course! It finally makes sense. That’s why Sis’s story is the key to unlocking the secret boss. Looks like there really was a connection after all.

It suddenly made sense why my kindhearted angel of a sister was the owner of the key that led to Himinglaeva. The fact she entrusted it to the heroes, too, began to seem like fate.

...I had a lot of thoughts on the matter, but right now what mattered was that I'd successfully avoided the Ceremonial Trial.

After a quick sigh of relief, I faced the girl in white and got back on the ground, my forehead scraping against the floor.

"You have my heartfelt gratitude for your kind response," I said. "However, shameless as I am, I have a request for you, Your Grace. Would you be so kind as to hear my plea?"

"Affirmative / Inessential: Your request is acceptable. Furthermore, this unit advises you to cease speaking in unnecessarily formal language. Please speak colloquially to maximize ease of communication."

"I truly appreciate your consideration. However, I—"

"Repeat: Please speak colloquially to maximize ease of communication."

"...Thank you kindly...?"

"Simplifying statement: This unit requests you speak casually."

"Casually? You mean...I should say 'thanks'? 'Preciate it'? That sorta thing?"

"...Acknowledged. This unit deems the specified style of speech suitable."

I wasn't sure why the conversation had gone in this direction, but Himinglaeva was insisting I use informal speech. I had been trying not to offend her, but if casual was what she wanted, I decided I would play along.

"My name's Kyouichirou Shimizu. Well, that's my name now, anyway."

"Query: Meaning of 'now' is unclear. This unit speculates this unnecessary addition is the result of your lack of linguistic skill. Is this inference acceptable?"

"No, it's not. There's some stuff I want to talk to you about that I think will clear up your confusion. Would you mind hearing me out?"

"Redundancy / Request: Your query has already been addressed. This unit advises that you refrain from meaningless questions to facilitate smooth communication."

Despite her cute appearance, this secret boss had a sharp tongue.

I had a feeling it was just part of her character, but Himinglaeva repeated

herself all the time, so I found this demand rather unfair.

...Well, whatever. Best just do as she says and try to keep the conversation going.

“Fine. This is a bit of a long story, though, so I hope you’re ready. For starters...”

I told her everything.

About how I’d come from another world, about the game known as *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*, and about how my sister and I needed Himinglaeva’s help to avoid our grisly fates.

I tried not to leave out a single detail. I didn’t have the luxury of being stingy, and I had nothing to gain from hiding anything.

“...And that’s why we need you, Himinglaeva.” When I was done speaking, I lowered my head again.

The secret boss answered me in her usual flat tone. “...Confirmed. This unit has a general understanding of your current situation. Taking into consideration that you have acquired Laevateinn and reached this place despite being an ordinary human, this unit concludes that your explanation is sufficiently reasonable.”

Looks like she believes me, at least. Thanks, Laevateinn. This would have never happened if I hadn’t fought so hard to get you.

“Inquiry: This unit requests a response to several queries. Is this acceptable?”

“Of course. Ask away.”

I answered without hesitating. The fact that she had questions meant she was interested in my plight.

It was a good start—great, even. A glimmer of hope shone in my heart as I silently waited for the secret boss’s question.

“Inquiry: Requesting response to the following. What does this unit stand to gain from forming a pact with you?”

But the girl in white’s question was already set to the maximum difficulty

level.

What could the secret boss—the strongest boss in the game—possibly stand to gain from helping out this loser from the tutorial?

Normally, the answer would be absolutely nothing. A small fry like Kyouichirou wasn't holding any cards that could be used to negotiate. I understood that. But it didn't matter.

I took all that into account when I replied, "Yeah," and shot her a big, bold grin.

After all, I might have been Kyouichirou. But I also *wasn't* Kyouichirou. I was a particularly strange version of Kyouichirou who remembered being a gamer from another world. And that gamer had spent countless hours playing *Dungeon Magia*.

"My mind is full to bursting with very valuable information about this world," I said. "If I were to share it with you, it could help you achieve your deepest desire. It could help *all of you*."

Himimglaeva's demeanor changed instantly. The air filling the white world was suddenly suffocatingly thick.

"From your reaction, I take it you understand what I'm talking about," I continued. "Don't worry. This isn't a lie or a bluff. I know the truth about you." I chose my words as carefully as possible and kept my voice cheerful to avoid putting her on edge as I slowly revealed what I had brought to the table. I could feel sweat running down my back. This was it. The critical moment. "That's right. Your wish. In other words..."

I trailed off, then took a deep breath. In my mind's eye, I drew up a plan for how I wanted this conversation to go.

This is fine, I thought. I can do this. I can definitely do this.

I repeated those words in my mind, mentally preparing myself before resuming my negotiations with the powerful secret boss. It was time to reveal a certain *spoiler*.

"In other words, as my part of the bargain, I can help you meet the other

Ultima."

Ultima was the name given to the top class of spirits in *Dungeon Magia*.

The game had seven classes of spirits: Low, Middle, High, Parano, Demis, Jin, and Ultima. (Technically, there were ten, since Demis was itself split into four separate classes, but let's forget that for now.) And the Ultima stood at the apex of that hierarchy. Essentially, they were a group of extra-dimensional beings with powers surpassing even the divine.

Each Ultima had a crazy, intricate backstory—the Dragon King, ruler of all dragonkind; an incarnation of sheer cosmic terror alive since time immemorial; the custodian of the space-time continuum. They existed throughout the series, awaiting players as endgame content. At minimum, they might be the game's final boss. Usually, they were even more powerful.

And yet, despite all this, the Ultima were incomplete—mere pupae.

"All I can say is that each Ultima grows more powerful by meeting other Ultima... Actually, it's not that they grow more powerful. It would be more accurate to say they come one step closer to completion. Yes, that's right. Despite their strength, the Ultima are, in truth, incomplete."

The game's producer had once said those very words at an offline event.

Fans at the time, including myself, absolutely lost their minds when all this was officially confirmed.

I remembered staying up all night looking at amazing fanart depicting players' ideas of what a perfect Ultima might look like. *Man, just remembering all that excitement gets me so hyped. My halcyon otaku days of yore.* I tended to remember my life as pretty glum, but thinking back to moments like those made me realize that I had a lot of fun, too.

...Whoops. Sorry. Got a bit nostalgic there for a second and lost track of the story.

Now, then. Where were we? Right. My side of the bargain.

There were three facts of particular importance to consider:

Fact #1: Every Ultima in the canon was incomplete.

Fact #2: Ultima came closer to completion by meeting other Ultima.

Fact #3: I knew exactly where every Ultima was and the conditions needed to make them appear.

And so, I could offer Himinglaeva—

“In other words, O Goddess, if you would heal my sister, I will swear to help you in your mission to become complete. I can provide you with recommendations for the best humans to form contracts with, support you in meeting the conditions to summon your brethren, and of course, give you detailed information on each and every Ultima. That’s what you stand to gain from forming a pact with me. I will make sure you are adequately rewarded for your services.”

“.....”

Once my little presentation was over, Himinglaeva fell silent. An ominous quiet filled the white space.

I was sure I had managed to move her. Faced with the man who had broken her seal and revealed the secret of the Ultima, she had to feel something.

Has she got doubts? Or maybe she's just taking her time thinking over what I said. I don't want to interrupt her and risk getting on her bad side. I'll just keep my mouth shut for now.

“Comprehension / Intrigue / Doubt: This unit finds your terms intriguing. However, several new problems have been detected.”

“I’m guessing you want to ask me something, right?”

“Affirmative / Inquiry: This unit wishes to inquire about the following...” The girl in white’s silvery eyes stared directly into mine. From those twin orbs, like unclouded gemstones, I sensed that she would not accept any lies or excuses. “For what reason must you help Fumika Shimizu?”

I almost scoffed. *Isn’t that obvious?* But then I stopped and swallowed my words.

“...I guess the fact that I’m her brother isn’t enough to convince you, huh?”

“Affirmative / Incomprehensible: Kyouichirou Shimizu is Fumika Shimizu’s

brother. However, you are merely a stranger borrowing Kyouichirou's body. Your desire to save her at the risk of your own life cannot be rooted in biology."

Himinglaeva's argument was completely reasonable.

Basically, what the secret boss was saying was this: I had only become Fumika Shimizu's brother one day ago, so there was no logical reason for me to play the good sibling and put my life on the line for her sake.

Gimme a break. That's low. What a brutal question.

Weren't people in *isekai* stories supposed to gloss over stuff like that?

But she'd asked, and that meant I had to answer. This was a negotiation, after all. If I couldn't get the other party to understand my point of view, I'd be walking away empty-handed.

"...Well, let's see. I can think of at least three reasons off the top of my head." I raised my index, middle, and ring fingers as I spoke. "First, it would serve as confirmation. Like I mentioned before, Kyouichirou Shimizu is supposed to die a very idiotic death in the not-so-distant future. I still don't know if I can avoid that fate. Saving my sister is one way to confirm if that's possible."

I kept my words as matter-of-fact as possible. That was our reality—the Shimizu siblings were guaranteed to die during the events of *Dungeon Magia*. Though the nature of our deaths might differ, our family's tragic demise was guaranteed across all routes.

And the reason we had to die was, in all likelihood, the girl who stood before me.

Himinglaeva Albion was an Ultima—one of the strongest spirits in the world. She was the secret boss of the first *Dungeon Magia*, and she had deep ties to the Shimizu family.

This is getting a bit meta, but the Shimizu siblings' whole reason for existing was basically to trigger the events leading the heroes to fight Himinglaeva. Heck, you could say that was the entire family's only purpose.

Our mother and father died in a cave-in many years prior. Our grandparents on both sides were also deceased. And our aunt—our last living relative—would

also die during the events of the game (something I'd realized while talking to my sister the night before). And then, of course, there were me and my sister.

...Honestly, what the heck? Does the Shimizu family really have to be so cursed?

I understood that the Himinglaeva fight couldn't occur as long as the Shimizus remained alive. But in that case, why not just change the damn plot?! How hard would it have been to tweak the Himinglaeva plotline ever so slightly so it didn't involve us? Couldn't the devs just let us live happily ever after as regular people? Why'd they have to wipe out an entire family line for one stupid secret boss fight? What a bunch of bull—!

...Oh. Whoops. There I go, getting distracted again. Anyway, the most important thing to know here was that my sister and I were destined to die. But in that case, approaching the problem from the other direction, if I could manage to save one of us, then...

“Summarizing: You believe that if you can prevent Fumika Shimizu’s death, it will serve as proof that you can also prevent your own demise.”

“Yes. So I clearly have something to gain by saving her.”

“.....”

The girl in white silently nodded. I took that as a sign to keep talking.

“The second reason’s a really personal one, but...I truly love this world.”

Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia changed my life, and that was no exaggeration. It was the first dating sim I ever played. And even now, after playing countless classics of the genre, I still considered it the very best one. It was just that good.

Back then, there was a lot going on in my life, and I was struggling with depression. *Dungeon Magia* saved me.

It taught me the joys of being a real otaku and brought me together with other fans. And from there, I learned the joy of sharing what I loved with others.

And now I'd been reincarnated into that game's world and met a character I was nuts about face-to-face. I'd even gotten to eat her home-cooked meals. I'd

lost my parents at an early age back in my own world, too. So, getting to eat Sis's delicious hamburger steak cooked with love had brought tears to my eyes. Eating a beloved character's cooking would be any otaku's dream come true. My debt was far greater than the price of a meal and a bed.

"Us otaku are an intensely emotional bunch of dummies. We pay out the ass for a few pixels, and we're happy to do it. And if we find out a piece of merch includes a character we like, we'll buy up as many as we can find."

Some people might laugh at us and call us stupid. Others might look down on us and say we're gross.

But you know what? Screw it! I don't care if it's stupid. Common sense can go to hell. What's wrong with dedicating your life to the things you love? Go ahead, call me a dummy or a child! Those normies can talk as much crap as they want. Otaku aren't trying to impress anyone. Caring about what others think of your own personal tastes sounds like a crappy way to live, and anyone who wants to force that on me can shove it.

"It's not like she's a complete stranger," I said. "She's a character I like from a game that I love. I could never forgive myself if I just left her to die."

Otaku don't care about how cost-effective their decisions are. Anyone who thinks it matters to us if something is "just ones and zeroes" or "just a piece of cloth" is barking up the wrong tree in the wrong forest.

"And besides," I continued, "otaku are easy. All it takes is one home-cooked meal from our best girl and we're ready to risk our lives."

"Astonishment: You mean to say you are willing to sacrifice your very life for a mere hobby?"

A resounding "Of course!" burst forth from deep within my heart.

You hear that, otaku of the world? We should be proud.

"But even I'm not crazy enough to make a once-in-a-lifetime decision after only a day and a half to think it through. And that brings us to my third reason." Without skipping a beat, I launched into my final justification. "To summarize, this isn't really up to me. Or rather, it's not up to *just* me. This body's original owner also wants to save Sis. It's his wish, too."

Kyouichirou Shimizu, that goofy punk of a miniboss from the first *Dungeon Magia*. He was a weak loser—not even strong enough to make the heroes look good. To most players, he was nothing more than a joke. I'd felt the same.

But something became clear to me once I reincarnated into Kyouichirou's body. After thinking over what I'd learned, I realized that from the very start, Kyouichirou had just wanted to save his sister.

Fumika's body was getting weaker by the day, and he'd simply been trying his best to help her the only way he knew how.

The fact that he'd managed to capture and control two spirits, even if they were only Low spirits, was proof enough to me. He might not have stood a chance against the heroes, but he'd tried his best anyway, and those two spirits were a testament to his efforts.

What's more, I felt like I finally understood the real reason he attacked the heroes seemingly out of nowhere. Now that I was seeing things from Kyouichirou's perspective instead of the player's, a hypothesis began to form in my mind.

"Nyeh-heh-heh! Bow down before the might of my Astral Skills, you fooooooools!"

He must have been after the holy woman in the hero's party. When he said "bow down," he must have been urging them to surrender. He'd needed her so desperately that he was willing to attack the heroes to try and force her to come with him.

...All things considered, there could be only one motive for his actions. He'd wanted to use the saint's overpowered healing abilities to save his sister.

"I can't say exactly how much of Kyouichirou still remains in this body. But I do know that my feelings aren't mine alone."

As I spoke, I suddenly realized the true source of the impulses I'd felt welling up from deep inside me.

When I was about to fight Vidofnir and I was so scared that I could hardly think straight, it was you that encouraged me, wasn't it, Kyouichirou?

No matter how much of a die-hard *Dungeon Magia* nerd I might have been, I wasn't sure I would have been so willing to throw away my life for a character I'd only met one day ago—even if I was a fan.

It's like someone inside me is screaming for me to save Sis.

Knowledge wouldn't be enough to win. Nor would desire alone get me where I needed to go.

We might be separate people, but we're both Kyouichirou. So make no mistake—this is my problem, too.

"I don't know why this happened to me. But as long as I've been reincarnated as Kyouichirou Shimizu, I want to make his wishes come true."

Those were my three motives: a desire to confirm, fondness for my surroundings, and an inner call to action. Summarized like that, each one seemed almost inconsequential.

But didn't every great endeavor start from simple, ordinary feelings? And if that was true, then no one had the right to criticize me for doing something weird, and I had no reason to be down on myself for making a big deal out of nothing.

I wanted to live, I wanted to save my sister, and I wanted to grant Kyouichirou's wish.

I knew that each of those ordinary desires had come together and brought me here, to where I was now. And with that understanding, I turned back to the secret boss.

"I'll say it one more time. We need your help, Himinglaeva. We need your power."

I made sure to dip my head the customary forty-five degrees in deference. Weak as I was, I put everything I had into showing her utmost respect.

A moment later, her clear voice echoed throughout the white space. "Understood. This unit has borne witness to your determination and will and recognizes the formation of a provisional pact with you."

Shock and joy shot through my body.

Yes! I freaking did it! I formed a pact with the badass secret boss!

“This is for real, right? This isn’t some kinda dream I’m gonna wake up from, is it? I don’t want any rug pulls, Goddess.”

“No issues detected. You bear the blood of Shimizu the Undying, and the ancient oath between us ensures that all of this unit’s spiritual conditions are met. This unit has been ordered to protect those of your bloodline. Furthermore, you are a unique entity with special characteristics. Forging a pact with you is therefore both necessary and logical.”

I could barely understand half of what Himinglaeva was saying. But I knew one thing—she had agreed to forge a pact with me.

“Thank you, Himinglaeva. I look forward to working with you.”

“Acknowledged. Likewise. I look forward to it as well, Master.”

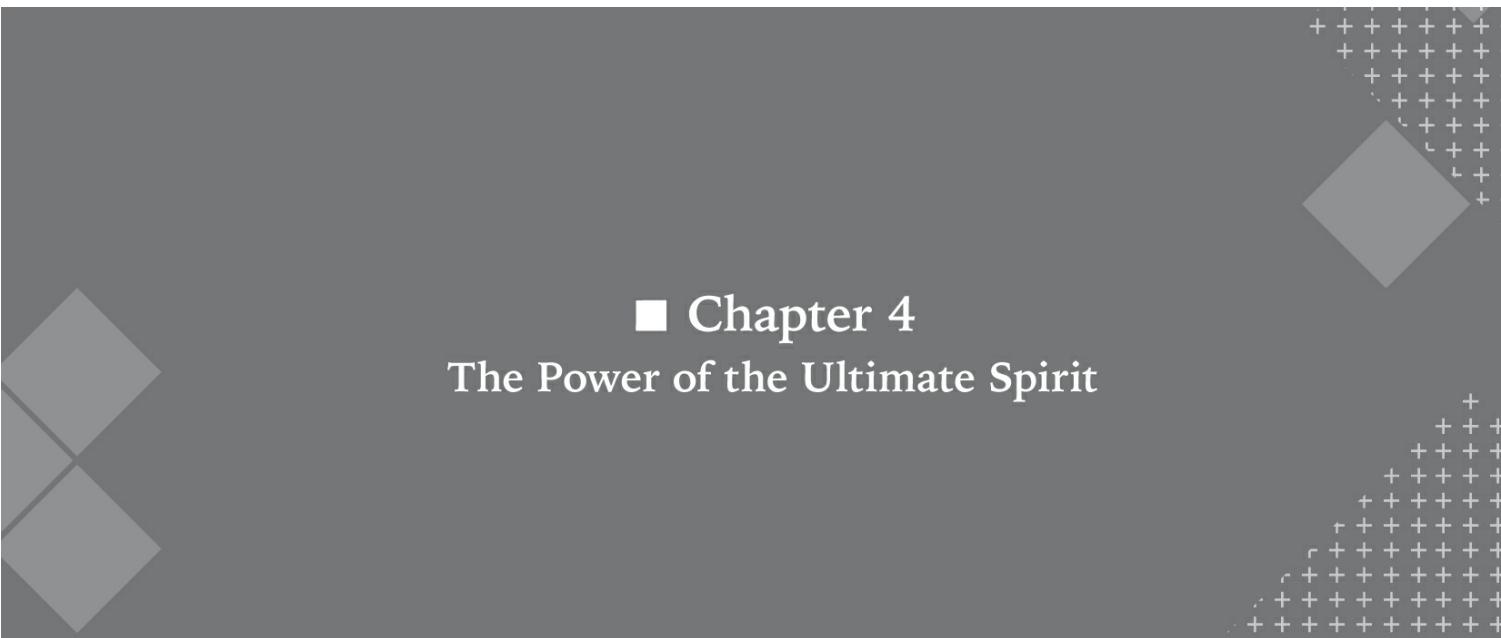
And so my first adventure came to an end. My throat parched and my heart still racing, I just barely made it out with my life. But I had successfully gathered up the ultimate spirit, a magical weapon, and maybe even a little bit of self-respect.

Not that a crummy tutorial boss deserved—

Actually, you know what? Forget it. I did my best every step of the way. I thought things through carefully, I risked my life, I was brave, and I used every tool at my disposal. I don’t want to cheapen the treasures I gained by saying I don’t deserve them.

So how about we wrap this up nice and simple?

Kyouichirou Shimizu completed his harrowing journey and collected his spoils. That was the truth of the matter and a good summary of what happened that day.



■ Chapter 4

The Power of the Ultimate Spirit

◆ Shimizu Home: Living Room

To be honest...I didn't remember much about the journey home. The road there had been so much more difficult, after all.

I had to first speedrun the secret boss's dungeon and collect Laevateinn, then fight an oversize chicken named Vidofnir, all in order to gain an audience with Himinglaeva. But even then, I wasn't home free. Once inside her chamber, what awaited me was a life-or-death negotiation with no second chances.

...What a ride. I'd had more than enough excitement. I was quite impressed that I'd managed to return at all. Come to think of it, wasn't the deck a little too stacked in my favor? A former *Dungeon Magia* player with all sorts of knowledge about the game just happened to be reincarnated as a descendent of the only family capable of officially contacting the secret boss. Wasn't that pretty damn lucky?

It's common in stories like this for a weak or disadvantaged character to turn out to be superstrong. But now that it was happening to me, rather than thrilled, I was a little put off. It felt weird, and it made me restless.

Could this situation really be random chance? Or did someone do this to me for some reason? And if they did, who could it possibly be? I just don't know. I'm not even sure where to begin. I don't like being in the dark like this. Why the hell am I even here...?

"Um, Kyou?"

"Huh? Oh! What can I do for you?"

I snapped back to my senses and looked around. I was sitting in the living room of my family's lovely home. Tea and cakes had been set on the lacquered table. Himinglaeva was sitting beside me, and my beautiful sister, Fumika Shimizu, was directly across from me. She stared at me quizzically. It was afternoon, and we were all enjoying a peaceful moment.

Oh, right. I already made it back here.

"Sorry, Sis. I was just spacing out... Uhh. So, where was I again?"

"You still haven't told me who this is..." she said, before glancing with confusion at the white-haired girl gingerly sitting next to me.

My sister was adorable. Her every gesture made my heart race. I silently wished her a long and happy life.

Actually, scratch that. No need to wish—I'll make it happen with my own two hands.

"This is Himinglaeva Albion," I explained. "I know this is hard to believe, but she's sort of like the goddess of our family's shrine...I guess?"

"That is correct. Kindly refer to me as Albi." Himinglaeva nodded, her expression blank.

Ever since leaving the shrine, she had taken off her equipment and stopped using that cringey—ahem, *unique* way of speaking. Her demeanor was now that of a rich girl with a good upbringing. In place of her armor, she wore a nice white blouse which suited her quite well.

But as you might imagine, my sister didn't believe a word of this bizarre introduction.

"Kyou, I swear! What kind of strange lies are you telling now? Why can't you

simply introduce your girlfriend to me like a regular person?"

"I'm serious, Sis. I'm not sure what you mean by 'girlfriend,' but Albi's not nearly as unscientific and unbelievable as that. She's real, and she's a genuine goddess."



"Hmph! You really think that's more believable?" Sis shot back, puffing up her cheeks in frustration.

Part of me understood what she was saying, but in my heart, I knew both were indeed equally unreal, so I held my tongue and let the matter drop.

At any rate, I'd expected this. In fact, it would have been more distressing if my sister had easily accepted we were in the presence of the divine.

I turned to see what the secret boss beside me had to say about this.

"Master, lend me your ear," she said.

"Huh? Uh, sure. What's up?" I did as she said and leaned over so my left ear was near her mouth.

"At this rate, we will get nowhere. I'll come up with a suitable story. You must simply play along, Master."

"A-all right. Thanks, Himinglaeva."

"Kindly refer to me as Albi."

I turned back to my sister and saw her pouting at us. *She's such an angel!*

"And just what are you two whispering about?" she asked. "Whatever the big secret is, I'd like to be included. I'm starting to get jealous."

"My apologies," said the secret boss. "There is no cause for alarm. Our relationship is not what you suspect."

"Oh?" asked my sister. "Then what *is* your relationship?"

"Well, you see, to put it simply..."

Himinglaeva—or, rather, Albi—skillfully moved her shapely lips...

"I owe your brother a debt of gratitude. He found me when I lost my memory, you see, and he gave my life purpose."

...and a bunch of nonsense tumbled out.

"Kyou, is this true?!"

"Huh...? Uh. Yep. Absolutely."

"We met on the shrine grounds," she continued. "I had no idea what I was doing there. I could not even remember my name. Your brother happened upon me. He saved my life. And after that..."

She then launched into a series of lies. Her story was like a giant amalgamation of every touching melodramatic dating sim opener you've ever seen.

A girl with amnesia happens upon a kind boy in a shrine amid a shower of cherry blossoms. Her stomach gurgles, and the boy offers her some sweet bread and mutters a few pretty but difficult-to-decipher lines that sound like cryptic poetry. But wait! What's this? A group of hooligans appears as if from nowhere! The couple is surrounded! To save the boy, the girl awakens to her mysterious powers, and...

Albi continued to stretch out her pseudo-heartfelt boy-meets-girl story for the better part of an hour. And, unbelievably, my sister bought it. Between sobbing fits, she wiped jewel-like tears from her face.

"Ngh... Sob. What an incredible tale full of drama and heroism!"

"Um, yeah. Exactly," I said. "Totally. So, um, if it's all right with you, Sis, can Albi—?"

"I don't need to hear another word, Kyou!" she said, cutting me off. "This girl... We must take her in and look after her!" My sister was adamant.

I was relieved that things had gone so smoothly, but I was a little worried, as well. My sister seemed a little *too* kind and trusting.

"Do not worry, Master." Albi seemed to see straight through me. She leaned into my ear and whispered, "The reason your sister believed my story is because of her bloodline. Those with the blood of Shimizu the Undying have been tied to me since the forging of our ancient oath. They have worshipped me ever since. And so to them, my words are divine."

"So, what you're saying is..."

"Members of the Shimizu line will do anything I ask and believe anything I say."

“That’s terrifying!”

I reeled at the implications of what she was telling me.

Oh boy. I hope I didn’t just unleash an evil deity on the world that should have stayed sealed away forever.

“Rest assured, I haven’t the slightest desire to manipulate your family. As long as you keep your promise to me, Master, I will act as your loyal servant.”

Does that mean that if I don’t keep my promise, she’ll do something truly heinous...? Probably best not to think about it.

After putting such worries out of my mind, I turned back to my sister. She looked thrilled to be adding a new member to our family.

“So, listen, Sis,” I said. “Albi’s got these mysterious powers.”

“You mean the ones she used to chase off those brutes that had you both surrounded?”

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely. It’s, uh, related to the power she mentioned. It’s like an offshoot of it.” Weaving the truth into Albi’s lies, I tried to cut to the chase. “Albi seems to have the ability to heal wounds and illnesses. Like she said, I had to fight it out with those punks, right? Well, just look. There’s not a scratch on me. And it’s all thanks to Albi’s healing powers.”

I’d fought, all right, but not against anything as cute and cuddly as a bunch of shrine-invading punks. But that wasn’t relevant just now. Going along with Albi’s nonsensical story seemed like the quickest way to get my sister to agree, and besides, I didn’t want to worry her.

“So, that said, here’s an idea—you’ve been fighting off a bit of a cold, right? Or, I guess I should say, you’ve been feeling pretty under the weather for a while now, haven’t you? If you don’t mind, how about we have Albi take a look?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to trouble her, but...”

And just like that, my sister was on board. We were in the world of *Dungeon Magia*, after all. No one hesitated to accept the existence of fantastical powers.

Okay, Albi... I signaled her with my eyes.

Before I knew it, the secret boss had consumed all the tea and snacks on the table and moved toward my sister as if going for an after-dinner walk.

"It may get a little bright," Albi told her. "Please close your eyes."

"O-okay."

My sister did as she was told, and Albi placed a hand on her forehead.

The change came slowly. A pale white light poured out from Albi's palm. It wasn't blinding, but most people would probably have found the baseball-sized glow very bright and rather warm.

Its light flickered and fanned out as it gently caressed Fumika.

Please... Please work.

I watched as the scene unfolded, and I prayed with everything I had.

C'mon Sis. Please. You're my only family. I want to save you. I want you to be healthy again. I would give anything to know that you're safe.

So please, O Goddess. I'm begging you. Save my sister.

After about a minute, the light coming from Albi's palm slowly began to fade until it vanished like a whiff of smoke.

"Sis! Are you okay?" I ran to my sister's side, my heart pounding.

"I can't...believe this..." she said. She opened her eyes wide, and her whispery voice began to tremble. "It doesn't hurt to breathe anymore... And my body—it feels so light." She took a deep breath. "Ahh... The air. It's so clean!"

How could I possibly describe how I felt in that moment? Joy leaped up from the depths of my heart.

Albi shot me a thumbs-up, signaling that her efforts had been successful. Meanwhile, a smile crept over my sister's face. I had never seen her look so serene.

We had done it.

The corners of my eyes felt hot, and I put my hands to my face as if to hold back my tears. It was going to work.

We could change our grim fates.

We'd just scored our first point against this awful plotline that seemed to have it out for us.



Later that day, the Shimizu household threw a party to commemorate my sister's recovery and welcome Albi into the family. It felt more like an eating contest between the two girls, mind you. But it was a lot of fun all the same.

I was surprised by how much my sister ate. She had gotten a second helping the day before, but I now realized that was further proof of how sick she was. Her real appetite was much, much more impressive. And yet, it seemed she had found a worthy rival...

"You're no slouch either, huh?" I remarked. "You've eaten a ton already."

The secret boss had on her usual blank expression as she worked through some ice cream after her bath.

"What's normal for a spirit is very different from what's normal for a human. Attempting to classify what constitutes a 'ton' from your narrow vantage point is simply ridiculous." Her face was flushed from her bath. "Besides, it is common courtesy for the object of worship to partake of all that is offered to them."

"Oh yeah? I wonder..." If you asked me, it sounded like she was just trying to justify her gluttony.

"You doubt my words? You're quite insolent for a Shimizu, Master."

"That's because the person in this body *isn't* a Shimizu. But anyway. I've got nothing but gratitude and respect for you."

In her current form, Albi didn't have a shred of that solemn dignity she'd possessed when we first met. But she was still the one who saved my sister.

"Thanks again, Albi. Seriously. Now it's my turn. I've still gotta fulfill my promise."

"Yes. About that..." She set her now empty cup of vanilla ice cream aside and locked eyes with me. "There is a serious, urgent problem we must attend to."

Her sudden change in tone surprised me, but I leaned in all the same.

“Okay, what is it?” I asked. “What’s the problem?”

Albi nodded. “Master. You are weak and completely useless,” she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

I could practically hear my last scrap of dignity shattering.

Unfortunately, there was no arguing the facts. Not only was I now inhabiting Kyouichirou’s body, but I had been an ordinary nobody my whole life. And I came from a peaceful world without any spirits or dungeons. So, yeah, no kidding I was a useless weakling. But Kyouichirou was meant to be a pushover. That was just the sort of character he was.

“You’re absolutely right. But in that case, why not just form a new pact with someone stronger? I could hang around and support the two of you.”

Wasn’t that why our pact was provisional in the first place? But the girl in white shook her head before I could say anything else.

“That would be in breach of our contract. Our pact was forged based on the understanding that I would save the Shimizu *siblings* from their deadly fates. However, at present, I have saved neither Fumika Shimizu nor Kyouichirou Shimizu.”

“Huh?”

What Albi said didn’t make any sense. Had I simply misunderstood her? Or perhaps I’d misheard her.

“Uh, Himinglaeva, what do you mean you haven’t saved either of us? You’re making it sound like you didn’t just save my sister.”

“Indeed. My contractual obligation to both of you is still in effect. And, please, kindly refer to me as Albi.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up,” I said. “You literally just healed my sister with your powers, didn’t you?”

My sister was currently relaxing in the bath. Her skin seemed brighter than before, and she moved more gracefully. She had an appetite, and the color had returned to her face. She’d even stopped coughing. Anybody would think she

was the picture of perfect health.

She's fine now. She has to be! She...has to be... Right?

"Yes. I have halted the curse affecting your sister."

"Exactly! So, in that case..."

"But it has only been halted."

"...Ngh."

I had the feeling I wasn't going to like what she was about to say.

"As you are well acquainted with the ways of this world, Master, I am sure you know that my powers are to 'manipulate time' and to 'alter cause and effect.'"

The secret boss's abilities were unbelievably powerful, befitting of the ultimate spirit. And that was why...

"I thought you could use your powers to turn back time and make it so she was never cursed in the first place. Can't you do that?"

That was what I'd been hoping for, and it was the whole reason I'd set out on that bonkers adventure through her dungeon. And yet...

"The answer to your question is yes. But it is also no."

The spirit known as Himinglaeva Albion did indeed possess those abilities. To her, going back and altering fate would be a trifle.

But Albi, the spirit who had forged a pact with Kyouichirou Shimizu, did not necessarily have access to the full extent of those powers. That was what she meant. *Shouldn't she have mentioned that a little earlier?*

"The problem stems from the fact that you are presently a complete weakling."

Her words traveled through my ears and reached my brain. As I mulled them over, I did my best to stave off the gloomy feeling welling up inside me. I pumped myself up with false courage and kept at it, until all of a sudden, I remembered a certain in-game system.

"I need to raise my astral level..."

Albi nodded.

Astral level was a general indicator of a character's strength in *Dungeon Magia*. As the game's title—*Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*—suggests, most combat in the game revolves around spirits.

Spirits were intelligent entities from a higher dimension that had existed since time immemorial, and they constituted the truth behind countless well known myths and legends.

By using their powers, the people of this world were able to explore dungeons—corridors to other worlds—and fulfill their own personal ambitions. This was the basic format of every game in the *Dungeon Magia* series. “By using their powers” was the important bit, and this aspect of the game had a big impact on a character’s growth.

Through this unique system, powering up a character’s spirit led directly to strengthening that character. This was what was meant by one’s “astral level.” It was similar to other games with what one might call a “skill board system.” Basically, it worked as follows:

1. A player earns points by leveling up a contracted spirit.
2. The player then allocates those points in order to improve their character’s stats or teach them special skills. These improvements are thought of as the spirit’s “blessings.”

Since I had only just forged a pact with Albi and was still at my starting level, this meant that...

“Currently, you do not have enough points to use the majority of my powers.”

“That...makes sense.” I laughed bitterly and slumped to the floor. It wasn’t that Albi hadn’t turned back time. It was that she *couldn’t*. “So, you’re saying that the only reason you were able to use Time Freeze is because that skill was already unlocked? I’m guessing you can use any of your blessings at will, provided they’re available.”

“Yes, that is correct. But the ability must first be unlocked.”

To understand this, you can think of Albi as a grocery store owner and me as

her customer. The store's got a kind of apple called Time Freeze already in stock. As long as I've got enough money—aka points—to buy it, I can make that apple mine. Then, if I keep spending money at Albi's store, her business will thrive, and she can stock new products—aka blessings.

Obviously, the store's owner would have the right to use her own products however she wished. And that was why Albi was able to use Time Freeze on my sister to pause her curse's progress.

But that was her most basic skill. The absolute bottom tier. Only the tiniest manifestation of her true power. *That*, when unleashed, had the potential to make *anything possible*.

"To unlock an applied skill like Reverse Time, you will need to collect the requisite amount of experience points."

"I guess that makes sense." I nodded as realization slowly dawned on me—I was in trouble.

To sum things up, the amount of power Albi was able to use in this world was intricately tied to my astral level. That was why she, a powerful secret boss, could still only use Time Freeze—her lowest level skill—on my sister.

Even Time Freeze was practically a cheat skill. But, as Albi had told me, she had done nothing more than pause the curse's progress. The sickness eating away at my sister was still inside her body.

"Additionally, any pact I forge with someone in this realm remains in effect only as long as we are connected."

"Wait. You mean—"

"If you, O Weak Master, were to die a pathetic death somewhere out in the world, your sister's curse would reactivate and begin devouring her once more."

A cold sweat ran down the back of my neck. My sister was finally feeling better. But if something happened to me, it seemed that horrible curse would reawaken.

This is serious. I can't let that happen. I won't allow it.

But then what should I do? Can I just keep a low profile and avoid the protagonists so I don't die? ...No. That's not going to work.

While it was true that Kyouichirou originally attacked the protagonists in an attempt to save his sister, I got the feeling there was *something else* that had stirred him into action. *It* was something I couldn't simply chalk up to fate. This was a concrete force within the game, with a set of rules, and the malicious desire to cause real harm. And once this thing—the evil at the heart of the original *Dungeon Magia*—spread, my death would be all but inevitable.

And as soon as that happened, my pact with Albi would expire and the curse would reactivate—the worst conclusion I could think of.

Unfortunately, if I chose to do nothing and peacefully live out my days, whatever it was would be coming for me in the not so distant future. For that reason, I couldn't simply focus on maintaining the status quo. Unless I fully removed the curse from my sister, she was sure to die.

Think back—back to how weak I felt when I saw Vidfnir and all I wanted to do was run away. Imagine the sad and pathetic end that I—and Kyouichirou—are destined to meet. It's all because of how weak I am. I can't expect to save anyone like this, not even myself.

I wasn't heartless. I didn't think the weak deserved to die. But I knew that, in my case, at least, my weakness was likely to get my entire family killed and destroy the pact I'd only just formed with the secret boss.

This is all because I'm weak. Weak, weak, weak!

Well then, think! What can a pathetic weakling like me do?

“How much do you need to unlock the ability to turn back time?” I asked.

“By my estimation, it will require about seven spirits of the High Demis rank or greater.”

I felt like I was going to pass out.

Seven High Demis spirits? You're saying I have to beat seven bosses? And they'll all have to be either a big boss from a large dungeon or a miniboss from the game's true route...

“There’s no way. That’s too much. It’s impossible.”

“Indeed. I agree.”

I sighed, and the sound was like the dying breath of my original plan as it crumbled to ashes. I had to give up on using Albi’s ability to turn back time. I needed a new plan.

“...Let’s forget about turning back time. Instead, we’ll get right to the heart of the issue—we’ll find a cure. There are all kinds of items in this world that can heal any wound or illness in a snap, right? Elixirs. Grails. That sorta thing.”

“Such things cannot be found in the mortal realm. If you want to obtain items of that nature, you will need to enter the holy sites known as dungeons.”

“Then I’ll have to get a license... These days, only licensed adventurers are allowed inside dungeons.”

“It has been that way since the last time I was awake. Though they used a different word back then.”

“Oh yeah? Huh.”

The two of us kept talking well into the night, going over the next steps in our new plan. My proposals and the things Albi wanted lined up marvelously, and overall, it was a pretty friendly discussion.

In the end, we reached two conclusions, or rather conditions that needed to be met.

The first was that I needed to obtain an adventurer’s license. And the second...

“If I stay weak, I’m going to die, and I won’t be able to save my sister, either. Which means...”

“The only solution is for you to get stronger, Master.”

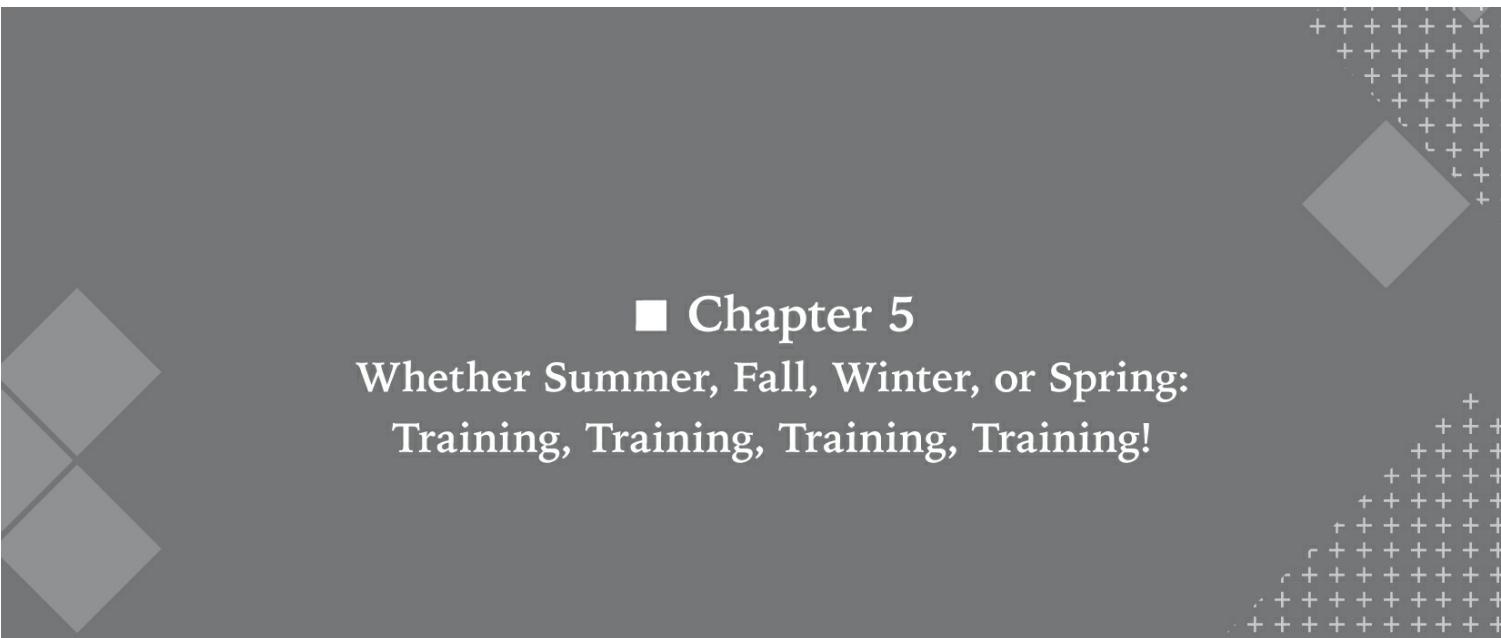
She was right. It really was that simple. I was just going to have to buck up and start training.

My first plan had fallen apart, but I still had hope.

We had now decided on a new goal, a mission I would do anything to

complete: We would go down into the dungeons and get our hands on some treasure—namely, an item able to break my sister's curse.

I'll do whatever it takes to pull this off. It's time to start grinding.



■ Chapter 5

Whether Summer, Fall, Winter, or Spring: Training, Training, Training, Training!

Herein lies the record of one pathetic weakling's attempt to get stronger, no matter how much blood, sweat, tears, and other disgusting bodily liquids he had to shed to do it.

◆◆◆ Spring: The Season of Toughening

During the first three months of my training, I simply tortured my body.

This made perfect sense, of course. In this world of dungeons and spirits, I couldn't hope to accomplish anything without first getting stronger. And besides, I was Kyouichirou Shimizu. I might have formed a pact with the most powerful spirit around, but I was still just a useless pip-squeak with an ugly mug to boot.

So when Albi suggested I work on my body, I agreed to start right away. My body was a kind of capital, and I needed to invest. First, I'd need to do some basic training. The secret boss was right. There was no skipping over the fundamentals.

But c'mon. A guy can only do so much!

“First, you need to increase your foundational strength. You will run six miles three times each day. Battle can be unpredictable, and your metabolism and stamina will be crucial if you hope to survive.

“Next, you will do fifty sets of sprints. Sprinting will increase your Agility, and help you learn to draw up power from inside you at a moment’s notice. Both of these skills are essential.

“The end goal of strength training is to increase the strength, size, and endurance of your muscles. However, attempting to improve all three aspects from the very beginning is not an effective strategy. Therefore, we will begin by focusing on your muscle strength. Until we’ve collected the necessary equipment, you will make do with some light body exercises— x squats, x push-ups, and x pull-ups. That will be your first set. Afterward, you will...”

On my first day, Albi, her face as blank as ever, walked me through the training regimen from hell.

Did I protest? You’d better believe it. I begged. I pleaded. I prayed for the sweet embrace of death to take away the pain.

This wasn’t just over-training; it was *overkill*—and I was the murder victim. No doctor in their right mind would recommend any of this.

But as Albi stuffed her face with sakuramochi, she assured me, “There is no need for concern. You have formed a pact with me. Despite your extremely low level, you have exactly enough of my protection to handle this training regimen, though we are cutting it close.”

If I’m in hell, then she’s the devil, I thought.

But Albi had a point. Characters in *Dungeon Magia* were able to move faster and jump higher than regular human beings could. And these enhanced abilities were all thanks to the divine protection bestowed upon them by their spirits.

I’d always thought it was just a clever excuse to allow pretty girls with delicate frames to leap around like superheroes, but that was beside the point...

“Hold on a sec, Himglaeva! If I’ve got access to your divine protection, then why do I need to train? If I can just use your powers to gain superhuman strength, then what point is there in busting my butt like this?!”

But in the face of my desperate pleas, the secret boss coldly replied, “You’re quite stupid, aren’t you, Master? If you get stronger independently, the effects of my protection will be increased by leaps and bounds. The stronger your natural aptitudes, the more powerful my protection becomes.

“Furthermore, improving your physical strength will manifest positive mental attributes such as confidence and bravery. There are other benefits as well. If your superior strength intimidates your enemies, you can avoid fighting unnecessary battles.

“And let me ask you this: Do you believe that one who wields the power of the spirits as though it were his own, yet complacently refuses to improve himself, is fit to change the fate of the world? Also, as it seems you never learn, I shall once again advise you, foolish Master, to kindly refer to me as Albi.”

After rejecting my useless pleas, Albi promptly plunged me into the depths of hell.

My training was brutal from the very beginning. I cried. I threw up. I think I even wet myself at one point.

And even worse—yes, it gets worse—all this training took place in *one single day* lasting *ninety-six hours*.

“Well done,” said Albi. “This marks the end of today’s training, as well as all the training we will conduct in the mortal realm. The rest of our schedule is as follows: First, a one-hour break, followed by three days of martial training within my domain. Then we shall have dinner. There is no use crying or whining. You may believe a day consists of only twenty-four hours, but such silly preconceived notions are of little use to you in my domain.”

How incredible! How utterly mysterious! It seemed that the secret boss was able to manipulate time in her home domain! Just wonderful!

For each day spent inside her shrine, only a single hour passed on the surface world. Thanks to this goddess’s incredible ability to control time, a single day could be stretched out into three or four, or even an entire week.

Strength training, combat training, basic weapons training, as well as movement, breath, and energy control. I had to admit these were all necessary

for a junior high brat who hadn't trained a day in his life and who now wished to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the big boys in a very limited amount of time.

Sure enough, Albi's training program was right on the money. Within months, my body had undergone a stunning transformation.

That said, my face had aged significantly, and my hair had gone white from stress (I now dyed it to match my natural color).

"Such sacrifices are nothing," said Albi. "You should count yourself lucky to have paid so small a price, Master."

And with that, my hellish spring was over.

◆◆◆ Summer: The Season of Strengthening

It doesn't matter how brutal their environment—over time, humans adapt and endure.

As intense as my training was, by the time I started wearing my summer uniform to school, I had already grown used to it. Frankly, I was pretty impressed with myself.

Of course, every time I began to adjust, my demon coach would up the load. Despite that, my mind and body had finally reached a point where they could more or less handle the strain.

And then, one day in June, Albi said, "It seems we are ready to move on to the next stage of your training," and began teaching me the basics of using Astral Skills.

Between the three months that had passed on the surface and the time I spent inside the shrine, about a year had gone by since my training began. It was finally time to learn about Astral Skills.

Astral Skills were, essentially, this world's magic system.

Humans who had formed pacts with spirits used them to manifest miracles from the astral plane. Characters didn't have any all-purpose energy gages, however—what other games might call MP or magical power. In fact, aside

from a few exceptions, the people in *Dungeon Magia* didn't have magical powers.

...Of course, those exceptions included whole races of magic users, so it was still pretty far removed from my old world's reality. But let's forget about that for now.

In general, at least, most characters in *Dungeon Magia* didn't have an in-born magical resource to draw from in order to manifest miracles.

So where did that power come from, then? Well...

"Let's begin with the most basic skills," said Albi. "This should be possible even for you, Master. All you need to make use of 'Shield' and 'Strength' is to circulate my spiritual power within your own body. These will enhance your defense and physical strength, respectively."

Yes, spiritual power, also known as astral power, was the force responsible for manifesting miracles in the world of *Dungeon Magia*. It was supplied to a character directly by their contracted spirits. In other words, astral power (AP for short) came not from the character, but from their spirit.

This meant that the common web novel trope of a character increasing their magical power reserve by using it every day starting from childhood wouldn't work in *Dungeon Magia*, because the people of this world didn't possess any organs capable of generating magic power.

For that reason, there were only two things that humans could do to improve their ability to use Astral Skills.

The first was to increase their astral capacity. Astral capacity was the maximum amount of spiritual power a person could store—their Max AP.

Albi explained to me that I had an internal organ near my navel used to store spiritual power and that I could strengthen it by repeatedly using and expanding it. But to be honest, this all sounded like a real pain in the butt to me.

Think about it. If this were a game, I could just grind for a while. I'd kill some low-level dudes, and before I knew it, *bam!* Level up. But now that I'd been dropped into the game for real, everything seemed so tiring...

I know, I know. It was silly to expect the real world to work like a game. Games usually minimize the unpleasant parts (or they try to, at least), but in the real world, the boring, painful, and seemingly pointless tasks necessary to improve must be personally attended to.

So I did exactly as I was told. I may have complained, and I may have hated every minute of it, but I did it again and again, every single day. No matter how painful, tough, or annoying, I kept tortuously training my body's organ for storing spiritual power. No matter how much I wanted to forget about it, the fact was that if I didn't do this, certain death awaited me.

The feeling was tough to describe, but as I trained, it felt like I was constructing a second heart inside my abdomen, and I needed to keep it beating. To do this, I had to focus on circulating blood supplied with Albi's spiritual energy throughout my body as quickly and efficiently as possible. It felt like I was a tiny butterfly trying to cross the ocean on a stormy night. Basically, it was absolute hell.

While I worked hard to increase my spiritual capacity, I also did my best to improve another fundamental skill—the amount of spiritual power I could recover.

Using skills depleted the user's AP. To counteract this, I needed to absorb astral power from my contracted spirit as quickly as possible.

This was basically the complete opposite of increasing my spiritual capacity. In the original game, a certain amount of AP was restored to each character each turn. Thankfully, this was pretty much on par with real life.

In simple terms:

1. The spirit shares astral power, the power to create miracles, with the user.
2. Using skills then depletes a portion of the AP stored in the user's body.
3. As the stored energy decreases, the spirit supplies the user with more spiritual power.

That was essentially how it worked. Pretty cool, right?

It might seem obvious, but as a user of spiritual power in this world, I would

like to applaud this incredible conversion system (actually, I already gave it a standing ovation).

A spirit's power wasn't infinite, of course. If someone used skill after skill with reckless abandon, there was the chance a spirit might run out of juice, so to speak. But my spirit—the secret boss Himinglaeva Albion—was the strongest of them all. It didn't matter how much spiritual power I spent, her blank expression never wavered as she served me refill after refill. Talk about an invaluable partner.

I wouldn't say it was easy, but this training went much smoother than I'd expected. I simply used skills until I completely depleted my AP, then Albi would supply me with more. After about a week (four weeks if you count the time we spent inside her shrine), I became quite accustomed to the process.

I was only using the most basic skills, of course, so I'd merely grasped how to do it as a training exercise. But just think—this was Kyouichirou Shimizu's body. And inside that body was just an average, run-of-the-mill office worker.

Isn't that wild? Doesn't this all sound kind of crazy?

Before this, I'd lived in a world without swords, magic, or spirits. But here I was, using mystical powers like a natural. I was starting to think I might be pretty talented.

When I said as much to Albi, she replied, "It seems your strength training has paid off, Master. The basic method of improving one's ability to use astral power is to subject the body to a heavy burden. This, in turn, increases your capacity and overall capabilities. I had a feeling that you would be able to handle it after all that physical training."

She was actually complimenting me.

So all that nightmarish training was to prepare me to use Astral Skills? Was she playing me the whole time?! This demon coach and her schemes! Sheesh!

◆◆◆ Fall: The Season of Determination

I kept training both my strength and Astral Skills together, and before long I noticed the leaves changing colors. It was around that time that my training

entered its next stage.

“It seems that you have mastered the basic techniques,” announced Albi. “I believe it’s about time you learned how to use my skills.”

Yes! It was finally time for me to learn those things all gamers crave—unique skills!

Unique skills, special abilities, traits, gifts, reincarnation powers—whatever you called them, all boys dreamed of one day laying claim to a few of their own. And the time for me to acquire mine had finally come.

I was pumped. Way more pumped than a man my age had any right to be (then again, I’d been reincarnated into the body of a fourteen-year-old, so I figured it was fine). I was so excited that, when we started training, my focus was off the charts. And yet...

“You are shockingly terrible at this, aren’t you, Master?” Albi concluded as she munched on a baked potato. It was tough to hear, but she was right.

My ability to project my power seemed to be the problem. Essentially, I wasn’t very good at taking a skill I’d prepared in my body and unleashing it at a distance.

Perhaps this was a side effect of having lived in a world where projecting auras wasn’t a part of daily life. But whatever the reason, there was something about manipulating distant objects that I just couldn’t seem to grasp.

“You are quite good at both conversion and convergence. But your aptitude for directing and scaling up skills is absolutely catastrophic.”

“And that means...?”

“Using game terminology, you excel at close-range physical combat. You would be suited to a role focused on big attacks, with secondary aptitude as a tank. You are utterly unsuited to long-range roles such as astral mage or priest.”

The secret boss’s nerdy choice of analogies was incredibly easy for me to comprehend. I suspected it had something to do with how I used every chance I got to talk to her about my deep knowledge of games.

At any rate, it seemed I sucked at long-range combat.

"So I'm like a frontline attacker with no long-range abilities, huh? That's not exactly reassuring."

There were a lot of factors to consider when it came to exploring dungeons.

In terms of combat alone, one could fight at close range, midrange, and long range. On top of that, there were various roles such as attacker, tank, or support. It was important to build a balanced party with characters occupying each role.

That said, if I was a jack-of-all-trades like the hero or the main heroines were, it might have been possible to take on dungeons by myself. Unfortunately, it seemed my skill set was much more limited in scope.

"So soloing dungeons is...basically impossible."

The dungeon with the Elixir I was after didn't require *that* much party diversity. But a close-range attacker like me (who could double as a tank) would struggle alone.

"Based on what you've told me about the dungeon in question, Master, I believe we will require an agile attacker with good weapon skills, as well as a powerful long-range attacker capable of dispatching foes with ease. Personally, I think it would also behoove us to find a healer."

I agreed with all her points.

The lower-level mobs were one thing, but when it came to the inevitable boss fights, I was going to need a skilled swordsman at the front. I'd also need a long-range bomber in the rear capable of dealing massive damage in a single attack. Obviously, we'd also need a martial artist with a solid range of skills to take down bosses.

"A tough martial artist, huh?"

The first option that came to mind was a character known for being the strongest physical attacker in the game—infamous among fans for being completely broken.

But that character hated beginners and would only join a party if someone was able to defeat them one-on-one. If I was strong enough to pull that off, I

wouldn't even need them. I quickly moved on.

Next, I considered one of the first game's five main heroines—a stoic sword user. She had the necessary skills and a strong moral compass. I had a feeling she might help if I begged her.

But I quickly realized that wouldn't work. At this point in time, she wouldn't have an adventurer's license yet. It would take way too much work to befriend her *and* convince her to become an adventurer. It just wasn't worth the effort.

Besides, I didn't want to alter her life like that. It would be a crummy thing to do both to her and to the protagonist. It might seem like a strange sentiment, considering I'd never actually met either of them, but that seemed akin to stealing the heroine away from the protagonist, and I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

Don't get me wrong. I was literally rebelling against my own crappy fate. But that didn't mean I was greedy enough to go around changing anything I liked. And besides, I had no plans to become the hero of the story.

So meeting the heroines before the protagonist did and gallivanting through a bunch of dungeons having fun, romantic adventures...Even just the thought made me want to retch.

"You focus on the most trivial things, Master," said Albi. "We don't exactly have the luxury of being picky."

"You're right. In fact, you couldn't possibly be more correct. But listen, Albi. I'm a dating sim enthusiast."

"What do you mean?" she asked, and I promptly launched into an explanation.

"Look, I don't expect us to become the heroes of this story. I still want to see the protagonist and the heroines together, y'know?"

"What a perverse desire."

"That's what it means to be a gentleman."

In response, the secret boss merely shrugged, her face as blank as ever. Though her expressions were as impenetrable as a Noh mask, after months of

training together, I had become able to read her somewhat. I could tell she had no intention of throwing in the towel. If anything, she seemed fired up.

"It will be necessary for you to form an occupational partnership if you hope to clear dungeons," she said. "Barring those not currently feasible, ignoring any potential candidates is rather unprofessional."

"I mean, the girl I was talking about isn't even an adventurer yet."

"In that case, what about her family? Or her friends? Seek them out. Skilled sword practitioners are certain to have a network of other skilled acquaintances. If you have a candidate, there is no reason to overlook their connections. This is the most basic of principles when it comes to gathering resources."

...Hngh?

Albi's criticism may have been biting, but that wasn't why I flinched. Albi often put me in my place with her sound logic, and I wasn't the type to get angry over something that petty.

The thing that caught my attention was the word *family*. *Of course. The heroine's family.*

"Remind me," I said, turning to Albi. "It's currently Imperial Year 1189, right?"

"Yes. And to answer your next question, it is approximately two years and six months before the span of time you refer to as the main plot."

She was right. There were still two and a half years until the protagonist would arrive in this city. And that meant...

"Hey, Albi. I think I've got an idea for a candidate. Mind hearing me out?"

"Very well."

I started explaining the events of this particular heroine's route, focusing on a certain girl who appears during her story.

Back home, this would have amounted to me nerding out. But now, everything I told Albi had vital, real-world significance.

"...If what you say is true," she said, "we will need to alter our schedule. You'll

have to be ready to get your adventurer's license by the beginning of spring."

She'd jumped on board immediately and she was already discussing changes to my training schedule.

As we got into the nitty-gritty of what lay ahead, my sister smiled at us. "You two have grown quite close, haven't you?" she said.

It felt odd to hear her say that. But it was also kind of nice.

Winter: The Season of Activity

By the time December painted the city white with snow, my training was almost at an end.

I had strengthened my body. I had learned the basics of manifesting Astral Skills—something I had a surprising knack for. And I had learned to use my own unique skills, though I was still experimenting to find the best approach for implementing them.

Now that winter had arrived, I needed to pull together everything I had learned. If I couldn't do that, what came next would be impossible.

It was time to learn to fight. I'd be starting real, actual combat.

To practice, I'd spent some time training in the secret boss's dungeon (it was actually more like her domain, but whatever). While there, I worked to master several different weapons. I also spent some time running battle simulations in the city's training facility. With the beginning of spring fast approaching and the Adventurer's Exam right around the corner, my every waking hour was spent fighting.

And then...

"What's the matter, Master? I'm holding this meat bun with both hands, and you haven't even managed to hit me with your sword."

"Shut it!"

I pulled myself out of the pile of snow Albi had knocked me into and activated my Astral Skills Stride (which increased power in my legs) and Strength (which did the same for my arms). The buffs enveloped the relevant parts of my body

with a white spiritual exoskeleton. I stood in the frigid snowfield, staring down the white-haired girl who had served as my coach these past months.

“I’ll show you!” I called out. “I’m nothing like the old Kyouichirou. You think I’m gonna let you kick my ass over and over again?! Here I come, Albi!”

“Very well. I sincerely hope you are able to land a blow.”

She reached into a paper bag under her arm and pulled out another steamed meat bun. Despite her words, it was clear all she cared about was her lunch.

She’s just screwing with me.

“Time to teach you what’s what!”

She’s a little under a hundred feet in front of me. There’s no way I can reach her from here. So my best bet is...

I held my wooden sword at eye level, then raised it above my head and let out as fierce a war cry as I could muster.

“Grrrraaaaaaaaahhh!”

As I shouted, I ran across the field. If I couldn’t reach her from where I was, I’d just have to take the fight to her. In the few moments between raising and lowering my sword, I flew like the wind, closing the distance between us.

I was able to move so fast thanks to a skill combo I had devised myself—Stride plus Hasten Time. Since I knew I sucked at projecting my abilities across long distances, I had racked my brain for ways to take advantage of my ability to manipulate time instead. Eventually, I landed upon this killer combo.

The Hasten Time skill was exactly what it sounded like—it allowed me to speed up time within a certain range. But in this case, I focused the increased flow of time on my body so it *only affected me*. I had essentially succeeded in turning it into a single-target speed buff. I cranked my time up as fast as it would go—sixty times my base speed. For every second of real-world time, I experienced an entire minute.

And to make sure I was moving as quickly as I could, I added Stride, which made it possible to traverse thirty yards at incredible speed. To an ordinary person, it would appear I’d warped across the field.

Using these abilities in tandem, I ran past Albi and came at her from behind. Aiming at the back of her head, I brought my wooden sword down, and...

“An excellent strike. I dare say it would have worked on anyone else.”

...she easily dodged my attack. I had expected no less from the secret boss. Even at close range, she was in complete control. However...

I predicted all this.

I chuckled internally as I backflipped to avoid her counterattack—a roundhouse kick. I didn’t stop there, though. If I had, I’d have left myself open and been pulverized. Instead, I quickly pulled Laevateinn from its place at my waist and slashed it toward my projected landing position.

“Hmph.”

Just as I’d predicted, Albi had launched an attack at the same spot. One of her delicate legs rushed out from under her skirt without a moment’s hesitation to counter with a rising kick.

Our attacks struck one another—the white-haired goddess kicking toward the heavens, and my white blade striking down from the sky.

I’ve got her!

“How naive.”

Crunch. I felt pain shoot through my midsection as her attack connected.

My newly chiseled body was sent careening across the snowy field.

So...cold... Since I had used Haste Time on myself, the cold set in sixty times faster than it normally would have.

“Damn it,” I cried. “Even that wasn’t enough?!”

As the frigid air filled my lungs, I felt the weight of my countless failed attacks crashing down on me all at once.

This is real combat using Astral Skills. I’ve been training for so long, and it’s all led up to this.

My teacher is the secret boss while I’m just the tutorial miniboss. The difference in our skills is like night and day.

“I get all that! But I thought I’d be able to land at least one blow!”

I let my hands fall to the snowy ground and sighed. I was completely burnt out. It was the dead of winter, yet my clothes were drenched in sweat.

The white-haired girl was still eating her meat bun. She hadn’t stopped for even a second. I shot her a spiteful glare.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing. I just remembered how incredible you are.”

This secret boss was strong as hell.

My pact with her had limited her abilities, and currently, she could only use the same unique skills I could (though when she used them, they were a lot more impressive). Despite that, she was still so much stronger than I was.

“How the hell did you even dodge that? It should’ve been impossible.”

“It was quite possible. Predicting someone’s next move is as easy as observing their muscle contractions, eye movements, and shifts in their center of gravity.”

Her opponent was attacking from the front one second and from behind the next. Yet apparently, in that brief instant, she’d been able to take in all that information.

“Maaan. Fighting you makes me feel like I haven’t improved one bit.”

“There is no need to speak ill of yourself,” she said, her expression serene. “I assure you that you are growing stronger every day. To begin with, your musculature has developed so much you are almost unrecognizable. I cannot detect even a trace of that scrawny hooligan I formed a pact with. You look like a bodybuilder.”

“It’s all thanks to you.”

I held my right arm up to the winter sky. My forearm looked like a tree trunk made of muscle and veins. I thought back to when I had struggled to lift even a ten-pound weight.

“Your ability to wield weapons and manipulate spiritual power has also improved dramatically. Your triple combination of Strength, Stride, and Hasten

Time was impressive to behold. While I do take issue with the amount of power using all three at once consumes, I believe the technique will come in handy during combat.”

“It feels weird to hear you compliment me so sincerely.”

“It is proof of how far you’ve come, Master. You are neither as weak nor as frail as you think. There is no harm in believing in yourself.”

A bit thrown by Albi’s genuine praise, I slowly rose to my feet.

“Thanks, Albi. But I feel like I’ve still got such a long way to go.” I wasn’t sulking. That was how I truly felt.

Even if she was right, and I had made huge strides, I knew it wasn’t enough. I knew there were plenty of areas where I still needed to improve. And it was no use pretending otherwise. If I was going to rebel against my crummy fate, I couldn’t slack off or compromise.

“Anyway. How about one more round, Albi?”

“You’re quite the perfectionist, aren’t you, Master? Though I suppose I’ve known that for some time.”

“No way. I’d describe myself as more happy-go-lucky.”

“Is that so? ...Well, you may think of yourself however you wish. Now, let us focus on improving the technique you used earlier. First, you must take your weapon and...”

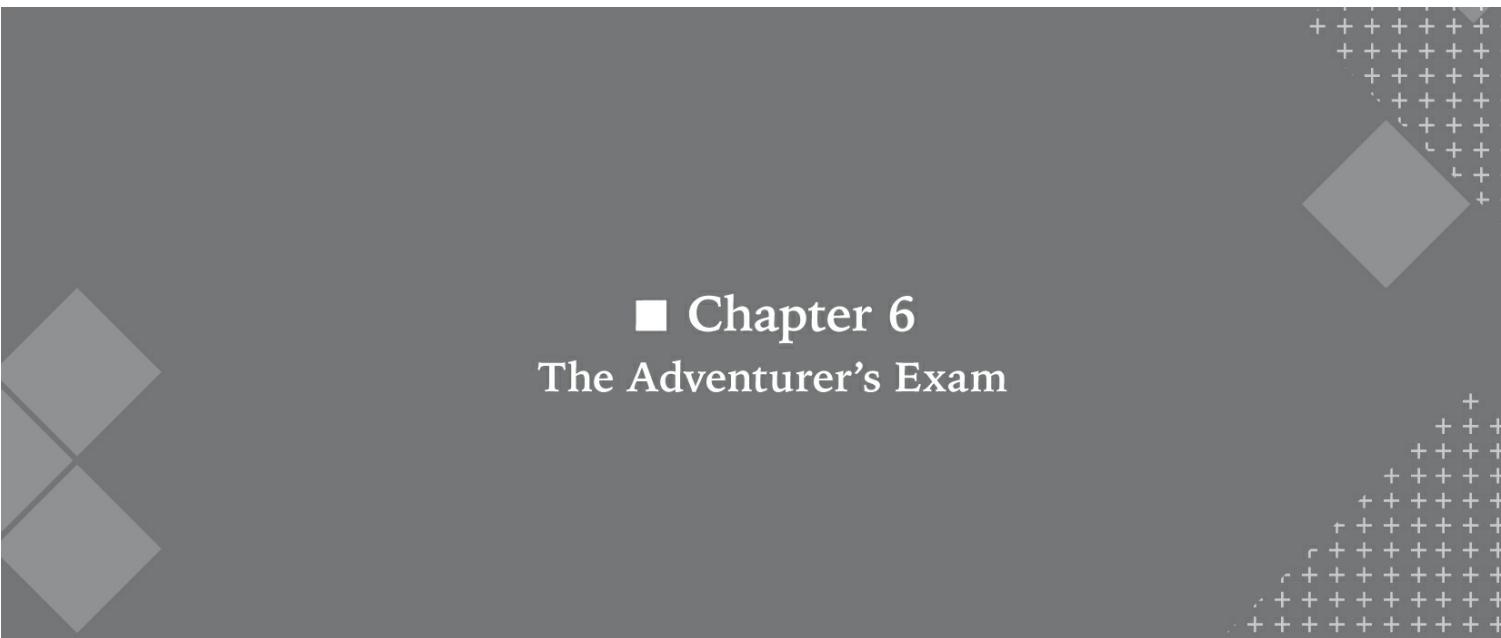
The two of us continued, working hard to reach our common goals. Every day was difficult and painful. I shed blood, tears, snot, and even soiled myself a couple of times. But I felt a strange sense of satisfaction. Maybe my brain had already melted. The human ability to adapt was terrifying.



Spring turned to summer, then summer faded into fall. Before long winter followed, and then it was spring again.

And finally, one April day in Imperial Year 1190—roughly one year after I came to this incredible yet merciless world—I headed toward a certain

dungeon. I was about to take the Adventurer's Exam and earn my license.



■ Chapter 6

The Adventurer's Exam

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Entrance to Dungeon #27, "Moon's Eclipse"

Dungeons.

These areas played a pivotal role in countless games and web novels. They were sanctuaries of dreams and adventure. They contained dangerous foes, terrifying traps, and, in their innermost depths, powerful bosses. They were fantastical wonderlands full of combat and drama. There was never a dull moment in a dungeon!

...If that's the sort of image you have of these places, it might be time to remove your rose-tinted glasses. If only that were true, this story would be over in a flash. Unfortunately, things were never that simple in the real world.

Think of it this way: Who in their right mind would want to go running around a place that dangerous? Aside from meatheads who like living on the edge and weirdos who think life is all about fighting, anyone else—anyone with their head on straight, anyway—would realize that dungeons are way too risky to be worth it.

That was why games and web novels always had very good reasons compelling their protagonists to go into dungeons.

It could be a handsome reward, like vast riches hidden deep in a dungeon's bowels. Or it could be imminent danger—say a nest of monsters was threatening the world and had to be exterminated, for example.

The reasons varied depending on the theme and genre of the story, but at the core of every tale, there had to be something pushing people to enter dungeons.

So, where does that put *Dungeon Magia*? Well, its reason fell into the “reward” camp. And the main reward was spirit stones.

By defeating enemy spirits inside dungeons, it was possible to obtain beautiful crystals. These stones were a kind of solidified Astral Body according to the fractal theory of blah, blah, blah—that sort of thing. Honestly, *what* they were didn’t really matter. The important thing was their *purpose*. Their effects. Their benefits. Basically, how they were used.

What can these things do? Well, the answers were practically endless. They were capable of just about anything.

Essentially, spirit stones could be converted into energy. They were far more powerful than fossil fuels, and using them had no negative effect on the environment. In that light, they were an outstanding natural resource.

As a result, aside from a few small anti-spirit groups that insisted on using fossil fuels, hardly any other sources of energy had been developed in the world of *Dungeon Magia*.

Makes you a little anxious about the future, right? But let’s not think about that.

Back to the topic of dungeons. As you’d expect from an RPG, the dungeons in this world contained a host of rare weapons and items. But in modern society, the magical energy provided by spirit stones was a *lot* more valuable than all those other things. These stones, then, were the major source of income for dungeon-crawling adventurers.

But what we wanted wasn’t an efficient and clean energy source, nor was it

the riches we could have gained by harvesting that energy. What we wanted was treasure—miraculous items that transcended human understanding. And of the many treasures we might stumble upon, what we wanted more than anything was an Elixir—a medicine capable of healing any wound or curing any illness. That was our goal, our duty, our dream.

And now, I was finally taking my first major step toward achieving that dream. I had arrived at the Moon's Eclipse, the dungeon where the Adventurer's Exam would be held, to obtain a license that would make me a proper adventurer and officially allow me to enter dungeons.

"The time has finally come, Master."

Albi's voice felt like it was echoing directly inside my brain.

People who had formed pacts with spirits were able to use Mind Sharing, a special ability allowing them to communicate remotely. My partner was kicking back and relaxing at home, but her voice came through as clear as day. Hearing it reassured me.

"Yeah. It's about time, too," I replied.

I sighed to vent some of my pent-up emotions and looked up at the massive cherry blossom tree towering in front of me.

The Moon's Eclipse was one of many dungeons located in the city of Sakurabana. Clearing it would take me one step closer to ridding my sister of her curse.

Full of anticipation, I headed toward the dungeon's entrance.

I crossed at the crosswalk and came to a well-kept staircase at the base of the large tree. The area was far more crowded than usual, likely due to the exam.

Though I'd long gotten used to it, passing by animal-eared beast people mingling with blond-haired, blue-eyed foreigners reminded me just how multicultural a city I now lived in.

After being pushed this way and that in the crowd, I eventually found the entrance.

The massive cherry blossom tree loomed above me. It was over three

hundred feet tall, and a large door of about thirty feet was carved into its roots.

My arm wrapped in spiritual power, I gave the edge of the door a small push and it opened easily, as if it weighed almost nothing.

This is definitely part of the exam.

Anyone capable of wielding astral power would have no problem opening this door. But those without such an ability would have to be quite strong to push their way inside.

It's exactly like it was in the game, I thought. Whether that was good or bad, I couldn't yet tell.



Dungeons in Sakurabana were, for the most part, found inside its towering cherry blossom trees. This might sound like something out of a typical fantasy story, but the dungeons themselves had a surprisingly modern look. Bright white walls encircled marble floors. There were elevators and escalators everywhere. And in the center of the room, a 3D model of a character excitedly explained the week's schedule.

"The sanctum has changed quite a bit since the last time I visited," said the secret boss, her beautiful voice echoing in my mind. Mind Sharing also allowed her to see through my eyes.

Albi wouldn't be participating in the Adventurer's Exam. Or, more accurately, she was physically incapable of participating. This was due to a certain principle meant to prevent interference across worlds, called the Barrier Rule.

The Barrier Rule was a restriction placed on the Astral Plane that prevented spirits taking residence in our three-dimensional world from physically entering dungeons.

Such a rule might seem contradictory to *Dungeon Magia*'s core gameplay, which required working together with spirits in combat. But that wasn't actually the case.

In practice, the only thing prohibited by the rule was adding spirits to your party. But there was no ban on using their powers. Using Astral Skills was totally

fine, and spirits could still supply a human with spiritual power. They could even participate directly in battle via skills that summoned or manifested them. They could also possess or fuse with their contracted human to join the fight. So in the end, the rule wasn't actually that restrictive.

The Barrier Rule basically did one thing: It prevented spirits from becoming adventurers.

It was easy to understand, and it didn't really matter. It barely even came up in the game's plot, and most players didn't give it a second thought. It didn't apply to the hero or any of the five heroines, and it had no bearing on their stories. The Barrier Rule was nothing but window dressing.

I always wondered who benefited from such a pointless rule (if anything, this rule was now *negatively* impacting Albi and me, but I was trying my best not to sweat it). For us, it basically meant that Albi couldn't just go off and single-handedly clear entire dungeons in my stead. Though I supposed if she really wanted to, with her powers, she might be able to ignore the rules and break in... But nah, that wasn't going to happen. The spirits who came up with the rule in question were Ultima-class just like Albi. So even if she did manage to break in and access the dungeon, it would probably cause major problems down the line. I figured it was best to play this by the books.

Besides, there wouldn't be much point in breaking the rules if it meant failing the exam. As long as things didn't get too crazy, I'd just have to do my best.

Here we are in the sanctum. Wait...

"...Oh, right," I said. "Dungeons were once revered as the homes of gods, weren't they?"

"That is correct. In the past, they were believed to possess miraculous powers and were used by both leaders and religious groups."

I couldn't help feeling like there was more to what she was saying. I wondered if something had happened to her in the past. I was hoping she'd tell me more, but instead, she said, *"There's no time for that now, though. Shouldn't you hurry?"*

"Hm? Oh, yeah. It's almost time."

I looked at the clock on my smartphone. It had taken me more time to get here than I'd expected.

I rushed to the reception counter and got a nameplate with my examination number on it. The lady at the counter instructed me to go to the portal gate on the fifteenth floor.

I took the elevator up. After about a minute of silent operation, a chime rang out telling me I had arrived. The doors opened onto the fifteenth floor.

“Wh-what the—?!”

The scene that greeted me beyond the door was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. Countless narrow transparent tubes snaked across the rough-hewn walls. A bluish-white electrical current passed through them, giving the whole area a cyberpunk vibe.

I followed the tubes with my eyes and saw they all led to a massive door.

“A portal gate! A real-life portal gate...”

Portal gates were mysterious doors leading to the Astral Plane.

The instant I laid eyes on it, a wave of excitement coursed through my body. The room's fantastical layout, the sounds, the peculiar smell—everything was incredible. I wished I could spend an entire day just taking in every little detail in this room.

Unfortunately, that wasn't in the cards. I wasn't on some gamer pilgrimage.

“Name and examination number?”

A crowd had gathered around the portal gate at the back of the room. A woman in armor was standing in the center of the crowd, brusquely asking for people's names.

Everyone's eyes naturally fell on me. I felt a bit awkward. Scratch that—I felt *very* awkward.

Barely managing to avoid stuttering, I responded, “Kyouichirou Shimizu. Examinee number 26.”

I thought I'd done pretty well. Speaking in front of crowds always made me

feel self-conscious.

“Good,” replied the woman. “Line up over there.” Apparently, that was all the information she needed. She then pointed her left index finger toward the end of a line of people.

I followed her directions and then tried to sneak a look at my competition. In all, there were about four hundred people taking the exam with me.

The crowd was about 70 percent human and 30 percent people of other races. I spotted a number of foreigners as well. Age-wise, it was fairly mixed. But it looked like less than a third of them were teenagers like me.

Amid the small crowd of other teens, I spotted *her*.

She had jet-black hair and blue, almond-shaped eyes. Her bangs were decorated with a snowflake ornament, and she wore a similarly colored ribbon at the back of her hair. She seemed to be a fan of cool colors. All of her accessories were in shades of blue.

“Master. Is that *her*?” asked Albi. I nodded silently.

It was my first time seeing her in the flesh, but there was something familiar about her features. Her beautiful face was very similar to that of one of *Dungeon Magia*’s main heroines.

“Greetings, everyone, and listen up. This is an overview of what to expect today. I, Ruby Akabane, will be acting as your examination proctor. I look forward to working with you all.”

I had spent so much time looking over my fellow examinees, I hadn’t noticed that the exam was already starting.

C’mon, concentrate! I reminded myself and leaned in to give the red-haired proctor my full attention.

“The examination will take place on the first floor of this dungeon. You will all have ninety minutes to explore. You are allowed to use only the equipment provided to you here.”



Basically, we had an hour and a half to bust our butts exploring the first floor. Once our time was up, anyone with more than a certain amount of points would pass the exam. In addition, the proctor had prepared special trials, and anyone who completed those would get bonus points... In other words, this exam was exactly the same as it was in the game.

*“Examinees are permitted to assist one another *only* during combat. Please bear in mind, however, that the points received from coop battles will be adjusted depending on how many examinees take part.”*

Her stiff tone threw me off a bit, but what she was essentially saying was: We could form parties, but we would earn fewer points than if we went it alone.

That made sense. Without a limit like that, every adventurer in the room could simply form one massive party. Then everyone would pass.

This way, the exam struck a nice balance—combat would be easier in parties, but a party would have to fight more battles than someone flying solo.

“Finally, the exchange of spirit stones between examinees is strictly prohibited. Naturally, stealing them from other examinees is also prohibited. Should any such actions come to light, the responsible parties will be immediately disqualified. Furthermore, they will be banned from retrying the examination for half a year. Understood? Excellent. I trust none of you will devise any such dastardly schemes.”

The impact of her words, combined with the intensity of her gaze as she looked over the crowd sent a shudder down everyone's spines.

She terrified me. But what she had said was common sense. It was the same as saying “don't share answers” or “don't steal another person's test paper.” This was pretty basic stuff. Heck, it even sounded like the punishment for rule-breaking was surprisingly forgiving.

“You say that now, Master. But up until last night, you were planning to sneak Laevateinn into the examination.”

You've got it all wrong! I was just weighing my options and trying to figure out if it was worth bending the rules to give myself a little extra power!



“That concludes my explanation of the proceedings. Anyone with questions, promptly raise your hand.”

With the instructions out of the way, the moment we had all been waiting for was here—it was Q&A time. Several hands shot up from the crowd, including mine. But who would have the honor of going first? Amazingly, she chose me.

“Number 26. Ask your question.”

“Right. Well, I actually have two questions. The first one is about Rings of Return. I’d like to know if there are any available. My second question is about the security situation during the proceedings. Any details you’re capable of sharing with us would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.”

“...Hmm.”

It seemed like my questions weren’t very common. The examiner blinked for a moment before responding. She sounded a little vexed.

“I’m afraid there are no Rings of Return available for this examination. Unfortunately, we simply don’t have the funding. I hope you understand.”

The proctor’s answer was soon followed by some subdued laughter from the crowd. Embarrassing as it was, their response was more or less what I’d expected.

A Ring of Return was a super-convenient item that allowed its user to be instantly transported back out of the dungeon. But even at its cheapest, a single ring would easily set someone back six figures.

There was no way anyone would blow that kind of money just to teleport out of the first floor of one of the easiest dungeons in town.

I had a feeling the answer would be no, but I’d decided to try my luck anyway.

“As for your second question,” she continued, “I and two of my subordinates will be supervising the proceedings. Though I will be dividing my attention between supervision and administering trials, you have my word that I will do my utmost to ensure your safety during the test. I trust that adequately addresses your questions?”

“...Yes,” I replied. “Thank you.”

I hesitated. I was about to follow up with something else, but I decided against it at the last second. It was clear that even if I asked her to increase security, she would simply refuse.

It wasn’t that I thought the examiners were going to slack off. I knew they would take every precaution to ensure everyone’s safety. But they were likely only prepared for the kinds of things one might encounter on the first floor of a beginner dungeon.

“There is not much more you can do,” said Albi. “Ordinarily, your fears would sound like the groundless ravings of a madman.”

“I know. I’m not upset, and I haven’t lost hope. But I had to give it a shot, at least.”

“In that case, you’ve done plenty. Be careful in there.”

“Thanks.”

Her words—more supportive than usual for Albi—helped keep me from dwelling on the matter.

“I’m gonna kick this exam’s ass. I don’t care what’s waiting inside that dungeon. I’m gonna pass this thing, and nothing can stop me!”

◆ [Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” First Floor](#)

After the explanations and questions were over, we each grabbed some weapons and stepped through the portal gate and into the dungeon.

These mysterious doors were transporters that separated our world from the Astral Plane.

If I included all the times I’d gone to the secret boss’s domain, I had already experienced this extra-dimensional warp hundreds of times. Frankly, it now felt completely normal.

I had initially expected to be shaken, or to feel weightless, or something—the

type of stuff you might expect when being warped from one place to another. But there was none of that. It was completely unremarkable.

I simply stepped on through the portal. Before I knew it, I was in a totally different place. *Ta-da!* That was it. So if you were expecting me to yell “Whoooooaaaaaa!!!” or some other exciting event...well, I hate to disappoint, but there was none of that. That said, when I saw the dungeon’s scenery stretching out before me, my simple brain was overwhelmed. I couldn’t help it—I felt euphoric.

The ceiling, floors, and walls surrounding me were made up of Astral Bodies that glowed azure blue. This was the Astral Plane. The area before me looked like a massive labyrinth.

This was all real. I was inside a dungeon.

This was nothing like Albi’s neatly laid-out domain. This was the real deal. And there I was—in a randomly generated map linked directly to the Astral Plane.

If I took out any assassins from the other side, they’d drop spirit stones. In some cases, the spirits might even decide to join my cause.

A dungeon! An actual, real-life dungeon!

This was the heart and soul of *Dungeon Magia*. For a whole year since I was transported to this world, I had stared at them wistfully from a distance, unable to go inside.

But now! Here I am! At last!

“*You’re far too excited, Master,*” said Albi.

“*Duh! Of course I am! C’mon! This is my first-ever dungeon! I’m so freaking pumped!*”

I did a little dance in place, announcing to the world just how excited I was.

“*How lovely for you.*” Albi did not sound impressed. I could clearly detect the apathy in her voice even from within the dungeon. “*In any event, kindly mind your surroundings. Acting in such an eccentric fashion is liable to draw negative attention. Particularly when one is standing in a large group.*”

“Uh.”

By the time I took Albi's advice and returned to my senses, it was already too late. I looked around and saw that everyone, including the proctors, was staring at me.

"It is...commendable...that you are so enthused," said the proctor. "But I would remind you that there is a time and place for everything. And this is not it."

Her kind restraint only served to embarrass me even more.



"Now, then. In a moment, we will officially commence the spring exam. You will all have until noon—ninety minutes—to prove your worth. I suggest you use your time wisely. And with that... Begin!"

With the proctor's spirited words, the Adventurer's Exam was officially underway.

Countless would-be adventurers rushed through the labyrinthine cyberpunk-themed halls one after another.

I quickly spotted the girl from earlier among them.

"Master. Begin your pursuit. Follow that girl."

"On it!"

I did as Albi instructed and began tailing the girl with the blue hair ornament. To an outside observer, I probably looked like a creepy stalker. But I had a good reason for following her.

The 1190 spring session of the Adventurer's Exam (the one we were currently participating in) would be talked about the world over for years to come. And not for good reasons, either. What's more, this girl was at the center of the events about to unfold...

"Huh?"

After running ahead for a little while, the girl suddenly turned back to face me. Her gaze was brave and bursting with charm, and it was aimed directly at me.

Did she just smile at me?

Yes, for whatever reason, she had flashed me a grin the moment she spotted me. But before I had a chance to wonder why, she'd clambered up a wall with the agility of a cat. Her movements were smooth and silent. And, after breaking the laws of gravity and inertia, she stood at the top of the labyrinth's wall and struck a pose.

She looked down at me again. Our eyes met. After a quiet moment passed between us, the girl moved her beautiful lips. I watched as the two delicate rose petals danced, forming a sentence.

"Come on up"? This girl's just messing with me.

To her, I probably looked like a fellow examinee simply hoping to get her help. And she was sizing me up.

I couldn't tell whether I'd annoyed her, or if she was just gaging my skills to see if I was worth the effort. Either way, she was provoking me.

"Or perhaps she thinks you're a creepy stalker and she is trying her best to avoid you."

"No way! I'd rather die than be mistaken for some pervert. There's no way that's what she thinks, right? Right?!"

"It's difficult for someone in my position to say. But I think it is likely that most regular people would have a negative reaction to a meathead like you with a scary face chasing them."

"Come on! Don't your functions include things like compassion and kindness?!"

Kyouichirou's face is not scary! I repeated internally, trying to convince myself.

"Wait. Who cares about that now!" I shouted, snapping out of it. *"I've gotta catch up to her!"*

I buffed myself using Stride. As soon as the white exoskeleton enveloped my body, I focused as much energy into my legs as I could to make up for the seconds I'd wasted arguing with Albi. But as soon as I did...

“Aw, crap! Not now!”

...a black mist suddenly surrounded me.

This was the sign that *they* were coming over from the other side.

That’s right. *Enemies*. I was being attacked. And at the worst possible time, when every second counted.



“Enemy avatars detected,” said Albi. *“Five in total. Three Goblins, two Kobolds. How unlucky.”*

“You said it...”

Seriously. I knew they hadn’t done it on purpose, but these guests had rotten timing.

“I’m in a hurry. Maybe they’ll listen to me if I beg them to let me pass.”

“They’ve come over hoping to gain experience points. Do you honestly think they’ll let their prey escape so easily?”

I responded with a sarcastic chuckle and a sigh.

While adventurers enter dungeons looking for energy or treasure, spirits appear for only one reason: to grow.

In RPG terms, spirit growth was akin to leveling up. A spirit’s one true purpose was to continue growing until they were able to ascend to a higher level of existence. This impulse superseded both ethical concerns and worldly desires. It was their ultimate calling.

Albi was no different. No matter how special and rare she was as the secret boss, the main reason she had so easily agreed to help me was because she, like all spirits, was completely obsessed with leveling up.

If a spirit was presented with the opportunity to grow, they jumped on it without hesitation. The details didn’t matter. Getting stronger, gaining renown among their peers, finding a sense of self-worth—these were the things that motivated all spirits.

And so these green-skinned Goblins, with their rusted swords at the ready, and the cute, bow-wielding Kobolds currently staring me down were here for one reason and one reason alone: to level up. I must have looked mighty tasty to all of them.

But I'm not about to lie down and become dinner.

I pulled my sword out of the scabbard at my back and held the blade aloft. It was a massive two-handed weapon about five and a half feet long.

As soon as I brought out this instrument of spirit destruction, the Goblins' expressions changed.

The enemies who appeared inside dungeons in *Dungeon Magia* were akin to avatars. Their real bodies never left the Astral Plane. So even if they lost, their lives weren't truly at risk. The producer of *Dungeon Magia* once explained how it worked in detail.

"Every time a spirit loses their avatar, they pay for it using spirit stones. To put it in our terms, they lose the equivalent of a month's salary. Stronger enemies drop more spirit stones because, in a manner of speaking, they've been promoted enough to earn a higher salary. In short, each of them pays an equally painful penalty to dungeon management regardless of their lot in life. Then a portion of what they've paid goes to the adventurers. And that explains why all of them are so eager to fight you. Ha-ha."

So, there you have it.

I wasn't about to start pitying them, but having to cough up an entire month's wages every time you got killed sounded pretty crappy. You wouldn't catch me in a dungeon if that much cash was on the line.

But it was clear that these spirits were more worried about leveling up than money. Even with a massive sword pointed at their faces, they only faltered for a second before assuming battle formation. To be honest, running away wasn't a very reliable strategy anyway.

The Kobolds readied purple-tipped arrows. I remembered from my gamer days that these arrows were poisonous. It'd hurt if I got hit, but that was the least of my worries right now. This group of enemies was an actual risk to my

life.

But for some reason, I felt strangely calm. All the combat training in the secret boss's domain and the experience I'd gained from fighting pro adventurers in the city's battle simulator had made me strong.

That's right. I'm strong. And damn proud of it.

"Master. Now is not the time to take unnecessary risks. I suggest you dispatch these enemies quickly and thoroughly."

"Got it."

I took a deep breath and surveyed my surroundings.

Right now, I'm in a space about ten feet across and flanked by corridors. There's about thirteen feet between me and my opponents. All five are in front of me. Three at close range. Two at long. I need to watch out for those poisonous arrows.

In that case...

"Haaaa!"

I cried out and shifted my gaze and weight to my right.

The instant my enemies turned to see what I was looking at, I switched directions and rushed forward.

With Stride increasing my agility, I closed the gap in no time. Before my opponents could react, I had broken the enemy line and used my momentum to stab one of the Kobolds with my sword.

"Gyah!" cried the tiny dog-like creature as its skewered body began to glow with white light. I didn't stop to watch it disappear. I quickly swung my blade—the Kobold's fading body still attached—and chopped off the other Kobold's head.

Each creature fell silent, emitted a burst of light, then faded away. The whole process looked strangely like a computer-generated effect. Once it was over, all that remained were two small spirit stones.

For a moment, I wondered about the lack of blood. Was it because they were

using avatars?

Regardless, I had taken care of the long-range attackers. I quickly regained my composure and turned to face the remaining close-range enemies.

“Gyah! Gyaaah!”

“Nngaah!”

“Gyahee! Gyahee!”

The Goblins screamed and cried out, mourning their fallen Kobold comrades. *Big mistake.*

When an opponent’s blade was aimed squarely at your throat, the worst thing you could do was lose your composure and start screaming.

Unfortunately for them, I wasn’t some battle-crazed warrior who enjoyed fighting for the thrill alone. As soon as I saw an opening, I went for it.

“““Gya-gyaaaaahhh!!!”””

Their earsplitting screeches rang out in unison as I separated their torsos from their lower extremities. The three Goblins burst into light and disappeared.

My first combat encounter of the exam had ended as suddenly as it began.

“*Not a bad start, Master,*” said Albi.

“*No use whining about lost time. Let’s just call that my warm-up.*”

I scooped up the pebble-size spirit stones left on the battlefield, dropped them into the shoulder bag I’d been provided, and gazed upward.

The girl who had breezily dashed up the wall only moments ago was now gone.

The exam had barely begun. I’d had a bit of a rough start, but there was still time to make up for it.

“Wait for me,” I said—more to cheer myself on than anything else—and resumed my pursuit. “I swear I’ll find you.”

“*You’re not sounding any less like a stalker, you know.*”

“Shut up!” I wailed, my embarrassed cry echoing through the azure labyrinth.



■ Chapter 7

The Red-Haired Lancer

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” First Floor

A few minutes after being forced into a battle at the worst possible time and quickly dispatching my foes, I was climbing the wall of the astral maze. I panted as I scrambled up its vertical surface, hoping to catch the girl with the blue hair ornament.

She had run up the wall like some sort of superhuman. Unfortunately, that sort of movement wasn’t possible for most regular spirit users, least of all me. So I climbed the wall using much simpler means.

I applied a beginner-level Astral Skill called Force Point to both of my hands. It imbued each of my fingertips with a force field capable of supporting my entire body weight. Basically, it made each of my fingers as hard and sturdy as a mountaineer’s ice axe. It was a pretty boring way to climb, and nowhere near as fast as running straight up the wall’s surface. But it was a simple and reliable way to get me where I wanted to go.

“I’m impressed, Master. You’ve improved quite a bit. Getting up such a high

wall in under a minute is no small feat.”

“Come on. You know how hard I trained.”

Before long, my right hand grasped the top of the wall, and I carefully pulled myself up onto the edge. I felt like a cat. Come to think of it, *wall* might not have been the best word for the area on top of the labyrinth’s corridors, but that’s more or less what it looked like.

I got down on one knee and surveyed the labyrinth below.

“This is so awesome,” I breathed. I couldn’t help it. The view from up there was positively gorgeous. My heart trembled at the sight.

The ground, ceiling, walls, and passageways were a deep blue and stretched out as far as the eye could see. The dungeon was a work of art. Kneeling there alone in such a beautiful place, I became deeply emotional...

“It’s as I expected, Master. The girl is nowhere to be seen. Do you plan to do anything about that?”

My partner’s question, dripping with sarcasm, forced me back to reality.

“...Huh? Oh. Uh, lemme think,” I said simply.

Where was this girl’s sense of wonder?

“We’ll discuss how easily she got away from you later and think of ways you can improve. But for the time being, what’s your plan?”

“Understood.” I mentally flipped through my treasure trove of gaming knowledge and came up with a few suggestions. *“The way I see it, I have two options. Either I run around frantically searching, or I ask other people to see if anyone’s spotted her. There are benefits and drawbacks either way.”*

“Go on.”

I nodded, then opened my mouth to reply, only to close it again. I kept trying to use my voice out of habit. It was tough getting used to speaking telepathically.

“If I search for her myself, I might get lucky and find her pretty quickly. I’d also be using fewer resources. But if I happen to be unlucky, I could waste a ton of

time and energy with no results.”

“So it would essentially be a gamble?”

“I dunno if I’d go that far.”

I looked down on the labyrinth below. On the ground, I spotted a party of young, muscular beast people devouring a group of Goblins. *Ugh. Gross.*

“When it comes down to it, I don’t really need to find her. I only need to find the place she was headed. And I think I have an idea of where that might be.”

As the words bubbled up in my mind, so did a scene from one of the story routes in the game.

The protagonists sat in a dimly lit coffee shop as a man, his face furrowed with regret, told them a story from the past.

“If things go down like they did in the game, that girl is probably looking for an examiner named Nikaidou. If we find the examiner, there’s a good chance we’ll run into her.”

“I see. And? What about the second option?”

“Same as the first, up to a point. I just need to follow the path and find an examiner. The only difference is that I don’t need to find Nikaidou. Any examiner will do.”

Every examiner would have scouted out the dungeon’s paths ahead of time, and they would know where to find one another. The examiners had two main jobs: patrolling the dungeon to keep the adventurers safe and to prevent us from cheating, and tasking us with trials to test our abilities.

In the game, Nikaidou explains that the examiners take turns doing these two jobs.

“Nikaidou used the words ‘my post’ to describe his position. That likely means that, to a certain extent, the dungeon has a fixed layout.”

“Then you only need to ask around to find this post of his. Correct?”

“You got it.”

“I see the merits of the second option. If things go well, you should be able to

determine the girl's location with a good degree of certainty."

"Yeah."

"And? What are the drawbacks?"

I hesitated for a moment, then said, "For starters, while option two is pretty safe, it's guaranteed to waste some time. First, I'll have to climb back down to start asking around. And depending on how things go, it might take a while to find him."

"In other words, there's always the chance that looking for him yourself from this higher vantage point would be faster and more effective."

"Right. But there's an even bigger issue at play." I ran a simulation in my head of one possible scenario. Say I jumped down from the wall in front of an examiner and suddenly asked them where I could find a *different* examiner. What would they say? "More likely than not, I'd be in for a fight. This is an exam, after all, and the examiners' job is to test us. If I told them 'I don't want to take you trial, but pretty please could you tell me where to find this other examiner,' I doubt they'd just go along with it."

"Indeed."

It was the same deal in the game. Beat one examiner and they'd tell you where to find the next one. It was designed to help guide the player through the labyrinth.

"The way I see it," I continued, "the second option will probably take a lot longer. On top of that, I'll probably have to fight an examiner to find out where I'm going. That sounds like a royal pain, so I'd like to consider the first option, too."

"Hmm."

The secret boss thought this over for a few seconds. Then she said, "Second option."

In her usual dispassionate tone, she picked the plan that would guarantee I saw combat.



After deciding my plan of action with Albi, I ran around the upper portion of the dungeon for about five minutes before I spotted someone.

Unsurprisingly, as a person who often receives small blessings from the goddess of fortune and even larger blessings from the goddess of misfortune, I had found an examiner, but not the one I'd been hoping for.

"Looks like you lost the gamble," said Albi. *"Though I suppose that's to be expected with the odds against you."*

"Shut it." If I left things to fate, Kyouichirou and the whole damn Shimizu family were destined for destruction. What kind of luck had she been hoping for out of a guy like that? *"Y'know what? Forget this. I'm just gonna keep looking for Nikaidou. It wouldn't be efficient to waste my time, energy, and AP on the wrong examiner."*

But Albi, a being obsessed with efficiency, wasn't about to let this go without a fight.

"Your argument is biased and lacking, Master. Remind me, what is our purpose? For you to do well on this exam and become an adventurer, yes?"

"Guh..."

Her argument was so sound I couldn't even form words to protest.

I had chosen this session because of the girl from earlier. But the original reason I was taking this exam was to become an adventurer.

"I am not suggesting that you forget about the girl," Albi continued. *"However, I recommend that you do not confuse what you want to do with what you need to do. Please choose a course of action that can accomplish both."*

"I guess you're right... My bad. I got ahead of myself."

"Haste makes waste, Master. It is all well and good that you are excited. But please, always keep an equanimous mind."

I nodded and clapped my hands against my cheeks to get my head back into the game. The sound echoed around the blue maze, and the pain snapped me back to my senses.

"All right. Let's do this. What I want to do and what I need to do—I'm gonna

do both. I've always been a completionist at heart."

With my determination renewed, I leaped into the air. Without anything below me, my body fell and fell. The strange feeling of weightlessness made my heart beat faster.

"Master. You should grant yourself a defensive buff now."

"I know."

I was picking up speed. Before I fell onto the examiner's post, I imbued myself with Shield and Lessen Impact to enhance my defensive capabilities. My body was now sturdier, and my shock resistance was practically superhuman. Fall damage would be a trifle.

A crashing sound filled my ears as I hit the ground, but aside from that I took no damage. A perfect landing, no bungee cord required.

"I'm impressed you were able to withstand that fall." The first thing to reach my ears after I stood up were the kind words of the examiner. *"Traveling the high ground is a necessary skill for adventurers, but not many show up to the exam with this level of mastery."*

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, bowing to the red-haired proctor. Despite my courteous greeting, I was wincing internally.

Of all the examiners I could have dropped in on, why did it have to be her?

"Allow me to explain how this will work," she said. *"You've arrived at a special area where examiners directly test a candidate's abilities. My name is Akabane, and I will be the one to test you. You are free to either accept my trial or refuse it and move on. Now make your choice."*

"Would you permit me to ask you one question before we begin?" I wanted to cut to the chase, so I thought it best to ask her right away.

"Very well... You certainly enjoy asking questions, don't you?"

"My apologies."

"No matter," she responded. *"What do you wish to know?"*

"I would like to know where one of the other examiners is posted."

A tinge of suspicion crossed her stern face. “And what, pray tell, do you plan to do with that knowledge?”

“I plan on accepting each of the examiner’s trials,” I lied.

That wasn’t the real reason, of course, but I decided it was smarter to give a reason she might expect to hear from an average examinee.

“Oh-ho. So you think one trial won’t be enough, hm? Already thinking about the next one? You’ve got a lot of guts, don’t you?”

“Yes, well, thank you. So, will you tell me what I want to know?”

“I will gladly tell you,” she responded. “However...”

Suddenly, her hand began to glow. The light grew until it formed a pattern like a magic circle. I quickly readied my weapon.

That crimson light. Is she readying an attack? Or is she summoning something?

“...first you must land an attack,” she announced, grasping the dark red spear that had now emerged from the crimson circle of light.

I figured as much. Looks like there’s no escaping this fight.

Trying to expel the ball of anxiety in my chest, I said, “Understood! I will do my best, ma’am!” in as loud a voice as I could muster.

“Good. Don’t hold back.”

As soon as those words passed between us, the battle began.

I was the first to move. I took a quick step back and used two skills in quick succession—Stride (to improve my leg speed) and Spiritas (to improve my thinking speed). I was going all in on Agility.

All I had to do was land a single blow, so there was no use wasting time trying to maximize damage. Besides, this was only a test. An examiner’s job was to size up the strength of the examinees. That meant Ms. Akabane would have to hold back a little. She wasn’t going to kill me or fill me full of holes.

With my safety guaranteed, and considering my goal was a single hit, speed was my best bet... Or so you might assume, but I had to prepare for the worst-

case scenario.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you going to attack me?” said the red-haired examiner. She stood still with her spear at the ready, exuding the overbearing aura of a battle-hardened warrior.

...I'll never succeed against an opponent like her if I hold anything back.

“Albi,” I said.

“I believe you have the right idea, Master.”

Grateful my partner was on the same page, I used an ability on my sword as insurance.

I felt large amounts of spiritual power leave my body, but I tried to remain calm and collected as I called out to Ms. Akabane.

“I’m sorry about taking so long to get ready. Boy, I tell ya...,” I said, purposefully slowing my voice. Meanwhile, the buff on my legs helped me close the distance between us in a flash. “...I’m a real piece of work.”

Just as the words left my lips, I swung my sword, now buffed to be even faster, in a vertical slice. The examiner fended off my surprise attack. I’d expected as much from a warrior of her caliber. But that didn’t matter. I just had to keep attacking.

“Rraaaahhh!!!”

I swung and swung and swung, dishing out a flurry of blows. All I needed was a single hit.

Greatswords tend to have a wide range, but because of how big and heavy they are, they leave the user open once they’ve taken their swing. If you want to wield one effectively and avoid this pitfall, you have to be pretty darn strong.

As I handled the huge sword now, I had the feeling I’d passed this strength check with flying colors. The year I’d spent training (way, way more than a year if you counted my time in the secret boss’s domain) seemed to have paid off. I didn’t even need to rely on strength buffs.

“Impressive moves,” Ms. Akabane said, casually fending off my attacks. “The work you’ve put into your training is evident from how you handle that sword.”

I could tell from the sharp look in her eyes that she was still testing me.

The difference in our skill levels couldn't be clearer. Even though I was raining countless blows down on her, she swayed like a willow in the breeze, dealing with each attack as it came. She was way too tough an opponent for a simple exam like this. It was all I could do just to stand my ground and prevent her from counterattacking. But I wasn't about to give up.

"I'm not done yet!"

I kept going, kept attacking over and over and over. I swung my sword dozens—no, hundreds of times.

My greatsword clashed against her spear again and again. It seemed like this might go on forever. But just as I felt sweat start to drip down my neck, something changed.

"...Hm?"

Ms. Akabane noticed something and frowned. Seeing an opening, I swung my sword in a diagonal strike. She moved to deflect my attack as though the fight were scripted—

"Tch."

—but her counter didn't connect.

The red-haired examiner, overwhelmed by the speed of my attack, took a step back and dodged instead.

"You're not getting away," I said, refusing to let this chance pass me by.

The souped-up muscles in my legs compressed and shot me forward like a spring.

Our weapons clashed once more. My blackened sword met her crimson spear, and we resumed our martial dance.

But after a short while, she took an exaggerated step back, once again attempting to put some distance between us. I sensed an increase in the amount of spiritual power emanating from her body. She must have used more power ups than she should have.

I quickly caught up to her with my sword. It took even less time than before.

“...!”

When I fell upon her, once more resuming our back and forth, she let out a voiceless cry.

Something about her behavior felt off. At the start of the trial, she had seemed capable of handling anything I threw at her. But now she was struggling to fend off my sword with her spear, despite using more and more power.

While I was merely swinging my sword, she was using all her focus and spiritual power to fend off my attacks. The look in her eyes was infinitely sharper than it had been at the start of the trial.

But she was slow, sloppy.

The more blows we traded, the slower, clumsier, and more sluggish she became.

She must have noticed something was wrong and used a skill to buff her *Agility* to keep her in the game.

But unfortunately for her, that wasn’t going to cut it. I wasn’t sapping her *Agility*. I was slowing her down by stealing *her turns*. There was no resisting this fourth-dimensional interference.

“I can confirm the target’s single-turn clock and temporal cognition have been dramatically reduced. She is already having trouble accurately perceiving even your unenhanced movements, Master.”

Albi’s observations said it all.

I’d succeeded in inflicting her with *Delay* through the clashing of our weapons.

Traditionally, this skill was meant to be used from a distance. One attack was enough to freeze both an opponent’s movements and their thoughts, reducing them to a living statue. But, alas, I had absolutely zero affinity for long-range combat.

So Albi and I spent a great deal of time coming up with a method that would let me put it to use anyway.

In short, I cast the skill on my weapon, then it moved from my weapon to my opponent's, and from there on to my opponent herself. It was like pushing over a string of dominos—the force was transferred from one object to the next in a line.

That way, I could release the skill at close range, greatly minimizing how much work I had to put into directing it.

The major drawback was that I couldn't simply use it whenever I wanted, and it took a really long time to take effect. But being able to slowly freeze an opponent as I hammered away at them was huge.

The fact that I was able to pull it off against an opponent as tough as Ms. Akabane by simply trading blows was proof that it was an effective tactic in battle.

Despite the terrifying expression on her face, her movements had slowed so much, she was no better than someone off the street without a single contracted spirit.

And so...

“Now’s your chance,” said Albi.

“Got her!”

I used Haste Time on myself. As the world slowed down around me, Ms. Akabane might as well have been made of stone. I stepped behind her.

“Got you.”

I slowly reached out and tapped her on the back with the flat of my sword.

Instantly, the Delay skill she'd been inflicted with was dispelled. She had hardly suffered any injuries, but she looked exhausted. Her body was probably all out of sorts from having its flow of time forcibly altered. I felt a little guilty.

If only I was stronger, I could have... Forget it. Now’s not the time. That sort of thinking was disrespectful, both to her and to me.

Ms. Akabane was tough as hell. I had pulled out all the stops to beat her. Wasn't that enough?

“Well done, Number 26... That technique of yours was as novel as it was effective. I was also impressed by your general combat prowess.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

I decided there was no need for empty modesty and took the compliment.

Aside from buffing her strength, Ms. Akabane hadn’t used a single other skill, and she’d stuck to defense the whole time. There was no way this was the full extent of her power. If I ever got to take on the adventurer Ruby Akabane again, our fight would be a lot less one-sided.

But for the time being, I had claimed victory and successfully completed her trial.

I thanked her, and then it was time for Kyouichirou Shimizu to take a breather. Next, I resumed my original mission and asked her the location of my target.

“Sorry to rush you, Ms. Akabane, but would you mind telling me where to find that other examiner now?”

“Very well. But before that, please accept this,” she said and pulled out a crimson medal from her breast pocket. “This is proof that you have passed my trial. Congratulations.”

“...Thank you. Now, if you please.”

“Ha-ha. You certainly are eager. Understood. Firstly—”

But before she could say another word, we were interrupted.

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Something was happening.

The first sign was an awful chill. Then a sickly feeling, like a horde of sticky black amoebas made of spirit power was assaulting our spirit senses.

The feeling was emanating from somewhere behind me. And despite the source being some distance away, it was both powerful and terrifying.

Soon after this sensation came a sound.

“uuUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUURYUUUUAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAaaaaaa!

An eerie piercing screech came from deep within the cerulean labyrinth. It did not sound human.

“Master.”

“...Yeah. It’s here.”

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and stared in the direction of the sound.

At that moment in history, there was only one creature in the Moon’s Eclipse dungeon that could emit such terrible spiritual power. It was an evil spirit, and the perpetrator of countless tragedies within the first *Dungeon Magia*.

This spirit was the main reason that, in the very near future, this exam would be referred to as the Blood-Soaked Eclipse.

The coming slaughter would serve as a tragic plot point in a certain heroine’s route. And its star villain had finally made its presence known. We were about to face the Dungeon Reaper.

■ Intermission

Sisters (Excerpt from *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*,
Kanata Aono's Route, Chapter 32)

I still dream about it—that moment, two years ago. The precious few seconds when she stood in the doorway, about to leave on her journey.

"All right, Kanata. I'm off. Ah! I'm so excited! Your big sis is going to become an adventurer! I promise!"

Her blue hair ornament sways as she moves. Bathed in the morning sunlight, she reassures me with a big grin.

But it's two years later now. And I already know. Her dream never comes true. And we never see each other again.

I pray for her to stay, my cheeks stained with tears. I scream over and over in my heart. *Please don't go.*

But the scene never changes. Every time, I smile innocently and respond the same way, as if the exchange is set in stone.

"See you soon, Sis."

■■■ [**Fall 1192: Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, "Moon's Eclipse," Falsified Final Floor, Utpala's Logic:**](#)

Kanata Aono

I always wanted to become like my sister.

Her sword skills were incomparably beautiful yet so free. And most importantly, they were *powerful*.

No one could ever defeat her.

It didn't matter how strong they were. Hulking men and experienced veterans were both like newborn babes before her.

Our family line is well known for producing expert sword practitioners, and even then, her skills were unparalleled. I used to think the history of the sword would one day be divided in two—before her birth and after.

That may sound like a lot of praise for a girl so young. Some may think it outrageous, excessive, hyperbolic. But make no mistake—every word of it was true.

She was a true prodigy. Even that word feels too trite to describe her immense talent. But an ordinary person like me could never hope to adequately describe such excellence using words alone.

How many hours did I spend imitating her swordsmanship? How many times did I long in my heart to be just like her?

She was my goal, my ideal, my idol, my goddess. She was my closest companion.

And now, as I steel myself to cut her down, she has become my opponent.

“...Prepare yourself, Sis.”

A casual greeting. That's enough for me.

I draw Azure Skies, the longsword *she* was supposed to inherit, from its sheath.

Reflected in its shimmering blue blade is the *thing* that used to be my sister.

She used to be so beautiful, so bright. But she has long since fallen from grace.

Its gaunt face. Its gloomy blue-black aura. The dark, empty hollows of its eye sockets. Gone are the dignity and radiance that once marked *her* as human.



It stands amid a sea of corpses over a hundred strong. Their flesh rent and devoured by the monster using *her* body, they continue to stand, even in death, their swords at the ready. They're like an army of the damned. I feel sick.

This is horrible.

A deep enmity overtakes me.

You won't get away with this. I won't let you.

Knowing that this repulsive apparition is the source of all this death only makes me angrier.

As a swordsman who once followed in Kanata's footsteps—and as her sister—it is my duty to rid the world of this horrible creature now and forever.

"Haaaaahhhh!"

I rush through the disgusting blue-black aura, past the stench of blood and rust.

I close the gap in an instant. The creature that was once my sister stands a short distance away.

She doesn't move. She is as still as stone and makes no attempt to draw her weapon.

It's impossible to tell if this is simply the arrogance of the strong, or if she has something else in mind.

It matters little. It won't change what I've come here to do.

"Arthur!"

"On it!"

He acts as soon as I call out his name.

The sound of something burning reaches my ears as Arthur unleashes his Holy Sword. He dances among the dead, wielding a blade made of light. He is performing a requiem for those robbed even of death, returning them to the peaceful dark.

With a flip of his golden hair, my beloved calls out, "Leave these ones to me!"

You take care of your sister, Kanata!"

His words are encouraging, but in the depths of my heart, I am riddled with remorse. I know that what I've asked of him is a truly heinous task. But I don't have time to let these undying soldiers hold me back.

"Thank you, Arthur. I owe you one!"

My grateful words make the air tremble as I launch myself upward.

I step on thin air and run across the heavens, making my way around to the *thing*'s blind spot.

"The food you cook is so tasty, Kanata! When you get married, I just know you're gonna make someone really happy!"

I unleash my spirit's power.

"Unsheathe! Ameno Habakiri!"

I call out my attack and bring Azure Skies down as fast as I can.

The power of Ameno Habakiri splits my slash into hundreds of projections, each falling upon my opponent's head like a deluge of cutting rain.

"Hey, Kanata. I've been thinking, and I want to become an adventurer. What do you think? Pretty cool, right?!"

But the *thing* meets my attack head-on.

Its sword moves so quickly, so precisely. It deflects the countless slashes of spiritual energy I've created as easily as it would a single strike.

The difference in our skill levels is as clear as day. Even now that she is a flesh-eating demon, her god-like swordplay lives on.

Hatred overwhelms me. My mediocrity, her genius, the beauty of her technique, which I yearn for even now—I despise it all.

"All right, Kanata. I'm off. Ah! I'm so excited! Your big sis is going to become an adventurer! I promise!"

But what difference does any of it make? I've known my whole life that I would never match her skill.

And right now, the only one who can stop her—the only one who can kill my sister—is me.

“Aaaaaahhh!”

Clang. A metallic sound rings out as our swords clash.

For the first cut, I use Monotone. Then Fusion. Delta Accel. Quadrangle into Pentagon. I end the combination with a sixth cut—the Hexabloom.

Skills my sister showed me once upon a time. I’ve since adapted them into my own technique.

Hey, Sis. Guess what? I’ve become an adventurer!

I must put an end to this apparition once and for all. It has harmed many and devoured their souls. There is no telling how much blood it has spilled over the past two years or how many tears were shed.

I just wanted to be like you, Sis. I wanted to make your dream come true. And you know what? I did. I’ve been on lots and lots of adventures.

Yet, despite it all, I still love her. I’ve always loved her. Nothing can change that.

She’s my sister. My one and only sister.

Of course I love her. Of course I look up to her. I’ve spent so much time wondering, regretting. What if I stopped her from going to the exam that day?

“But I...!”

No, no *buts*. It’s *because* I love her that I have to do this. I’m going to help her find repose.

Tears stain my cheeks as I release my stored spiritual power. A blue astral light surrounds me. My senses sharpen. I catch the wind and take to the air. My resolve crystallizes, and I issue one more order to Ameno Habakiri.

“I’m here now, Sis! I’m sorry it took me so long.”

I pour all my spiritual power into my blade and get ready to unleash my strike when...

“Puh...”

...the thing suddenly speaks.

“pUh...pLeAsE...”

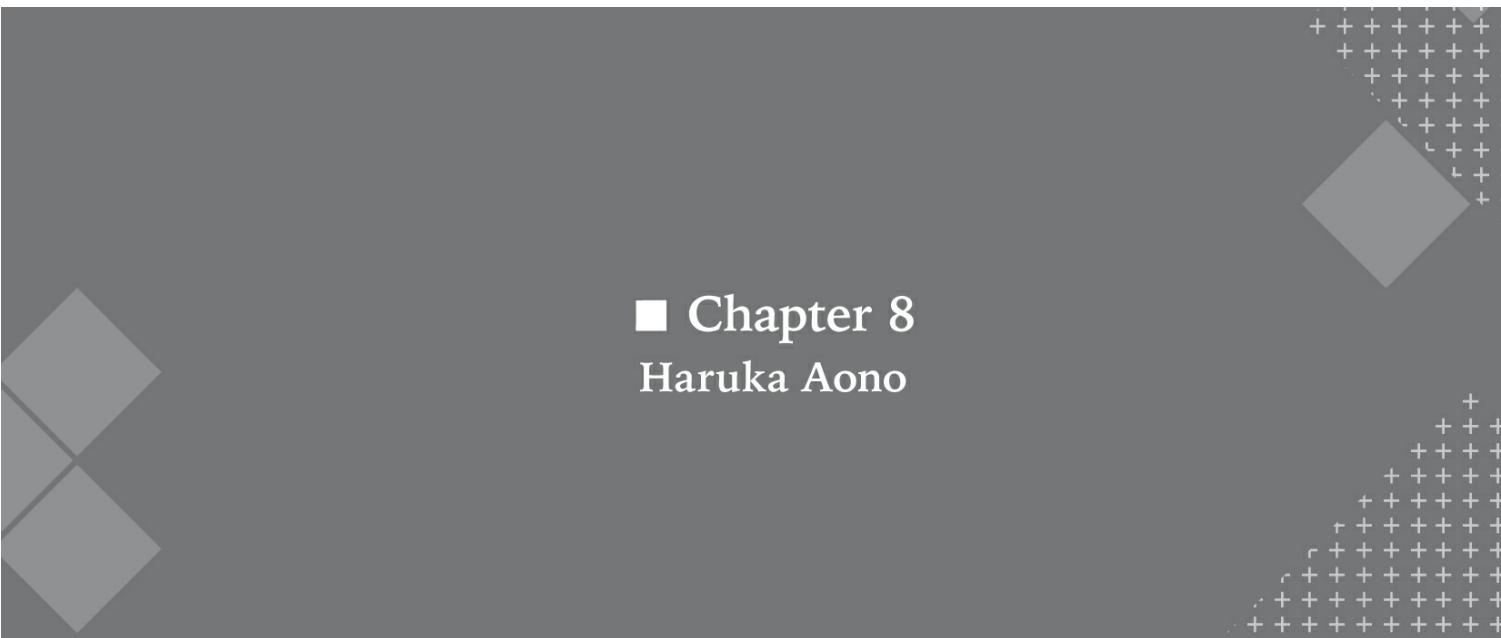
Amid a flurry of sword slashes, the thing that used to be my sister begins crudely weaving sounds into words.

“pLeAsE. K...k...”

And I...

“pLeAsE...kiiLL...mE...”

...I curse this world’s unfairness until my voice runs dry and I fall silent.



■ Chapter 8

Haruka Aono

◆◆◆ Spring 1190: Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, "Moon's Eclipse," First Floor: Haruka Aono, Swordmaster

Haruka Aono's existence was one of boredom and compromise.

She was born to a prominent family, showed considerable talent, and had a promising future ahead of her.

As a result, many of those around her had high hopes, while others were envious. She figured all this was inevitable for someone born with innate talent and lived her life as best she could despite her circumstances.

She was gifted. People expected great things from her, and she had what it took to make those things happen.

And so...

"All right. No problem. I'll do my best."

...she forced herself to put in twice as much effort as everyone else and achieved even more than was expected of her.

But people's expectations were limitless, and every day the pressure mounted.

Such conditions would crush most children. But not Haruka. She withstood it all, unbroken.

But it wasn't others' expectations that drove her. She believed it was her duty to endure the pain. As long as it was something she *could* do, she felt it was her obligation to do it. And so, she bound herself within the confines of how she thought she ought to be.

Hearing all this, you might think that Haruka was a dutiful, responsible person. But the truth wasn't quite so cut and dry.

"All right, I'll give it a shot."

This trifling resolve was all it took for her to accomplish these feats—to put in twice the effort and achieve double the results (or more).

While others required lofty reasons to shore up their resolve—ensuring their survival, protecting their family, or even the joy of getting strong—Haruka needed none. And despite this, she easily outworked and outdid everyone else.

To those around her, her talents were an endless source of envy. But to her, they seemed like a cage—training wheels that kept her life safe and on course.

At the tender age of five, Haruka was recognized as a fully-fledged swordsman of the Aono line. At seven, she inherited one of the three greatsword spirits, the spirit known as Futsu-no-Mitama. Before she was ten, she had managed to defeat a hundred rival sword schools and was officially dubbed the next in line to lead her clan.

Throughout it all, despite her young age, she would simply put on a wry grin and think, *I'm a little too good, aren't I?*

Though a part of her enjoyed her success, this gnawing sense of dissatisfaction grew and grew. She was too gifted. Too accomplished. There was no thrill to be had from any of it.

But she knew that this dissatisfaction, one of her chief concerns in life, was likely to be seen by others as a luxury, arrogance, or simply selfishness.

And for that reason, her unfulfilled desires eventually turned toward the outside world—toward dungeons.

On the other side of the portal gates was a world full of mystery—the Astral Plane.

There, adventurers searched for mysterious treasure and fought powerful creatures that defied human comprehension. It was a place where adventurous people risked their lives day and night.

This is it, she thought. I've found my calling.

She was inspired by a TV program about adventurers called *Unexplored Dungeons: Gifted Young Adventurers*. The star of the show was a girl about the same age as Haruka.

Though she was still a student, she led a party that included adults, and together they fought their way through dungeons filled with tough foes.

She seemed so strong—practically unbeatable. Watching that girl on the other side of the screen brought Haruka a sense of excitement she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

"I'm going to become an adventurer!"

Haruka begged her mother, who held the reins of power in their clan, to let her take part in the Adventurer's Exam and ultimately received her permission. That all happened only one month ago.

Ever since, Haruka had worked even harder, tirelessly polishing her sword skills as she awaited the day of the exam.

Finally, she could slake her thirst for thrills and excitement.

"Wha... Whaaat?"

But awaiting Haruka was yet more disappointment.

The only spirits she encountered were weak—easily beaten without using her sword or skills. And yet every one of her fellow examinees seemed to be locked in mortal combat.

They swung their blades and unleashed skill after skill. Their battles were loud

and flashy, but none of them were strong, and none of them were cool. They were all mediocre. Not one among them demonstrated any interesting skills, strategies, or originality. To borrow Haruka's words, there was nothing "thrilling" about them.

But there was one presence in the dungeon that caught her attention—that of the examiners. They were the cream of the crop—*incredible* adventurers who watched over Haruka and the other examinees and challenged them to difficult trials.

As she accepted one such examiner's trial, Haruka's eyes lit up. In her imagination, she was about to duel someone as skilled as the girl on TV. But less than a minute later, her dreams were once again crushed by cold, hard reality.

Haruka easily defeated the examiner, a man named Nikaidou.

This was an examination, not a real battle, so she was sure he'd held back... But that sort of trite justification was, unfortunately, meaningless to her. After all, *she'd* been holding back, too.

In this case, holding back didn't mean stopping short of killing her opponent or keeping her moves within the confines of exam rules or anything. She'd begun the fight planning to use only a small fraction of her power and a very limited number of her skills.

Yes, that was what she'd *planned*. But there was a fatal flaw in her calculations. She was purposely starting at a low level to gauge the examiner's abilities, but she also just wanted to make sure she'd enjoy the fight. And yet, despite giving herself a major handicap, she'd still grossly overestimated him. Her admiration for adventurers had made her falsely believe that, even at their weakest, they couldn't possibly be *this* pathetic.

"I surrender! It seems you are far, far stronger than I am." Nikaidou praised her as he panted from exertion.

But all she could think was, *Is this guy serious? No way. How can this be?*

How can someone be this worn-out from such a light sparring match?

Had she misjudged the strength of her own attacks? *No, anyone could have dodged a move like that.* Her opponent had been an examiner, after all—an

adventurer. How could he be even weaker than the girl she'd so admired from that TV show?

Logically, Haruka knew she was being unreasonable. She knew she was being childish and arrogant—that she was asking too much.

She understood that her disappointment was her own fault. She'd come up with her own ideas about what an adventurer was and been disappointed when the reality didn't live up.

But her dream of becoming an adventurer was like her guiding light. Something she'd searched and searched for and finally found. At last, she'd discovered something interesting after a lifetime of boredom and compromise.

In her heart, she begged the examiner not to let this be it. Not to crush her dreams. Not to snatch away the one thing she yearned for.

But, one by one, her dashed hopes, like drops of rain, bathed her heart in despair.

Though physically unharmed, deep down, some innocent part of her cried out in pain.

Not again, she thought. Not this feeling again.

If she acknowledged this pain, it would be like an insult to everyone else. Haruka imagined a faceless person berating her. "You arrogant, selfish little girl," they spat. "How could you ever understand what it feels like to be born without talent?"

I know, she thought. You're right. I know I'm blessed—that it's wrong of me to wish for anything more.

I'll just have to give up. Grin and bear it. Resign myself, like always. That's the only way to make things right.

But...

Is it really so wrong to want a little excitement?

She tried desperately to mask her feelings, to appear calm and collected, to suppress her desire to scream and weep.

And that was when—

“uuUUUUUUUUUUUUUURYUUUUAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAaaaaaa! —it suddenly appeared.

“What the—?” she said without thinking. Her words were tinged with panic.

The source of the sound was something completely abnormal. An anomaly. A glitch. Some unidentifiable *thing* that went against the very logic of the world.

It crawled through a black oval-shaped hole like a tear in space itself and let out an otherworldly screech as it infiltrated the cerulean labyrinth.

The creature was a skeletal corpse, large and imposing, without a shred of flesh attached to its bony form. It was clad in a tattered black cloak, and its eyeless sockets glowed with bluish-white spiritual power. It was a truly grotesque abomination.

The word *Reaper* flashed across Haruka’s mind. Reapers were emissaries from hell who appeared in order to take human souls. Surely no other word could suit such a horrific creature.

“Uh, Mr. Examiner? This might be a strange question, but is that thing part of the test?”

“N-n-no way! What’s an Irregularity doing here? I didn’t hear anything about...”

Haruka hadn’t really expected the examiner to know, but his reaction told her the situation was more dire than she had expected.

Here was a seasoned, nationally recognized adventurer chosen to proctor this exam, and he was too frightened to move or even speak.

Haruka muffled a sigh of disappointment that had welled up in her throat and collected herself, then calmly instructed Nikaidou on what he should do.

“Mr. Nikaidou. Would you please find some reinforcements? I’ll hold this thing off for now.”

“...You want me to run away and leave you behind?”

“That’s not what I said! I want you to get help. We both have a job here.”

Despite the circumstances, her voice had somehow grown even calmer. That wasn't to say she didn't understand the gravity of the situation. A quick glance at the apparition before her was all it took to know they were in trouble.

"What did you call it?" she asked. "An 'Irregularity'? Whatever it is, it's bad news, right? It doesn't look like the kind of thing that will just leave if we ask politely."

"You don't know the half of it. If we don't do something, that monster's going to start chowing down on adventurers left and right. And its parameters are far beyond this dungeon's Final Guardian," he continued, referring to the dungeon's boss enemy. "That thing's in a class of its own. Which means, uh... well... It means that all of us put together probably won't stand a chance."

His words confirmed her suspicions.

Nikaidou had just given Haruka a trial and had an idea of what she was capable of. And yet he seemed certain even she didn't stand a chance against the creature.

Even so, or rather, because of that, Haruka looked at him and said:

"That's all the more reason to fight, Mr. Examiner."

Her face relaxed into a gentle smile—the expression of a fourteen-year-old girl trying to ease his worries.

"If this thing's as strong as you say, it'll kill us even if we join forces. But if we both run, it'll chase after us, right?"

Nikaidou's face twisted in disbelief, and the next line out of Haruka's mouth was exactly what he'd feared.

"In that case, it's better if I hold it back while you get help. That would be the most effective strategy. And besides..." Haruka shot the Reaper a glance. The hulking skeleton, well over ten feet tall, turned to face her. *If that's how this is going to go down...* "Then, at least one of us is guaranteed to survive."

With that, Haruka unsheathed her katana.

The Reaper responded by opening the tear between dimensions and pulling out a weapon perfectly suiting its ghastly appearance.

Ha-ha. As if this thing's looks weren't enough, it goes and pulls out a scythe? This is starting to get exciting, she thought, staring at her opponent's massive weapon.

The creature was the dictionary definition of a grim reaper—black cloak, skeletal body, and now a large scythe. It was almost too perfect, like it had been staged. But Haruka was busy preparing for combat and had no time to dwell on such things.

“Now then, Mr. Examiner. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“I promise I’ll come back and help you, all right?! You have my word! So, please... Stay safe until I get back!”

“Yeah, yeah! I’ll do my best.”

Nikaidou bowed and, sounding miserable, whispered, “Please forgive me!”

Haruka did her best to seem unbothered as she saw him off with a casual wave.

“Now then, Mr. Reaper. I haven’t got a clue why you waited for me, but I sure appreciate it!”

“.....”

Since the Reaper had stayed eerily calm as Nikaidou made his escape, Haruka decided to try calling out to it. But just as she’d expected, there was no response.

Was the creature incapable of speech? Or did it simply not wish to respond? Maybe it was a little of both. Either way, Haruka had confirmed that communication wasn’t possible. *Oh well*, she thought.

“In that case, how about we get started already?”

With that, Haruka took off at incredible speed.

She used Stride to boost her Agility and rushed at the creature, feinting five times as she closed the distance between them. She was toying with the massive Irregularity.

“Uru.....?!”

Haruka was moving so quickly that the apparition struggled to follow her trajectory. In a flash, she appeared in front of it, sword pointed at its throat.

The Reaper swung down at her, using a skill called Soul Eater. If its scythe touched her, it wouldn't just hurt her body, it would eradicate her soul. But, as though grasping at smoke, it lost sight of its target.

The girl had already vanished.

"I'm over...here!" Her voice sounded behind the Reaper.

But the moment it sensed her position, the creature felt a sharp pain in its upper back.

She had managed to slice it.

Despite leaping toward its throat mere moments earlier, she had already made her way into the large skeleton's blind spot and slashed it.

This made something clear to her—

"Hmm. Well, now I know that I'm way faster than you are."

—her Agility surpassed that of the Irregularity.

Blue light poured out of the cut in the Reaper's back as it slowly turned to face her.

Meanwhile, Haruka carefully took in her surroundings and readied her sword.

Anyone with any knowledge of dungeons happening upon the two figures would surely doubt their eyes. Who would ever believe that this young girl, able to easily outpace an Irregularity, hadn't even passed her exam yet?

But there were no spectators here to shower her with praise or cower in fear. The only ones present were the young girl herself and her opponent, the unspeaking skeletal horror.

And so, with no adventurers to cheer for them, nor any players to watch their cutscene, they resumed their fight.

"Hiyaaaaaaaaah!"

"URuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuruaaaAAA!!"

They both held their ground and let out terrifying battle cries as their weapons clashed.

One held a scythe, the other a katana. The Reaper had greater reach and power, while Haruka held the advantage in speed and technique.

At first glance, she seemed to have the upper hand as they traded blows.

She utilized her speed, dashing in all directions and overwhelming her opponent with a relentless gale of sword slashes. Meanwhile, the reaper, with its giant scythe, couldn't even graze her.

Her movements were nimble and sharp, like she was performing an elegant dance. The sword skills of the future mistress of the Aono clan overwhelmed the Irregularity.

However...

I'm landing my attacks, but it's like I'm not hurting it at all. I have a bad feeling about this.

...the creature defied logic. It continued fighting even as Haruka sliced away at its body.

Her attacks gouged into it, but try as she might, she couldn't sever any of its limbs. And the gashes she left kept healing at an alarming rate.

Could it be immune to pain? ...No. It's still responding to my hits. I can feel my attacks connecting, so it's probably not an illusion. In that case, maybe it's...

She did a backflip and followed it up with two feints to knock her opponent off balance. Next, she struck it with a heavy diagonal slash.

She pulled off these superhuman feats with ease, all the while keeping her eyes trained on the Reaper's body.

A light resembling a pale flame surged out of a cut she had left on the creature's solar plexus. It almost looked like the fleshless skeleton was spurting blood. But upon closer inspection, she realized that what was happening was, in fact, the opposite.

"So, you can regenerate? That kinda sucks." A wry chuckle escaped her.

A body that kept moving no matter how many times it was cut, and a pale flame burning away all the wounds she inflicted—Haruka’s theory had been right on the mark.

Reapers had a unique skill called Soul Regeneration—a passive ability that allowed them to use flames of spiritual power to purify their wounds and restore their skeletal frame. No matter how much it was sliced or pierced, its body would quickly heal itself. In a word, Reapers were immortal.

This irrational being with its absurd ability was truly fit to be called an Irregularity.

“Well, if that’s how you want to play it, I guess I’m gonna have to change up my strategy a bit.”

But even under these nightmarish circumstances, Haruka refused to give up. In fact, her eyes were brimming with joy, like she’d finally found a long-sought treasure.

“This thing’s really tough, and I get the feeling those reinforcements aren’t coming. I’m all alone, and things are looking bleak... But for some reason, I feel exhilarated.”

In the face of a powerful foe the likes of which she’d never seen before, Haruka was brimming with excitement.

Her opponent was immortal. But looked at another way, that meant she could finally cut loose and give it her all. She didn’t have to worry about bystanders, either. She could fight with everything she had. The thought made her so happy she could have cried.

It was finally time—

“Let’s do this! Futsu-no-Mitama!”

—time to call upon the sword spirit that dwelled inside her body.

This kind of summoning wasn’t as simple as using spiritual power to enhance one’s physical attributes. Instead, it was a spell used to draw out her spirit’s unique power.

This was Haruka Aono’s ultimate form. By manifesting Futsu-no-Mitama, she

could unleash her full potential as a master sword user.

Finally. Finally!

She dashed backward. She would need space between her and her opponent to activate the spirit's full power.

The Reaper showed no signs of pursuing her. Haruka focused every fiber of her being into bringing forth the sword that slept inside her.

I can finally, finally fight with everything I've got!

She could hardly contain her joy. She trembled with delight. Deep in her heart, she envisioned a sword. And then—

—the Reaper acted. It wasn't going to pass up this opening.

“...Wh-what?”

It happened instantly.

Haruka's limbs, which had been as light as feathers a moment before, now felt unbelievably heavy and stiff.

“Wh-what is this?”

The katana fell from her hands with a clatter.

She had lost control of her body. Her limbs ignored her orders and fell limp.

Searching for the cause, she looked down at her arms.

This...can't be. When did that happen?

Shocked, she turned to look behind her.

There she saw four black, oval-shaped holes, identical to the one the Reaper had emerged from. Something had stretched out from each of them and bound her limbs.

This is bad. I can't move at all.

She felt her consciousness fading with each passing second. And the dimmer her senses grew, the clearer the things binding her became.

First, she saw their shape. And then their color.

Are these...chains?

They were a deep red—gloomy, solemn, grotesque. Only negative words came to mind as she looked at them.

I'm in big trouble.

Her neck was drenched in sweat.

There was no resisting her bonds; her limbs felt like they had been cast in plaster.

These chains aren't normal.

Haruka could feel that she wasn't simply bound physically, but the realization did her little good.

She could no longer move. She could no longer run. She could no longer fight. Her greatest strength—her speed—had been rendered useless.

Her only chance to turn the tide would be her contracted spirit, Futsu-no-Mitama. Unfortunately, it was impossible to call upon the spirit's power while she was bound.

She was now a swordsman without a sword.

Now that the Irregularity—this calamity that transcended human understanding—had caught her, there was little she could do.

Step by step, the Reaper drew closer to the young girl.

Its large skeletal form rattled beneath its dark cloak as it moved, its scythe at the ready. The hunter was about to fell its prey—her soul.

"Ha-ha. This is such a B-movie-level plot twist," she said with a laugh.

But she knew, instinctively, that her time was almost up.

She couldn't move. Her opponent was unharmed. And her trump card, her one final hope, was now impossible to use.

Damn. This world was so much bigger than I expected.

And yet, despite the situation, she still felt joy deep within her heart.

I guess I really was just a sheltered kid. I take my first steps outside and look—right away, I find something so exciting I can hardly handle it. It just makes me want to...

She cried tears of joy.

She was about to meet her end. But she had finally found an opponent that truly excited her.

She had regrets—too many to count. But she had lost. She had finally, finally lost. *So, she thought, I don't mind. If I was destined to die of boredom and disappointment anyway; I'd much rather die here.*

Maybe she was simply being gracious in defeat, or maybe she was giving up too quickly. But there was no one there to sympathize with her youthful joy, nor anyone to criticize her recklessness. There was only a monster—a heartless, skeletal apparition draped in a tattered black hood.

Its bony body rattled as it inched closer to the girl. It would start by ending this obstruction's life. The Reaper raised its scythe.

The weapon drew a curve as it fell. Death was mere moments away. There was nothing she could do now... No, there *was* something—one last thing she could do.

“I’m sorry, Kanata.”

With those final words, the young girl gently closed her eyes.

And so Haruka Aono’s short life came to a close.

The young prodigy’s death was mourned and lamented by many.

However, Haruka’s story didn’t end there. Her brilliant technique and manifold talents were inherited by a being most foul—the very same Irregularity that Haruka had dubbed the Reaper. Upon murdering the girl, the terrible creature had devoured her soul.

And with that, a new monster was born. One that had the Irregularity’s power, Haruka’s skills, and possession of Futsu-no-Mitama, Haruka’s contracted spirit. This creature came to be called Rakshasa Sarama, a demon who would devour and slaughter countless adventures.

Death was no release for Haruka—now she was in hell. Her talents would live on, twisted into tools of murder, her dignity and pride trampled without end.

Even Haruka, who had accepted her own death so gallantly, could not bear the waking nightmare with which she had been cursed.

“pLeAsE...kILL...mE...”

Her torment would go on and on until her own sister avenged her and killed the Reaper once and for all.

That was Haruka Aono's destiny. Her fate. Her end.

There was no way to resist or undo these facts. Haruka Aono would die here, and then her soul and talents would be used by the grotesque Irregularity to slaughter innocents.

Her death was a tragedy, or perhaps a noble sacrifice to elevate another's story.

Her grim but inevitable fate was to be used as the Reaper's deadly weapon. This was her predestined role to play—a necessary part of this world's narrative.

That was why today, the ever-turning wheel of fate would once again crush Haruka beneath its tread. That much was certain—or, at least, it *should have been*.

“SCREW THIS SHITTY ROUTE!”

The sound of two things slamming together was followed by a thunderous roar. Suddenly, the grim specter's form seemed to dissipate.

Someone cried out, and something flew through the air. Haruka's ears were suddenly overwhelmed with information.

She opened her eyes to see what had happened and took in the form of a large man. He stood before her, holding a massive sword. On his face was an expression of murderous rage. And in front of him, some distance away, the Reaper was doubled over in pain.

Haruka was still dazed, but she quickly realized that he had saved her.

"Hold up, you bony freak. You've got some nerve picking on a poor defenseless girl."

Throwing out a line like some schoolkid standing up to a bully, the man holding the large sword glared at the kneeling Reaper.

His features were imposing, like those of an angry god. His heroic pose suited him quite well.

His face looked familiar, and she soon remembered why—this was the same person who had been silently pursuing her a little while ago.

"...Um. What *are* you?" she asked.

She realized too late that she had asked him *what* he was instead of *who* he was.

As a result, her question had likely come across as pretty rude. Then again, he *had* been chasing her around. It was only natural for her to be wary. Not that she was *that* wary.

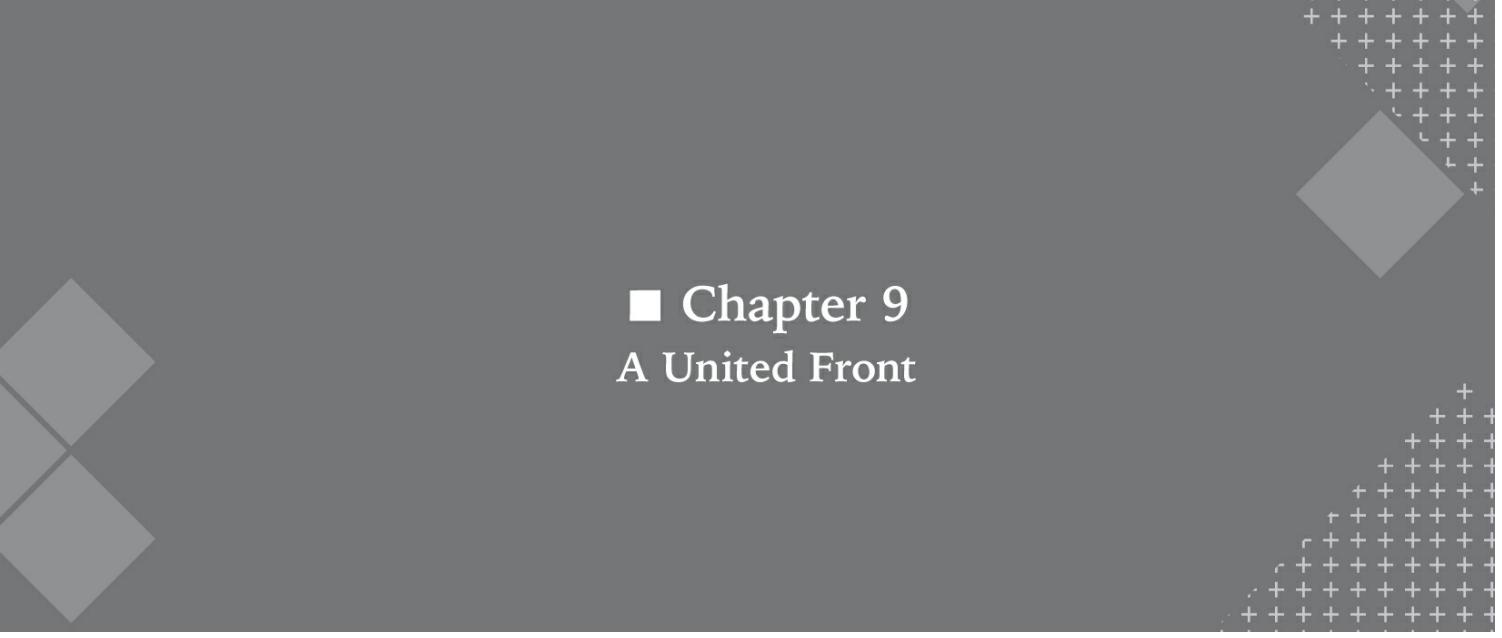
"Uhhh. Well..." He seemed to be at a loss for how to answer. "If you want to know 'what' I am, I'll be honest—I don't really know myself. But I guess the most accurate answer would be—"

After a short pause, the man announced his name. He sounded ever so slightly embarrassed, but at the same time deeply proud.

"—Kyouichirou. My name is Kyouichirou Shimizu. I'm an examinee just like you. I came running as soon as Nikaidou told me what happened."

Cracks were beginning to form in a fate that had, until then, been set in stone—cracks that dared to ask, "What if?"





■ Chapter 9

A United Front

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” First Floor

When a *Dungeon Magia* player hears the last name Aono, the first name that pops into their head is Kanata, or “Kana,” as fans like to call her.

Kanata Aono is one of the five main heroines of the first *Dungeon Magia*. She’s a cool, demure beauty and the future mistress of the Aono clan. She is the very personification of beauty, simplicity, and dignity. Many players were naturally drawn to her, including yours truly.

Oh, the exquisite days I spent playing *Dungeon Magia*, my heart palpitating at the stoic female samurai’s every move. She was so cute. She was so beautiful. She was so *moe*.

Now that I think of it, back then, I must have been in love with Kana. The fact I can say that with confidence is a testament to how cool and charming she was.

However, despite her popularity (or perhaps because of it), most players absolutely *hated* her route. Frankly, it was pretty bad.

The reason was simple—the enemies were way too strong.

...Yes, yes, I know. I hear you saying, “Oh, boo-hoo, the enemies are too tough. Just git gud, pleb.” Trust me, I get it.

If I didn’t have firsthand experience, I would probably think the same thing. And I agree that it’s important to consider a game’s story and its difficulty separately. Plus, *Dungeon Magia* is meant to be brutally difficult. If anything, players should enjoy that the game’s so punishing. Uh-huh. I couldn’t agree more. That’s perfectly valid. I’d even say that’s the correct opinion.

But, listen... Just trust me here. I’m dead serious, so...hear me out, okay?

Kanata Aono’s route is truly a cut above the rest. It’s total BS.

The enemies are completely broken.

For example, there are groups of low-level enemies that get preemptive attacks and immediately lock you down with status ailments or are capable of one-shutting your party members or can steal your items and levels and never give them back. And then there are the little pricks that regularly become invincible while they heal and revive their buddies every single turn—and these are low-level enemies, mind you!

Even just one of these bastards would be enough to traumatize a gamer for the rest of their days. But they come in *teams* and attack you every three or four steps inside dungeons. It’s a total *nightmare*.

Like I said, it’s BS. One hundred percent pure, uncut BS. And the fact that these beasts—the polar opposites of a weak boss like Kyouichirou—are out there in droves, crawling around the same world as him somehow makes the whole thing even more annoying.

It should go without saying that in an absolutely BS route like that, the boss’s abilities are complete nonsense.

Rakshasa Sarama is an undying apparition created when the Irregularity known as the Reaper devoured the soul of a talented young girl. So, what’s fighting Rakshasa Sarama like? Let me put it this way:

Imagine a goddess of death whose normal attack includes six strikes who can

sap your HP, summon helpers, and bind your characters. Does that sound fair to you?

Yeah. It's rough. It's absurd. Whatever bozos on the dev team came up with this ridiculous creature deserve to burn in hell along with their abomination of a boss.

...Whoops, sorry. I kind of lost my cool there.

But pretty much everyone in the *Dungeon Magia* community would agree with that assessment.

Look, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with making a boss hard. I know I'm repeating myself here, but *Dungeon Magia*'s whole deal is being brutally difficult. So, there's nothing wrong with the boss of one of the heroines' routes being tough. If anything, that's what we players want.

But the fact that you have to fight Rakshasa Sarama with a level cap and using only two characters—Arthur and Kana—is beyond insane. The whole encounter feels broken. The boss is practically immune to hits, can sometimes strike nine times in a turn, has endless droves of minions, can hit either party member with a 100 percent accurate bind skill... God. It pisses me off just thinking about it.

That said, if this route were part of the true ending or the grand finale, people might have forgiven the difficulty... Well, maybe not, but they probably would have hated it a lot less.

But Kana's route doesn't really fit into the overarching plot. The characters don't uncover any secret truths about the world or solve any of its big problems.

Maybe some of those plot issues were unavoidable. After all, Kana is the third heroine you unlock, which means her route takes place in the dead center of the plot. But that fact only makes the absurd difficulty and plot-enforced handicaps all the more ridiculous.

Thanks to the care put into the cutscenes, the amazing performances of the voice actors, and the high quality of the scenario, it's still worth the playthrough. But players continue to consider it one of the worst routes in the series.

And of course, the entire grim plot of Kana's story culminates in her and the main character having to take down her poor sister who has been incorporated by an Irregularity and cannot die. For that reason, ironically, no one hates Kana's route more than hardcore Kana fans.

And so, having just barely made it in time, I praised myself from the bottom of my heart.

That's right. I made it. It may have been by the skin of my teeth, but I did it.

Kanata's older sister was spared the grim, undignified fate the plot had laid out for her. She was alive. Her body was intact. She had no obvious injuries. She could go on living her life as a human.

This fact made me so happy that tears welled up in my eyes.

"Attuning spirit senses. Increasing telepathic communications priority to reflex action level and connecting virtual nervous system link to your spinal cord. Please confirm, Master."

But I was still standing in the middle of a battlefield.

I immediately granted Albi's request to take control of my bodily systems. At the same time, I once again prepared my mind and body for battle and assessed my surroundings.

Albi's connection with me was now heightened even further. She was no longer simply sharing my senses—we were now completely in sync. In this state, we could communicate faster than the speed of thought.

This was called Full-Dive Synchro Mode. Basically, Albi was piloting me like a mech. This allowed her to optimize my every movement and granted me the ability to sense spiritual power as well as any spirit could.

Our opponent might not have transformed into Rakshasa Sarama, but it was still an Irregularity. I couldn't underestimate it. We would have to proceed with utmost caution and exhaust every available strategy.

As we steeled ourselves for the battle ahead, we took in the cerulean world around us.

"The target seems preoccupied with recovery and has yet to act. Furthermore,

I don't sense any changes in this area's spiritual power. If you plan on destroying those shackles, I suggest you do it now, Master."

After a few moments, the secret boss gave me the all-clear, and I immediately swung my large sword into the chains binding the girl. I heard the metal crack as it split into pieces, and then Haruka Aono was free.

With the restraints no longer holding her up, she tumbled toward the ground, but I caught her mid-fall. I was careful not to make any sudden movements as I supported her body and helped her get to her feet.

"Can you stand?" I asked.

"Ah-ha-ha. Thanks. Guess I owe you one."

As the girl with the blue hair ornament slowly stood up, she chuckled and made light of her brush with death.

It didn't look like she had sustained any physical injuries, at least...

"I can confirm that she has no spiritual injuries, either. She seems rather worn out, but she is essentially unharmed."

Upon hearing Albi's diagnosis, I heaved a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness. It seems she's really okay.

It felt like a load had been lifted off my chest.

But just in case, I decided to hand her the item I'd brought along. I pulled a clear glass bottle full of red liquid out from my pocket and handed it to her.

The girl in blue held the hefty bottle in both hands and, with a puzzled expression, asked, "Um, what's this?"

"It's a Life Potion. It's a medicine that works with your spiritual power to increase your body's natural healing abilities. It also eases fatigue. We don't have much time. You should drink up."

My aunt bought me the potion to celebrate my taking the exam. She must've been especially proud of me because these things were really expensive. I felt bad for regifting such a fancy present, but the girl needed it more than me.

"First you save me, and now you're giving me a cool adventurer item," she

said. "You some kind of good guy or something?"

"I don't know about that, but I like to think of myself as a gentleman. Anyway, forget that. Listen, Miss—"

"It's Haruka. Haruka Aono."

"All right, Miss...Haruka Aono. This place isn't safe. You should get out of here while you still can." I handed her a piece of paper. "Nikaidou gave me this. It's a full map of this floor of the dungeon. It's only accurate for twenty-four hours, though. The red circle is where we are now. The black one is the entrance. I hear you're tough. You should be able to make it on your own, right?"

As I summarized this information, I recalled the conversation I'd had with Nikaidou on the way here.

"I can't believe I have to ask one of the examinees for help like this. Some examiner I am. But I know you just passed Akabane's trial, so I'm gonna put my faith in you. I'm begging you. Please go help that girl."

He told me the only reason he was able to make it out alive was because of Haruka Aono. Then he left the rest to me.

Was it irresponsible of him to trust someone he'd only just met? Was it cowardly? I didn't think so at all.

His pride as an examiner, his macho dignity—Nikaidou had thrown all of it to the wind when he handed me that map. I didn't find that pathetic in the least.

Think about it: If all he cared about was saving his own skin, he would never have let me rush off toward an Irregularity. It would've been much safer, and saner, frankly, to use typical adult logic to convince me to turn back and leave with him. By doing the opposite, he might be fired, or worse, seriously punished. It was a terrible move from his point of view. And yet, he'd believed in me enough to put his own career at risk.

I didn't think it was a rash decision on his part, either. I got the feeling he gave me the go-ahead only once he noticed the medal I'd received from Akabane and the quality of my spiritual power buffs.

But despite all that, what I'm trying to say is this: It took a lot of guts to

gamble his career and standing on so little info and send me to help Haruka.

Thank you, Nikaidou. I swear, I won't let what you did go to waste. I'll save her. I promise.

...Or, at least, those were the cool-sounding words I'd said in my head as I steeled myself for the task ahead. But all of that was smashed to pieces in a matter of seconds.

Why, you ask? Well...

"Huh?" said Haruka. "No way. I'm staying right here."

Because the girl I was supposed to rescue refused to let me save her.

Hah! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!

I could feel a vein standing up on my forehead as I suppressed my irritation.

"Okay," I said. "Could you please tell me why? And try to keep it brief."

"I can still fight! So, let's do this together! Okay?"

Nothing about this idea was "okay."

"...Look, I don't want to sound patronizing here, but you almost died there, missy."

"I know that! And you saved me! Thanks, Mr. Shimizu! I'm sooo grateful! There, are we good? Great. Now let's work together and kick this thing's butt!"

I couldn't believe it. Only moments ago, the creature in front of us had been about to murder her. And yet, she was totally unfazed and still raring to go.

"Uh, look, I—"

But before I could finish trying to convince her—

"...?!"

—my sixth sense picked up something gross and sticky creeping across the silent room.

Something wasn't right. A terribly unpleasant spiritual power was pouring out from the area around the Reaper. I took a massive step to one side and then turned to the battle-crazed lunatic beside me. "Something's coming at us from

behind. I think it's more chains. Try to use your spiritual senses to find them and then dodge!"

"Got it!"

Roughly two seconds after Haruka and I moved, four chains appeared where we had been standing. One was aiming for me, while the other three were after her.

Damn perv must have had a thing for young girls and wasn't ready to let her go just yet.

"Clearly the Irregularity was feigning sleep. But, Master, the question is why?"

"To regain its strength, survey our movements, bide its time until it had an opening, and, uh...reload its chains?"

"Hmm. An impressive response for someone like you. I'll give you full marks, just this once."

"Gee, thanks. So, what should we do? After all that trouble I went through to save the princess, she seems pretty set on kicking that thing's ass."

"...It seems a change of plans is in order. Might I suggest a cooperative combat strategy?"

"I figured you'd say that. All right, I'll see what I can do."

After taking less than one real-world second to chat with Albi, I called out to Haruka. She was already rushing toward the Reaper.

"Let's attack its flanks! Just watch out for those chains!"

"Got it!" she replied cheerfully.

With that, the girl with the blue hair ornament used some fancy footwork to pick her katana up off the ground.

Her lips were turned up in a smile. She was enjoying this. Seeing her expression, I felt my own spirits rise.

"All right, Albi. Time to use that."

As my excitement grew, I implored the goddess of time to activate a skill we had been saving for just such an occasion—an ultimate attack that would

require all my power.

I'd have to endure massive recoil and take on a lot of risk, but it would be well worth the effort. If I could land the blow, our secret weapon might even end this battle in a single strike.

"Please try to maintain your composure after activation. If you die here, Master, I would be quite inconvenienced."

"Quit your worryin'! I'm not letting anyone die on my watch! Least of all me!"

"...Very well, then."

Spiritual power began to circulate through my body, producing a pleasant hum.

It seemed my (secret) boss had given me her approval.

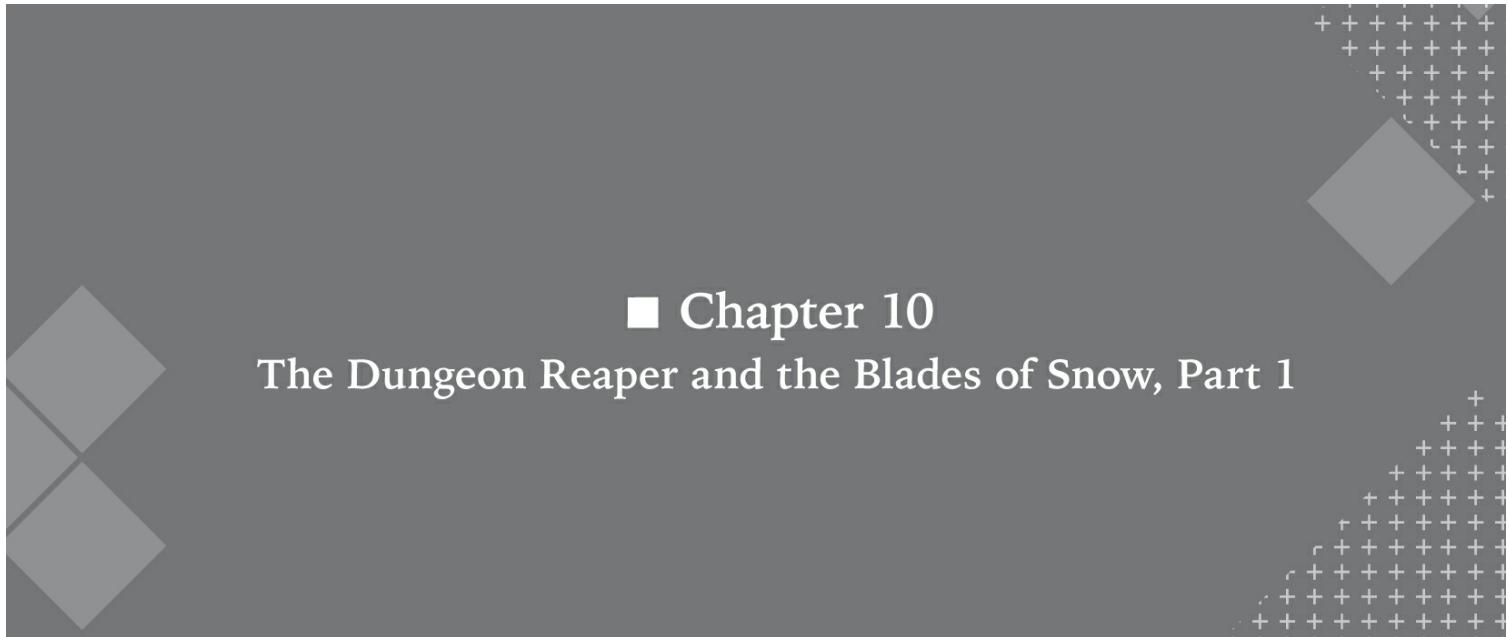
There was no need to hesitate. All that was left was to send this grim reaper off to its happy ending—in hell!

"Here I come, you bony jerk! _____!"

Having steeled my murderous resolve, I quickly swung my greatsword up above my head.

■ Chapter 10

The Dungeon Reaper and the Blades of Snow, Part 1



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” First Floor

I felt the change immediately.

All of the spiritual power that had built up in my body disappeared, as did the supply from Albi.

I had used my trump card—a special attack that exacted a heavy spiritual toll in exchange for incredible power.

...Or, at least, that was the cool way it would be described if this was your typical fantasy battle story. But to tell the truth, this technique was greedy, unscrupulous, and downright stupid.

First off, it cost a lot. In fact, it was positively ravenous. Just to get it started, I needed to feed it every drop of AP I had stored up. Then, to satisfy it, Albi had to supply every last drop she could manage.

On top of that, I was taking one hell of a risk. Think of it like this: I use up all my currently held spiritual power *and* my whole backup supply. Where does

that leave me? That's right. I'd have nothing left for additional skills.

You know those scenes in stories where the hero pours everything they've got into one super move and can't do anything else? They release all their MP or magic or whatever mystical power they have in one massive finishing blow, then collapse to the ground. Well, that was exactly what I was trying to do.

...Except, in my case, I'd run out of juice well before the grand finale.

Screwing myself over by using my own special move? I, Kyouichirou Shimizu...

"I'm a real piece of work, aren't I?!"

With a fearsome battle cry, I swung my large sword down toward the ground. Usually, that sort of reckless swing would be easily dodged. But my attack connected cleanly near the Reaper's left arm with a tremendous boom.

I kept going, gouging into its chest. Then, dragging my blade, I spun around behind it and lifted the greatsword back into the air only to bring it down hard in one final slash.

"Fighting an endurance battle with zero AP freaking blows, man!" I shouted from the depths of my very soul.

From there, I sped up and really put my back into it. I hit the Reaper once, twice, three times. Each blow connected cleanly, practically knocking the thing off its feet.

I channeled all my rage and resentment into a series of relentless attacks. The Reaper was taking so much damage, I thought its spine might snap.

I was off to a good start.

There were several reasons why I had to keep pushing forward like this.

The first was the way my special move worked. Like I said, the process required to use my ultimate skill went something like this:

Activate skill → Become totally useless → Defend myself until the skill is ready to use → Use skill.

It was like loading a glass cannon in plain view of the enemy.

One of its major downsides was the fact that I couldn't use any of my skills

again until the entire process was over. But I had a secret to counteract the “become totally useless” part of the equation.

“Rrrah!”

I raised my sword and brought it down with all my might. Thanks to the effect of Strength, the Reaper finally staggered under the weight of my attack.

That's right. That's my ace in the hole.

Once I used up my AP, I could no longer use new skills, which would make me much less effective in combat. That much was true.

But did running out of AP have any bearing on skills that were already active?
Nope!

Buffs and AP were not synonymous. AP was energy, while buffs were effects. So any buffs I had remained, so long as I activated them before I ran out of energy. This was one benefit active skills had over passive ones.

Before I showed up to the battle, I had already stacked three buffs on myself—Strength, Stride, and Shield. And all three of them were still active.

This came with some disadvantages, such as how I was forced to put them all on the same timer, and a loss of flexibility since I couldn't switch the buffs in and out. But it was a solid strategy pulled from my gaming knowledge, and it was working pretty well for now.

This was *my* reason.

The other had to do with the Reaper...and the girl.

Haruka Aono tore into the Reaper, letting out a very peculiar battle cry.

She's something else, all right.

I watched, shocked, as a girl who had to still be in junior high overwhelmed the nearly ten-foot-tall monster.

The Reaper should have outclassed her both in physical strength and weapon specs. And yet Haruka Aono seemed to have a clear advantage.

But why?

"I must say, Master, I am astonished. Her skills are so deft. Has humanity truly advanced so far?"

It was just as Albi said. The word *deft* sounded a bit outdated, but she was basically saying that Haruka's technique was crazy impressive.

"I couldn't agree more. Even to my amateur eyes, her moves are unreal. Hold on. Did her sword just divide into multiple blades?"

"A mere afterimage."

"What?"

"As I said, you are seeing an afterimage. Her slashes are so inhumanly fast and delivered at such an abrupt tempo that they create an optical illusion."

"Whoa..."

"But there is something more important going on than her speed, Master. Despite how fiercely she wields that blade, it shows no sign of damage."

"...Hold up. Wasn't that sword provided to her for this exam?"

"It was."

"And she's slashing so quickly I'm seeing afterimages."

"Indeed."

"Then why isn't the sword breaking?"

"I believe she has used astral power to improve the blade's durability. But more than that, I would say it is due to the deftness of her skill."

"...Whoa."

Taken aback, I slammed my greatsword into the Reaper's spine.

The pervert skeleton reeled back but refused to face me. It was obsessed with Haruka Aono's soul, but it was also clearly aware of the threat she posed.

Its instincts were correct. By this point, I was just a dude with zero AP who couldn't use any skills. I was only barely able to keep up with it thanks to my buffs and had no means of delivering a decisive blow.

On top of that, the Irregularity's special skill was complicating things. Blue flames poured out of every wound I left in its back. These weren't part of an attack—they were healing the damage I'd just inflicted.

Dungeon Magia described this cheat move thusly: "A passive skill that activates at the end of each turn and heals half the damage taken."

I remembered groaning at this back when I played the game. But, boy, it was a pain in the ass dealing with it for real.

"This is starting to get annoying, huh?" Haruka said with a frustrated laugh. I was amazed that she could still chat while swinging her sword with the speed of a machine gun. "No matter how much we attack it, it just keeps healing. How calcium-rich is this thing's diet?"

"I don't know about calcium, but you're right that its regeneration ability is a real pain."

For some reason, Haruka's eyes widened with surprise. "Whoa! I'm impressed, Shimizu. You've already got a plan to take this thing out, huh?"

".....What? How'd you guess?"

This girl was starting to scare me.

"It's really not that big a deal!" she said sheepishly, still raining slashes down on the bone-brained boss.

I decided to let it slide. Things were chaotic enough as it was.

"I just, y'know, listened to your breathing and counted the beats between your attacks, and thought it was a bit weird that you kept your rhythm steady despite knowing your opponent can regenerate. I mean, isn't that odd? Most people would see that their attacks weren't doing the trick and adjust their strength or speed. But you haven't made any changes. Same power, same attacks. Over and over. Plus, you're hitting it all over the place. You've been aiming for the upper spine a lot, but it's not like you're focusing on one point. And more than that, I can tell you're running out of astral power. If you're spending all that astral power on an enemy that regenerates, using attacks you know are useless against it, then you must—"

“Holy crap! Your mind is terrifying!” I snapped, unable to stop myself.

She was already swinging her sword like a seasoned expert, and now she was deducing my entire scheme like some master detective. This girl was way too quick on the uptake. I found it hard to believe we were both from the same species. Haruka Aono’s talent for combat was truly out of this world.

“uuUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUURYUUUUAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAaaaaaa!

As I was freaking out over Haruka’s unparalleled genius, I heard the Reaper start to howl. Pale blue flames erupted across the skeleton’s body, and it thrashed about in a frenzy.

While the giant monster was very imposing, something about the timing made it seem like a pathetic virgin getting pissy because the girl it liked was talking to another guy.

What a loser... I get it, but I have no sympathy. Sorry.

“Shimizu, let’s back off for a sec.”

“All right, but be careful. Don’t get caught up in its chains.”

“No prob. I won’t fall for the same move twice... See?”

She easily dodged a group of chains hurtling toward her and then smashed them to bits with a swing of her sword. I was impressed. She’d already conquered the move that had originally claimed her life.

“They’re nasty if you get caught, but these things are no biggie once you figure them out.”

“It’s a real shame bone boy over there can’t use regular attacks at the same time, huh? Looks like the chains move around automatically, but it has to summon them manually, so it backs off before using them.”

After becoming Rakshasa Sarama, it was able to use multiple attacks at once. But its base form apparently only got one attack per turn. That was a lucky break for us. The more clunky its attacks, the easier it would be for us to deal with them.

“So, how are we supposed to kill this thing, Shimizu?”

"If we use basic attacks, it'll just regenerate. So I'm gonna crush it with something superstrong that it can't regenerate from."

Yes, I know. That was oversimplifying it quite a bit. But I didn't exactly have the time to take her through every intricate detail of my plan. I was hoping she'd just put up with a brief outline for now, but...

"Gotcha. So you're saying you have some huge attack charging up right now, right?"

...it seemed that was all she needed to figure the whole thing out. I assumed she'd get it once she saw my attack, but it turned out even that wasn't necessary. Well, that just makes things even easier.

"Yep," I said. "I'd appreciate it if you could cover me."

"Got it! In that case, how about—?"

But before Haruka could finish her sentence, the enemy made its next move.

"umdgjwo8*zmdakpoooOaaaAfnn77yaklv—"

The Reaper glared at us and began to recite some eerie prayer.

I had no clue what it was saying, but I had a feeling I knew what came next.

"Well, this is new," said Haruka. "I wonder what it's doing."

"Who knows? But I think it might be calling in reinforcements."

A second later, I was proved right.

Countless holes opened up behind us to cut off our retreat. Lines of skeletons emerged from the gaping tears, each about half the size of the Reaper.

"Whoa, look at that! You were totally right!"

"I appreciate the recognition, but, uh, we're totally surrounded."

"Whaaat? Don't tell me you're scared. You wanna run for it?"

I grimaced. "Not a chance. I'm sending this punk-ass skeleton back to the boneyard."

The raven-haired girl burst out laughing.

"Hey!" I shouted. "What the hell?!"

"I'm sorry! Heh-heh. It's nothing. It's just, your face... You look like a real scoundrel right now. Pfffft! Ah-ha-ha!"

"You've got some nerve poking fun at my sore spot!"

"I'm not trying to make fun of you! You just look like such a cardboard cutout of a villain, that's all. Pfffft, ha-ha-ha."

I was overcome with the urge to pop her one.

"...Whatever," I said. "We can bicker about this later. For now, we've got more important business. So, what do you think? Should we split up?"

"Oh, yeah. About that."

Haruka Aono leaned in and started whispering in my ear. I didn't expect the pervy skeleton to listen in on us this far into the match, but I figured it was best to let her do what she wanted.

"So, you _____, then _____, and _____. Or, at least, that's my plan. What do you think?"

"...Fine. Let's go with that."

"Oh, wait. There's something else I noticed."

"What?"

"_____"

With that, our short strategy meeting came to an end, and we headed for our positions.

Haruka Aono would take the skeleton army. Which, by process of elimination, left me with the other guy.

"Hey, you bony piece of crap. Let's dance." I goaded the Reaper, who had just finished his little chant. Unsurprisingly, the bony creep tried to make for the girl. But I wasn't going to let that happen. "Damn, that's some crush you've got. Didn't realize it was skeleton mating season you damned"—I swung my sword—"creep!"

The Reaper was wide-open. My blade connected with its chin, and I managed to stagger it. I was about to follow up with another attack, but it cried out,

“UUURYUUUUAAaaaaa!” and swung its scythe straight at my head.

Hold up, how is it countering when I just staggered it? It wasn’t this agile a second ago. Come to think of it, this looks bad. It’s totally gonna hit m—

“Engaging emergency evasive maneuvers. Relax your body as much as you can, Master.”

In an instant, Albi took control of my muscles.

I felt like I was floating as my body used more power than I thought possible to dodge the Reaper’s scythe and then escape its attack range.

“That was far too close,” said Albi. “Are you aware that, had you taken the brunt of that attack, you would have sustained tremendous damage?”

“My bad. Thanks for the assist. I really didn’t expect that thing to attack me when I had it staggered.”

“Don’t forget it is an Irregularity. Even if its main ability is defensive, you mustn’t take it lightly.”

Albi’s advice knocked me back to my senses.

She was right. The thing in front of me was an Irregularity—a special kind of boss enemy that roamed the map and violently attacked anyone it came upon. I couldn’t underestimate it. And yet somewhere along the way, I had let my guard down.

C’mon, Kyouichirou, get this through that thick head of yours. An Irregularity might be a cakewalk for some pro at full strength, but I’m just a regular person. I can’t afford to screw around.

I took a moment to refocus. I wasn’t going to underestimate my opponent, but nor would I shrink in fear. I was gonna hand this piece of crap a bouquet of death.

“Albi. Support.”

“As you wish.”

The moment Albi returned control of my body, I rushed back into battle.

My first move was nothing fancy. I simply slashed with my sword, my head

empty.

I angled my blade for maximum power, but the damn Reaper swung its scythe up over its head, and our weapons clashed.

“Grrah!”

I swung down in the same direction once more. Then I changed my position and brought my sword down again.

The Reaper caught each of my blows with its scythe. Every time I'd strike, it would dodge. Every time it struck me, I'd deflect and try to counter.

I wasn't letting my opponent overwhelm me and neither was the Reaper. We had reached a perfect stalemate.

“Rrrraah!”

The sound of metal scraping metal rang in my ears.

I wasn't making any progress, and it was starting to piss me off.

This pointless back and forth was actually to my advantage, taking my plan into account. But at the moment, being unable to land a single blow on this bastard felt seriously crappy. Was I supposed to just run out the clock and let this people-devouring, human-soul-cursing, death-defying piece of garbage fight me one-on-one without giving him even one good punch?

Yeah, maybe that was the right choice in terms of strategy. But...

“As a gamer—no, as a man—I’m not gonna let a piece of crap like you get the better of me!”

...I let my anger—and my own incompetence—fuel my next attack, and I rushed my opponent with a sweeping sideways chop. I lost myself and let my muscles take over.

All the Reaper had to do in the face of this brain-dead slash was avoid it. And sure enough, the stalker skeleton dodged just in time to avoid the blow and then brought down its huge scythe like a guillotine.

“Finally! Big mistake, pal!”

I launched my greatsword into the air and kicked off the ground with both feet.

The opening would only last a second, but I went for it. In less time than it took to snap your fingers, I hopped back and leaped into the air with all my might.

The Reaper flung its scythe down in front of me. For an instant, I felt my heart leap into my throat. I gritted my teeth as I soared ever higher.

This was what I'd been waiting for.

I had won our little game of chicken and flung my sword into the air.

This move was extremely risky. In all honesty, it probably would have been better to simply dodge. I bet it seemed like I was just trying to look cool.

A master like Haruka wouldn't even have considered a plan like this. The reason I'd taken the risk was because I figured it would lead to some *really big damage*.

It may have been irrational, but with my dodging and attacking, I had already built the pillory. Now, by taking to the air, I was poised to fall upon my opponent *like a guillotine*.

I used the boost I got from Stride to its fullest and grabbed hold of the great sword I had just tossed into the air.

“Eat this!” I shouted, using my falling momentum to slash downward.

Gravity, body weight, and a little bit of rotation all coalesced as I fell upon the Reaper from overhead.

I made impact. I felt the shockwave pass through me, and then—*crack*.

Before my opponent could summon any new chains, my sword planted a kiss on the defenseless skeleton's neck.

After sticking my landing, I looked up at the bony freak.

And what a sight I saw.

Over 80 percent of its skull had been sliced right off. Moreover, I'd chopped

through its throat and left a massive gash in its chest.

The Reaper ceased fighting. The pale blue flames burning across its body told me it was focused on recovering. Or, in other words...

“KO, bone breath.”

I could feel my heart throbbing in my ears as elation overtook me. Filled with a sense of accomplishment, I readied my sword to resume my assault. But just then...

“*Bad idea*,” said the voice in my head.

Like a splash of cold water, it doused the flames raging in my chest.

“*What do you mean?*” I asked. “*You don’t seriously expect me to pass up a perfect opportunity to whale on this guy, do you?*”

“*Unfortunately, that is exactly what I expect. I advise you to remain patient and watch.*”

“*Why, though?*”

“*This is a trap. The enemy is clearly trying to bait you.*”

She seemed sure, but I couldn’t help doubting her. My heart, full of irritation, was asking for proof.

“*It’s quite obvious,*” she replied. “*Your foe is an avatar of the undead and it has already withstood countless waves of attacks from both you and Haruka Aono. And yet the creature now exposes itself. Why? Why now?*”

“*You sure I didn’t just blind it? I mean, check it out. I smashed its face to pieces!*”

“*Are you implying that a skeleton has eyes? Much less optic nerves?*”

“*Ngh...*”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. She had a point. This thing wasn’t human. I couldn’t count on it working like a human, or any living creature, for that matter.

I thought for sure I’d smashed its eyes, and that was why it had stopped to recover...

“Either way, we don’t have the strength to damage it more than it is able to heal. The best course of action would be to avoid attacking recklessly and focus on keeping it restrained until we are ready to deploy our technique.”

“So we’re just supposed to have a staring contest? That sucks.”

“I am quite familiar with your penchant for reckless abandon, Master. As such, I do not plan to stop you. However—”

Albi’s words trailed off.

“What’s up, Albi?”

“Look at Haruka Aono, Master.”

Spirits were far more sensitive to other spirits and their energy than humans were. Albi’s sharp spirit senses must have picked something up that even I, synchronized with her as I was, hadn’t noticed.

Keeping one eye on the Reaper, I surveyed the battlefield.

“There’s no way.” I gulped.

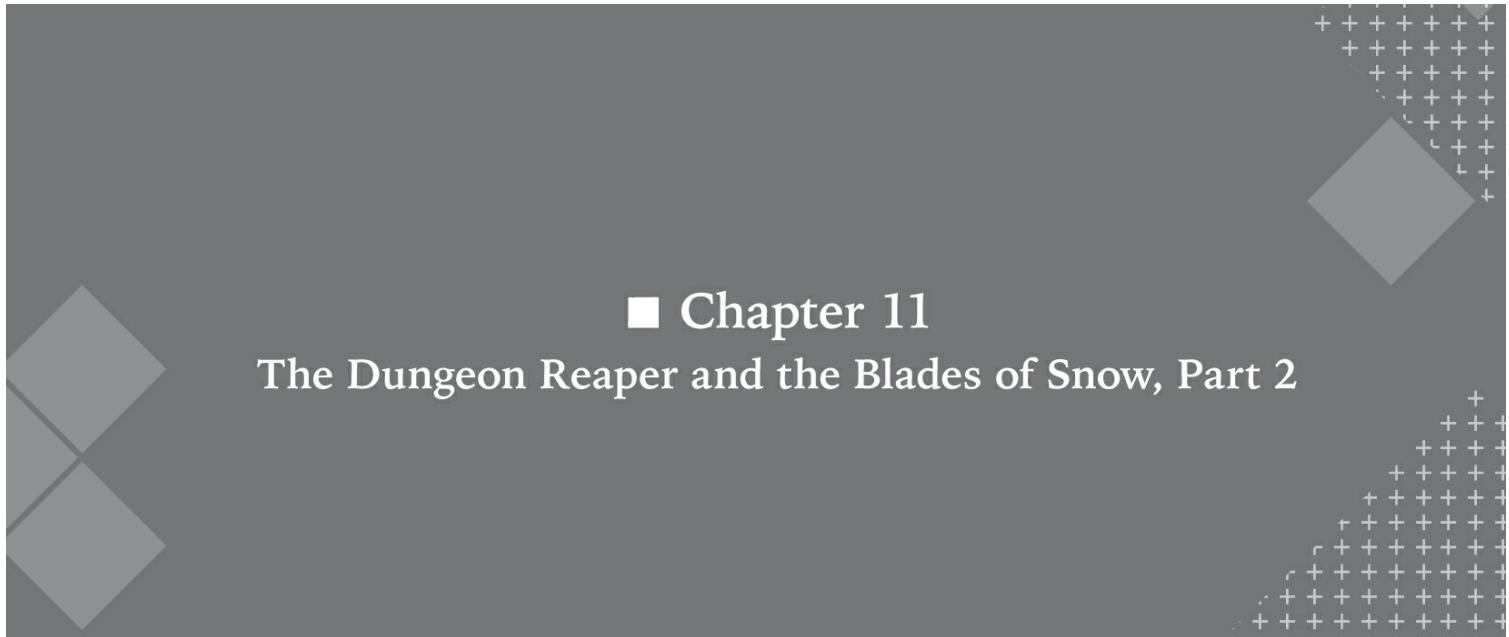
The ground was littered with a mountain of bloodless corpses. Bones were strewn all over the place. I could describe the scene with any number of words, but the simplest way to put it and still capture the essence of the situation was this:

“Haruka Aono... She’s gone and done it.”

I drew back in terror.

■ Chapter 11

The Dungeon Reaper and the Blades of Snow, Part 2



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” First Floor

The spirit known as Futsu-no-Mitama was a Demis spirit of the third highest class—a divine spirit of the possessor type. Haruka Aono was its current contracted human. During the plot of the original *Dungeon Magia*, it becomes a part of Rakshasa Sarama.

The game’s description of its ability goes like this: “Allows user to duplicate and manipulate equipped sword.” I might be paraphrasing, but I’m pretty sure the official *Dungeon Magia* wiki said something like “Summons copies of the user’s weapons (swords only) that can be controlled from a distance.”

Personally, I think the appeal of Futsu-no-Mitama is its versatility and how cool it looks in battle. It lets characters summon swords midair and shoot them like bullets, or create an army of swords to command, and so on and so forth. As I said, there are all sorts of ways to use it. It’s strong. It’s effective. And it looks *kick-ass*.

That sort of ability is a classic in these kinds of games. Maybe it’s not in all of

them, but in any given fantasy story with combat, there's a pretty good chance one of the characters will have a similar skill. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying, let's call this type of skill "creating and controlling energy blades." That's what Futsu-no-Mitama does.

But the story doesn't end there. There's a clear difference between Futsu-no-Mitama and other skills of a similar nature. Or rather, not so much a "difference" as a "weakness."

That's right. Futsu-no-Mitama has a few major flaws which make it much more inconvenient than its brethren.

First: The amount of blades it can create. Based on what I remembered from the Rakshasa Sarama fight and how many blades Haruka Aono was summoning right now, the maximum number seemed to be six. That's not a small number by any means. But also, it's not exactly a lot. Is it enough to overwhelm a swarm of enemies? Probably not.

Second: As stated in the description, it allows the user to duplicate their *equipped* sword. Not all swords in their possession, not every sword they've ever possessed, but only the one they have *currently equipped*. In other words, the only sword that can be copied and controlled is the one in the user's hands at that moment. You can't summon swords from memory or pull them out of some other dimension. You can only use whatever sword you're holding. That means your equipment plays a huge role in how effective the spirit is. Take, for example, the sword Haruka Aono was supplied with for this exam. I couldn't think of a worse sword to use with the ability.

Second: The biggest drawback is that the copies don't just do their own thing. They have to be manipulated manually.

According to the official guide, Futsu-no-Mitama requires full participation from the user, who has to survey their surroundings, figure out positioning, and then use their sixth sense to control the blades.

...Obviously, that's a real pain.

There's no auto-aim, and no aim assist, either. The user has to control these swords floating in space all on their own. And what's worse, the swords made by Futsu-no-Mitama are far weaker than the original weapon.

To summarize, Futsu-no-Mitama can only create a limited number of blades, the quality of the user's equipment heavily impacts its effectiveness, and to make full use of it, the user has to be incredibly skilled.

Kanata Aono's Ameno Habakiri, a skill that divides and multiplies her *slashes*, is practically Futsu-no-Mitama's antithesis. Neither ability is unconditionally better than the other, but one thing is for sure—Kana's skill is much, much easier to control.

Now, that's not to say that Haruka Aono's ability is weak. That's simply not the case. At the end of the day, it's still Demis class, and it has great maneuverability.

The problem is, it simply asks too much from its users. Not only does it require an experienced sword practitioner, but it also demands a perfect understanding of how to direct Astral Skills and a superhuman ability to manipulate objects in three-dimensional space.

My point is that Futsu-no-Mitama's unique ability is incredibly difficult to use.

The official guide states that its strength is irrelevant, because no one alive can control its power. And I found that pretty easy to believe.

No matter how good something looked on paper, it was pointless if no one could use it. I had always assumed that the ability to create and control sword clones was far beyond anyone in this world.

...Until I saw the scene unfolding before me right now, that is.

“Haaa! Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-taaah!”

The girl shouted her strange war cry as the smaller skeletons' skulls flew left and right. All of them had been sliced off with swords, but each slice was totally unique.

The first skill was called Monotone.

A single sword danced through the air. It spun elegantly, its bare blade emitting a blue glow. No one gripped its hilt. And yet, it seemed to perfectly understand its purpose as it rushed across the battlefield.

It was fast, sharp, elegant, and exacting.

It flew toward the dimensional rifts, seeking its skeletal prey, and soon found what it was looking for.

The skeleton soldiers moaned as they emerged, spears at the ready. Left alone, they would keep spilling out endlessly. But to the sword, these bony beasts were little more than target practice.

It paused for only an instant before exploding into movement.

Free from the restraints of gravity, the sword dove at the closest bone soldier like a bird of prey. In the blink of an eye, it slashed once as though being drawn from an invisible scabbard, and then again in the opposite direction. This speedy combo lopped off the soldier's skull.

It quickly returned to its original position, as if the air were its scabbard. It was like watching an invisible swordsman practicing *iaido*, a sword style based on quick-draw techniques.

It was a strange sight, but the sword's movements were exquisite, almost transcendental. I (and Albi, borrowing my senses) could only stand by and watch, transfixed by the divine technique that seemed to defy not only the limits of swordplay, but the very laws of nature.

Has she even heard of air resistance? I wanted to say as much, but before I could, the miraculous show continued.

The next skill was Fusion.

A tremendous sound shook the room as a skeleton was split in half.

Some distance away from the *iaido* blade, a tremor rippled out in front of another black tear. At its epicenter was a single sword.

This new blade, even more powerful than the first, had manifested thirty feet away and was now fighting its own battle.

This one only needed a single strike. It was quicker than lightning, the stuff of legends.

An *iaido* sword drawn from air and a blade that struck faster than a thunderbolt.

Despite their disparate styles, their attacks weaved together to perform in

miraculous tandem.

But Futsu-no-Mitama could do more still.

Delta Accel.

In yet another area, a third sword easily dodged a skeleton soldier's attack, then pierced through its body like a fencer's épée.

Quadrangle into Pentagon.

Two more swords appeared from empty space, acting in perfect synchronicity as they overwhelmed another pack of skeleton soldiers.

Then, finally—

The Hexabloom.

—a sixth blade appeared in yet another area. It danced through the air like a swallow taking flight, eradicating foes as they stepped out from the rifts.

All of these swords acted simultaneously, yet each took on its foes using a completely different attack style.

Each clone was wrapped in blue spiritual power as they sliced through the calcium crusaders like sharks speeding through an ocean of air.

Meanwhile, the general commanding these steel soldiers, Haruka Aono, was herself cutting through a swath of skeletons.

The sight left me speechless.

Not only was Haruka controlling six separate free-floating swords, but she was manipulating each with a different attack style and hitting all her targets with perfect precision.

This went beyond mere skill at manipulation. She hadn't simply devised an elegant program for the clones to follow, either. It was like each blade was another Haruka Aono. They moved through the air freely and unsystematically as they overwhelmed the enemy.

"It seems she has it handled," said Albi.

"No kidding."

Nothing more needed to be said on the matter.

Now that I'd seen her skills in action, I couldn't help wondering how this bone-brained pervert had managed to get the drop on a beast like her in the original plotline.

"Tell me, you skull-faced stalker," I said. "How'd you do it, huh?"

Unsurprisingly, the Reaper said nothing. It merely stared at me, unmoving, as blue flames burned all across its body, healing the damage it had sustained a moment earlier.

Come to think of it, this thing's been like this from the start. It just waits and waits until its opponent is within range or makes a mistake. Then, when they're exhausted, it swoops in to devour them. I knew it was a no-good scoundrel, but I didn't expect it to be this much of a scumbag. I'm kind of impressed.

Albi's voice sounded inside my head.

"The Reaper depletes the resources of its opponents by obstructing them and defending itself. It then uses its predatory abilities to devour their souls... Such a being is certainly worthy of the name Reaper. What a dreadful strategy."

"Huh. I figured you'd compliment it for being so 'efficient.'"

"And just what about its strategy do you find efficient? Personally, I would focus my resources on stealth rather than all that unnecessary restoration. If the goal is merely to take advantage of a foe once they've let their guard down, there is no need to rush in and take so much damage."

Albi's thoughts on the matter were spot on as always. And they also cut right to the core of what this *thing* really was.

"Seeing how it neutralizes all attacks and refuses to communicate," Albi continued, *"I believe this Irregularity was born from the accumulated regrets and feelings of inferiority of the downtrodden. I've never seen a being that so completely personified the term 'irredeemable.'"*

By "the downtrodden," I figured she meant the spirits that logged in to the Moon's Eclipse dungeon and served as its boss encounters.

This dungeon was aimed at beginners. It had only five floors, and the enemies

that showed up were all low-level spirits like Goblins and Kobolds. Even the boss wasn't all that impressive.

Basically, every spirit in the dungeon was weak. There was no point in forming pacts with them, and adventurers just used the place as a spot to gather spirit stones.

Most enemies were sent back to where they came from after a single blow. They were too weak to put up any resistance. Too weak to survive. Too weak to be noticed. Too weak to be considered a real fight. Too weak to be respected.

They were weak, weak, weak...

Their regrets must have been endless. And those negative memories accumulated until they festered, rotted, and eventually formed an undying creature that used chains to bind its foes.

"Irredeemable, huh? I couldn't agree more." The creature wasn't evil, per se. It was simply beyond redemption. I turned to face it. "Yo, if you've got something to say, why not try saying it? It doesn't have to be in our language, so if there's any chance we can talk this through, then—"

My empty attempt at negotiation was drowned out by an uncomprehending howl. It seemed I wasn't going to be meeting this guy halfway. Not that I could blame it. If it was really an amalgamation of countless spirits' hatred toward adventurers, I couldn't expect it to simply forgive and forget.

Was I the target of its vendetta? Prey for it to kill and shame? At best, it probably saw me as a power-up item. Whatever I was to it, I was an adventurer and a human. That alone guaranteed no love was lost between us. We were going to keep fighting until one of us was dead.

"Heh." That was fine by me. I wasn't some hero looking to make the world a better place. I was just a weak-ass tutorial miniboss. "...Chill out, bonehead. If you *had* tried to negotiate, it probably woulda just pissed me off even more."

Mercy? Reconciliation? You don't deserve any of that. You're just a pile of trash, and I'm here to clean you up.

What was the point in trying to reason with some human-devouring, little-girl-chasing stalker in the first place? I was just kidding—fooling myself. And I was relieved it hadn't fallen for it.

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Master. You seem to know how to handle yourself."

"Crying over the bad guy's sob story is the hero's job. A small-time punk like me has to at least try everything. After that, I can let my fists do the talking."

I might love this world, but I was also the leader of a rebellion.

I had people to save, fates to change. And while I was at it, I was willing to lend a hand to others doomed by this game's ridiculous plotline. People who became evil for unavoidable reasons, people who harmed others for what they thought was right, or people, like my sister, who died just to make the story more tragic. There was a part of me that wanted to help such poor, unfortunate souls.

But my heart wasn't big enough to welcome those who weren't interested. Especially if they were in my way.

"I gave you a chance, and you refused it. And so, your evil days end here... You're going to hell with an incomplete bucket list, pal."

These words, full of all the venom I could muster, were the Reaper's death sentence. Okay, sure, it sounded pretty cheesy. But as far as I was concerned, it was the perfect eulogy for that piece of crap.

As soon as the line left my mouth, Albi announced, *"It's time, Master."*

In an instant, she claimed dominance over our cerulean surroundings, changing everything.

Albi's spiritual power glowed, expanded, broke free, and rose above.

It flowed through my sluggish body and into my greatsword, which grew hot with energy.

The power I had yielded to manifest my big attack was back.

And that could only mean one thing—

“Three-dimensional erasure force manifestation complete. The beginning of the end is nigh. Standing by for End of Zero. Engage deployment sequence at once, Master.”

—our special move was ready.

■ Chapter 12

The Dungeon Reaper and the Blades of Snow, Part 3

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” First Floor

A pure white light bathed my greatsword, spilling out into the cerulean labyrinth for sixteen feet in all directions.

The light was strange. It was bright and warm, yet it didn’t sting my eyes.

It condensed into my greatsword until it became a shining blade of purest light.

The white radiance was divine—the work of an Ultima, the greatest of the spirits. Logically speaking, a cheap piece of equipment couldn’t possibly hold this holy radiance. But Himinglaeva Albion, ruler of the fourth dimension, easily defied three-dimensional logic, creating a paradox: The most powerful of skills was existing within the weakest weapon imaginable.

This white light descended upon the material plane, harming neither me nor the sword that served as its vessel.

“Engaging: End of Zero.”

And so, my sword was reborn. It took on a regal appearance, emanating an immaculate spiritual power. Who would guess it was just a piece of junk I borrowed for this exam?

“Ha-ha! This freakin’ rules!”

I gave my beautiful new sword a few practice swings. I hardly recognized it.

Usually, swinging your sword around in the air in the middle of a battle would be tantamount to suicide. But my opponent didn’t move an inch.

“Yo, yo, yo! What’s wrong? You scared of a little sword, punk?”

“.....”

The Reaper was silent. I could sense a new reluctance from its stance. This was something different from the careful strategy it had been using up until now.

It hadn’t moved a finger since I manifested my skill. As the light shone and fused with my sword, it hadn’t so much as sent a single chain after us. This wasn’t part of the skill, mind you. Albi and I hadn’t stopped time or done anything to purposely confuse our opponent.

This undying Irregularity, this endlessly regenerating Reaper, had stopped for one simple reason—it was scared. It understood that if I hit it with this new sword of mine, it was screwed. The bony freak had overcome death itself. But now it felt an emotion it had believed impossible, and it had no idea what to do.

No matter how powerful, the weapon in my hands was still just a sword. What could a glorified paring knife do against a creature that could endlessly regenerate? Right?!

“So, tell me,” I said. “Why’re you so scared? It’s only a sword. It’s just a little shinier now. What’s the future lord Rakshasa Sarama got to be afraid of, huh?”

Even if I’d brought a sword like Laevateinn that could cut anything, it wouldn’t make a difference. No matter how sharp the blade, the instant the Reaper got cut, it would regenerate like magic. All it had to do was fall back on its gloomy kid endurance shtick and wait for me to use up all my ammo. Problem solved.

Besides, End of Zero wasn’t nearly as convenient an ability as the Reaper’s.

My greatsword's stats hadn't changed at all. It was still the same junk sword I'd been supplied with. Despite being an Ultima level technique bearing Himinglaeva Albion's second name, all it did was create a single sword of light. The weapon's cutting ability wasn't even enhanced.

In my opinion, it was a meager return on my investment, considering all the AP I had poured into it. This was an inferior version of the attack, too—several orders of magnitude lower than the base ability.

Originally, this special move could be used instantly with no buildup. It wasn't single-target, either—it hit all enemies at all ranges. And yet I had spent a huge amount of time just to imbue my weapon with the power for a single strike. Yeah, I was using only a fraction of a shadow of its true power. And this drop in quality was due to a single factor—the failings of its user, Kyouichirou Shimizu.

But even taking into account the tremendously nerfed usage speed, range, and cost, this skill still lived up to the name the goddess of time had bestowed on it.

Sure, it was limited in all sorts of ways by its less-than-ideal user. But its power remained unchanged from the original. And as long as she could manage that, the goddess could assert her authority.

“URUuu.....”

She could make even a creature with limitless regeneration cower before her might.



Now that End of Zero had manifested, we had the final piece required to assure our victory.

It was now Reaper-hunting season.



“Nyeh-heh-heeeeeehhhh!!!”

Kyouichirou Shimizu—both me and the original—let out an eccentric laugh and leaped into action.

I sunk every drop of my AP into buffing myself up, maxing out my speed.

“Stride, Stride, Stride, Stride!”

I used my superhuman leg strength to bound across the cerulean floor at a tremendous clip, my weapon at the ready. And with my special move complete, I was now free to use my Astral Skills.

This was it. The final turn. No reason to hold back.

It seemed my opponent felt the same way. The Reaper sent more chains flying out of subspace. As usual, they showed up in a group of four. But they came in hot, much faster than before.

However...

Nothing I can't dodge.

...I ran at lightning speed, cutting a zigzag path through their attacks punctuated with jumps and feints.

One, two, three, four—after avoiding each of them, I sped up and got into range.

“Waaaaaaahhh!” I howled with everything I had as I aimed my greatsword at the Reaper’s head and swung down.

I put all my strength into this final attack. It should be enough to take down this immortal Reaper for good and erase it from the face of—

“...?!”

But before I wiped it from existence, *I stopped.*

I could feel the strength draining from my body, starting with my limbs. My sword felt like it was about to slip out of my hands.

It must have been the Reaper's restraints. But the chains I had just avoided weren't to blame.

This was a new trick. Or, to be precise, this was my foe's true power.

“So you’ve just been hustling me this whole time.”

The Reaper remained silent, but its smiling skull seemed to laugh at me from the very depths of its being, and that told me all I needed to know.

Its second restraining attack was so stealthy that it slipped past both my sight and my highly attuned spirit senses.

Man. Busting out a wild card like that at the eleventh hour. Looks like you were right, Haruka Aono.

A scene from earlier replayed in my mind's eye. Haruka leaned in and, with her perfect lips, whispered the following into my ear:

"Oh, wait. There's one other thing I noticed."

"What is it?"

"Listen. I hope this doesn't sound like I'm bragging, but if that thing had only used these chains, I'm positive I could have dodged them."

That was what she'd said during our little strategy meeting. Out of context, it might have sounded like a novice bragging about their meager abilities. But this was Haruka Aono.

Would a swordmaster capable of controlling six blades simultaneously spread all across the arena, and all utilizing different sword techniques, really be fooled by a trick as trivial as invisible chains?

Not a chance. Even if she couldn't see them with her eyes, such a cheap trick would never escape her notice.

Then, why? What caught Haruka Aono off guard? Did the bony bastard really have a skill that could successfully hit a girl with superhuman spatial awareness without her ever noticing?

Yes, it did. It had chains that the victim could neither see *nor* detect.

The damned Reaper had a trump card up its billowy sleeve: restraints that could not be perceived. They couldn't be seen, or felt, or anything.

This attack was invisible even to one's spiritual senses. (Actually, come to think of it, Rakshasa Sarama's binding attacks also became guaranteed hits once the boss dipped below a certain HP threshold—not that it mattered now.) *That* was the move that had captured Haruka Aono. And it was the move that had

now captured me.

If the target can't sense the attack until they're already trapped, that would certainly guarantee a hit. The Reaper had been hiding a first-turn one-hit KO move this whole time.

A deathless body and imperceptible binding chains that were guaranteed to hit. All together, this thing was one hell of a nasty customer. I should have expected as much from the creature at the center of Kanata Aono's hellish route. All this time, I'd thought the perverted skeleton had been relying on Haruka's stats. Who would have guessed that it had a move this fearsome even before it evolved into Rakshasa Sarama?

But it's still a piece of garbage. Sorry to break it to you, but...

"You fell for it, bonehead!" I gloated.

I took in a big gulp of air—

"Haruka!"

—and shouted her name.

I yelled so loud I thought my veins might pop. And I probably looked super lame doing it. But Haruka was far away, and this was her signal to come rescue me.

"Ta-ta-ta-ta! Kaaapooow!"

With yet another eccentric war cry, Haruka's swords came to my rescue.

This reassuring answer was followed by a concerto of slicing and dicing.

Shnk, shnk, shnk. I listened to the delightful sound of blades slashing through invisible chains. And before long, four of her swords had freed me from my restraints.

Haruka and her swords were about to overcome their grim fate. Everything was going exactly according to our grand scheme.

If the chains were inescapable, we simply needed a third party to break them. I had helped Haruka out of the same bind earlier. Now our roles were reversed. It was as simple as that.

And the timing? We had it all coordinated, of course. And she would've had to notice with me screaming so loudly.

The Reaper's one-hit KO move was totally broken. But as long as we saw it coming, we could use it to our advantage instead.

"Like this!"

With my body freed, I powered myself up with every buff I could think of.

The instant I hit the ground, I took off at hyper speed. Then, once I got near the Reaper, I started spinning around in a circle, building momentum and power, and focusing it into my sword.

"Go, Shimizu! Kick its ass!" Haruka cheered.

Her swords continued to dance, slicing into the Reaper. The relentless slashes from the four blades had it completely overwhelmed.

A gap opened up in its defenses... Though, now that I thought of it, the Reaper's defenses were full of holes the entire time. It never bothered dodging any of its opponents' attacks. And as soon as it landed a hit it would hover over its target, ridiculing them before going in for the kill. It was a depraved creature that couldn't help trying to look tough while shaming its foes.

"I hate the strong. I want to trample them. Ruin their efforts. Tarnish their victories. Torment the weak. Steal their strength. Defy logic. Become invincible. I want to be absolute. Aaah. AaAaHhh. i Don'T wAnT iT to hUrt. I dON'T wAnT It tO HUrt. i DoN'T waNt iT to HurT!!"

I thought I heard a voice from somewhere.

It sounded so self-obsessed I thought it would rot my ears off. It felt like a bundle of distorted neuroses trying to assault me where it mattered most. It was pretty obvious where these words were coming from. *What a load of crap.*

"...Oh yeah? That's how you feel, is it? Then let me give you a piece of advice as a parting gift."

I aimed my sword at the thing's chest. There was nothing in my way now. We had trumped every one of the Irregularity's logic-defying tricks. So, all that was left—

“Quit taking all your messed up trauma...

—was to grip my sword—

...out on innocent bystanders, you bony piece of shit!"

—and slam it into the Reaper.

There was a flash of light.

Haruka Aono's dancing blades had rendered the creature defenseless, so it couldn't avoid my attack. The sword of white light cut clean through the Reaper's body, and—

—the Reaper let out an awful death cry as I erased it from this world.

The bones composing its body bleached in an instant and its immense spiritual power dissipated like smoke. The parts making up its body vanished at a dizzying speed until it was gone, not a single bone left in its wake.

An instant, silent demise felt like a fitting end for a being so proud of its regenerative abilities.

The blade of light still in my hands was the instrument of that masterwork of irony. Through an extreme hastening of time, it had eradicated the Reaper from existence. *This* was the active skill known as the End of Zero—the ability to send anything it touched to the furthest reaches of time.

It was basically like the jeweled box given to Urashima Taro in the old Japanese fairy tale bearing his name. But unlike the story, whoever made contact with this skill didn't turn into an old man or a bird—they were completely wiped from reality. So it was a bit more vicious than the box was.

The End of Zero exposed all things to the ravages of time. Mind and matter, souls and concepts, even spiritual power—anything that existed below the fourth dimension was nullified. It all dropped to zero. That was the technique's true power.

Not even the undying could avoid an absolute end to their existence, passed down by the goddess of time herself.

...It was a jaw-dropping skill that a tutorial miniboss should probably not be wielding. And on top of its incredible power, the full version could be shot from any range with fully automatic rapid fire! ...Isn't that insanely OP?!

"Huff... Huff... Ha... Ha-ha..."

I exhaled despite myself, each breath carrying a different emotion.

It was starting to dawn on me how terrifying a being I'd formed a pact with. Not that I regretted it one iota. If I could go back in time, I'd do it again a million times over.

Still, Albi's powers were absolutely unreal.

"Well done, Master. You've successfully overcome the first of your many trials."

"It's all thanks to you, Albi. Without your help, I'd never have made it here in the first place."

After thanking her, I collapsed to the cerulean floor. I was understandably exhausted.

Glancing around, I noticed that a massive spirit stone the size of a boulder had appeared where the Reaper once stood. It was proof that the apparition had vanished for good. It was also our incredibly large prize for coming out victorious. I appreciated it and all, but...

"Uh. How do we even carry this thing?" I asked.

"Why not simply ask the examiners for help?"

Albi's idea sounded good to me. Ms. Akabane and the other examiners probably wouldn't try to swipe my prize.

"Hmm?"

Just then, I felt something weird around my hand. I looked down and found that a skull ring had slipped itself onto my index finger.

"What the—?"

But I already knew what it was. Regalia—a boss drop. But I was interrupted before I could take a closer look.

“Shimizuuu!” Haruka called out.

I could hear her joyful footfalls even from some distance away. I turned to see the girl with the blue hair ornament grinning broadly as she bounded toward me.

As soon as I saw her, it hit me—our long battle was finally over.



A monster was fated to be born here in this place, on this day once known as the Blood-Soaked Eclipse.

The birth of Rakshasa Sarama—an undying apparition with unparalleled mastery over the sword—should have heralded the spilling of buckets of blood and tears here in the Moon’s Eclipse dungeon.

Many would-be adventurers were supposed to die, along with two examiners who fought bravely to the bitter end. The third examiner would have assumed all the blame and become an outcast. And the girl at the center of it all was to become both the greatest victim and the greatest villain, doomed to murder endlessly until her own sister finally put her soul to rest.

This was the grim fate that awaited those taking part in the spring session of the Adventurer’s Exam.

But how about it? Did any of that come to pass?

The Dungeon Reaper was gone. And the girl was still alive.

Rakshasa Sarama would never be born into this world. Her victims would get to keep their lives and, in one case, their job.

We’d managed a perfect victory, and it was time to declare it, loud and proud.

“We did it. We won!”

I waved at Haruka as she approached. And with my other hand, hidden behind my back, I lifted a single finger—the middle one.

It was both a sign of triumph and a declaration of war.

Suck on that, fate. Screw you and your damned tragic twists.

Even a crappy tutorial miniboss like me can throw a wrench in your plans.



■ Epilogue

Cherry Blossoms Fall on Sakurabana

◆ [Shimizu Home: Kyouichirou's Room](#)

A whole week had passed since our battle with the Irregularity. By the time I received a message on my phone, the cherry blossoms in Sakurabana were in full bloom.

Haruka: Heya Shimizu! Let's hang out!

It was from Haruka Aono. I thought it would be a good idea to exchange contact info after fighting together. But I had to admit, I was glad that she'd contacted me first.

Getting a text message from a *Dungeon Magia* character (especially being invited out by a girl) made me feel like I'd really moved up in the world.

Kyouichirou Shimizu: Sure. When, though?

Haruka: Uhh... How about right now?!

Right now? C'mon, give me a little heads-up!

Kyouichirou Shimizu: I'm free until dinner. Where should we meet?

Haruka: The entrance to Moon's Eclipse! How about 10:30?

I sent her a message saying I'd be there. As soon as I saw she'd read it, I closed the app.

It was currently eight thirty, so I still had time to bathe before I headed out.



I'd finished washing off and was drying my hair when a certain secret boss came to see me.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. I'm meeting up with Haruka."

I quickly filled Albi in, making sure to emphasize that *Haruka* had invited *me*. But that just made her even more suspicious. I showed her the messaging app so she could see for herself.

"I must admit, I am impressed," she said. "This image is quite the convincing fabrication."

She proceeded to accuse me of forging evidence. It seemed like our bond of trust (or lack thereof) remained unchanged.

"Regardless, this is the perfect opportunity, Master," Albi said as she pulled a fist-size rice ball out of her breast pocket. The sight of the girl in white with her massive snack was so odd I was a little taken aback. "If your very comical joke is to be believed, then it would seem that Haruka Aono has positive feelings toward you, Master."

"It's not a jo—! ...Forget it. But yeah. I guess you're right."

"And if that's true..." Albi paused for a moment, parting her rosy lips wide enough to shove the entire rice ball into her mouth. Satisfied, she pulled another out and continued. "...we should ask her to join our cause before one of the larger clans claims her."

“I totally agree.”

We had just overcome death and bent fate to our will. If I waited around with my hands in my pockets, one of the sharks from a bigger clan would snatch Haruka up. I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

“I was an absolute nobody before the exam, and the clans even came knocking on *my* door,” I said. “I bet a prodigy like her from a well-known family has been fielding requests left and right.”

“Indeed.”

After the exam, Haruka Aono and I had become kind of...or, rather, *very* famous around the city. It made sense considering what we had just pulled off.

Taking down an Irregularity in our first dungeon (using only the weak gear we were provided with, no less) was utterly unprecedented in the history of *Dungeon Magia*.

If I’d run into a character like that in the game, I would have been just as surprised as everyone else was.

We’d also passed the Adventurer’s Exam with the highest score ever recorded. So it was understandable that we’d become famous.

Yes, I understood the reasoning just fine. But...

“Super-Duper Rookies Appear!”

“Unprecedented! Newbies Defeat Irregularity During Examination!”

“Divine Prodigies of the Dungeon Dream?”

“Fastest to Become a Regalia User? Newcomer Beats Kaika Renge’s Record!”

...they didn’t need to make such a huge deal out of it.

“I was kinda trying not to stand out,” I said.

“Your pathetic attempt to appear above the need for social approval only

makes it more obvious how much you seek it. Your attitude stinks of virginity."

"Don't call me pathetic! You should be praising me for being so restrained! And, hey! What do you mean I stink of virginity?! I don't stink, okay?!"

"Apologies. You don't *stink* of virginity. You are the *very picture* of it."

"Can't you be a little considerate?!"

Unfortunately, it seemed Albi was in a great mood.



After ending my chat with the secret boss at the first available opportunity, I headed for the kitchen.

Chop, chop, chop came the pleasant sound of my sister's knife plunging into a daikon radish. The smell of miso wafted through the air, completing the cozy atmosphere.

"Mm-hm-hm-hm-hmmm! ♪"

And there, in the middle of that lovely scene, was my elder sister, happily humming a tune. She was an angel. A real-life angel.

"You sure look like you're having fun, Sis."

"Eeek?!"

It seemed I'd surprised her. I felt horrible, but even scared out of her wits, my sister was totally adorable.

"Ah! Um, Kyou! Th-this isn't what it looks like. I was, well, trying to come up with some new dinner recipes, you see! That's why I'm making udon with minced daikon. It certainly wasn't because I wanted to make myself a before-lunch snack or anything..."

"Uh...sure. Don't worry, I believe you."

I was practically the founder of the Church of Fumika Shimizu, so I wasn't going to doubt her. If my sister told me something was white, even if it was black, I would gladly call it white for the rest of my days.

"Um, so, Kyou... Oh, goodness. You're looking quite sharp today. What's the

occasion? Are you going out?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna meet a friend."

"Whaaat?!"

Chop. The knife in my sister's hand suddenly stopped.

"Kyou. You mean to tell me you've made a friend?"

"Yeah, I mean we're just gonna hang out and— Wh-whoa?!"

I couldn't even finish my sentence before my sister wrapped her soft body around mine.

...*Wh-what's happening?!*

"Uhh, Sis? What's with the hug?"

"I-it's just...! You've never made a friend before! And now you have! As your sister, how can I not rejoice?!"

"Wait, really?!"

I'd figured as much when I noticed the only contacts in Kyouichirou's phone were his family. And it looked like I'd been right on the money. *Poor Kyouichirou...*

"You've done it, Kyou! You've really done it! I'm so, so proud of you!"

"Th-thanks, Sis."

My sister's warm hand reached out and patted me on the head. As I felt its warmth and tranquility seep into my heart, I noticed something else.

I'd just received a powerful hug. From my sister. And, with the way she was standing...

"Uh, ummm, Sis? This doesn't feel right..."

"What could possibly be the matter? I'm just praising my little brother for how much he's grown. This is my job as your family! You've done so well, Kyou!"

She continued to pat my head lovingly.

I was a bit taller than her, which meant she had to reach up to pat my head.

And that was when it hit me. Or, rather, when *they* hit me.

“You’ve really been trying hard lately, Kyou. I’m so, so proud of you.”

They made contact with my chest. Even through our clothes, I could feel them. They felt like big bouncy marshmallows.

What a feeling. I was in paradise.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #27, “Moon’s Eclipse,” Entrance

Eventually, I reluctantly tore myself away from the soft, marshmallowy paradise and staggered to the meeting spot.

Nothing about the walk there registered in my memory. Instead, my head was full of thoughts about my sister’s soft bits. And before I knew it, I had arrived.

Sis. Sis...

She looked so healthy. I felt a sense of relief, but it was only ephemeral. I knew that her curse had yet to be undone.

Thanks to Albi’s spell, it had been temporarily sealed. My sister would be fine for a while. But the curse still lived inside her.

If I made a mistake and died, my pact with Albi would expire, and the curse would immediately resume eating away at her from the inside.

“Haaah.” I let out a sigh that had been building up inside me.

I wasn’t in the clear, either. I still had a death flag hanging over me.

I was Kyouichirou Shimizu, a man fated to talk smack to the story’s protagonist, get my ass kicked, and then get scarfed down by the tutorial boss the instant it appeared.

My sister’s safety depended on a guy who was guaranteed to die in every route. It was better than nothing, but it still wasn’t great. I would need a solution that didn’t depend on Albi’s abilities—I needed to get my hands on an Elixir. And that wasn’t going to be easy.

I knew I could find one in the dungeon called Eternal Darkness. But that boss

wasn't going to be as easy as the Reaper was. It didn't have any false pride. It didn't sit there and take hits for no reason. And its strength and speed were both ten times higher than that bonehead's.

If I challenged a boss like that by myself, I'd have my butt handed to me on a platter. But it didn't feel right to involve any of the characters from *Dungeon Magia*. Who knew what might happen if, say, I got someone killed who was meant to help out the protagonist at some point down the line? Even if they survived with serious injuries, what if they had to quit being an adventurer?

The hero was destined to save this world, and I wanted—no, *needed*—to avoid impeding his mission.

And that was why I wanted Haruka Aono's help.

Not only was she a first-rate swordmaster, but she was destined to die in the original *Dungeon Magia*. She would be an immediate asset, and, if she was willing to help me, it wouldn't negatively affect history. It was for this very self-serving reason that I had wanted to rescue her. It hadn't gone exactly as planned, but I had seen it all through and had returned alive to hopefully reap my reward.

However, as part of the price of my success, we now had everyone's eyes squarely on us.

“...We should ask her to join our cause before one of the larger clans claims her.”

Albi's words from earlier were like a dagger to my heart. The secret boss was right. Not only was Haruka from the Aono clan, a family of renowned swordmasters, but she was now a superstar for taking down an Irregularity during her first dungeon crawl. The adventurer clans would be trying to snap her up as fast as they could.

“I might be too late. There's a chance that she's already signed a deal with one of the big clans. In fact, I'd say it's pretty likely.”

“Heeey!”

“This could be bad. If I fail to scout Haruka Aono, it's basically game over for me.”

“Heeey! Shimizuuu!”

In the original Dungeon Magia, Haruka Aono wanted to become an adventurer because she admired Kaika Renge. If her clan asked Haruka Aono to join, she'd be almost guaranteed to say yes...

“Uh? Hello?”

Crap... This really is bad. I'm already screwed, aren't I? I've messed up big time. The more I think, the sweatier I get. Goddamn it, what the hell am I gonna do?!

“SHI! MI! ZU!”

“Ngywhoa!”

When I snapped out of it, I realized that Haruka Aono's beautiful features were already invading my personal space. She was so gorgeous up close. What an attractive— *Uhh, probably not the right time for this.*

“Oh, uh. Well, um!” I stuttered. “If it isn't Haruka Aono! Splendid weather we're having, is it not? Your face is *very* close, by the way.”

“Well, well! If it isn't Mr. Shimizu! The cherry blossoms are a lovely sight, are they not? ...And yeah. No duh. You were totally ignoring me.”

I apologized for spacing out. Then I took a step back.

“Sorry. I was lost in thought.”

“Oh? What about? You weren't imagining what I'd be wearing, were you?”

“Uh, yeah. That's it. I like your outfit, by the way.” I gave her a once over and stated my honest opinion. “Beige and gray blue look nice together. It's very mature—or subdued, I mean. It makes your top's off-shoulder ruffles feel subtle. Everything works really well together.”

Also, and this was just my personal opinion, but I thought blue suited Haruka Aono perfectly. Not a cold blue, mind you, but one as refreshing as a clear sky.

“Wow. Didn't expect such a thorough compliment. Not bad, Shimizu.”

“I'm a connoisseur of dating sims and a gentleman, I'll have you know. I have an eye for this sort of thing.”

“What’s a dating sim? And what do you mean you’re a gentleman?”

“Nothing. Forget it. Anyway, what do you want to do? We could go to a café or something. Anywhere you want.”

Haruka Aono sighed and looked up at the sky.

“Before all that. There’s something I want to say.” She flashed me a stiff smile.

“Sure... What’s up?”

“Well... Ha-ha. It’s no big deal, but, well... I just wanted to say thanks, I guess.”

Her words confused me. I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

“I don’t remember doing anything special,” I said.

“Come on. Really? You saved me.”

But as soon as she pointed it out, I realized she was right. It all felt like it happened a lifetime ago. But it was true—I had saved her.

But that was only part of my grand scheme to get her to help Albi and me with our plan. Though I guess, as a *Dungeon Magia* player, I also couldn’t stand letting her suffer like she had in the game.

Essentially, it was all calculated self-interest. In other words, she didn’t need to thank me for any of it.

“There’s no reason for you to feel indebted to me. You saved my butt, too. So we’re even.”

“No, you’re wrong,” she protested. She shook her head twice, looking surer than ever.

A rain of petals from the cherry blossom tree holding Moon’s Eclipse fell gently down on us. In the middle of this fantastical world which seemed to contain nothing but beauty, the girl with the blue hair ornament spoke in the tenderest of tones.

“Listen...,” she began. “My home’s not a very fun place to live. My family is prestigious, yes, but that also means we’re bound by tradition. Everyone’s heads are full to bursting with nothing but sword stuff.” According to her, it was an incredibly boring existence. “I’m... Well, I’m really good at what I do. So the

pressure and all that other annoying stuff—I'm able to handle it.”

“Right.”

“But because of that, people start expecting even *more* from me. And when I was a kid, I'd just do whatever they asked... But then one day, you know what they told me? ‘There's nothing more that we can teach you.’ Can you believe that?”

Her words had a weight to them that stood in stark contrast to the fluttering petals filling the air.

I felt the countless complex emotions caught up in what she was saying. She must have been struggling to properly explain her feelings.

So I listened silently and nodded as she pieced her story together. There was no correct solution to problems like hers. Hearing her out was the best I could do.

“How could there possibly be nothing left? I was still a child. The only thing they taught me was how to cut things. How was that supposed to make me a fitting heir? What did swinging around a piece of metal have to do with leading a family? And then all these adults, realizing they would never outdo me, would come to me and bow, asking me to teach them the way of the sword, as the future head of the Aono clan. Was that supposed to make me happy?”

Her tone grew somber. It didn't feel like she was trying to call all adults pathetic. If anything, it felt like the opposite. I got the feeling she hoped the adult world was limitless. That it held so much more for her to learn. She wished for a world that was immeasurably vast and for adults to be cool people who would guide her. It was an idealistic, childish dream. But what was wrong with a child holding on to a dream like that?

Knowing she would one day wake from her dream was no reason to take it away from her.

“You can do it, can't you? You can handle it, right? You're strong, aren't you?”

Who did they think they were? Crushing a child's dreams and then turning around and asking that same child to guide them? *That's...*

"That's pretty selfish," I said.

"I think so, too."

She narrowed her eyes. I felt sure she knew that her childish disappointment was something only a child could understand. Or maybe it was like a tax levied on the strong in exchange for their power.

"But then one day, I found something," she said. "Something I thought might finally excite me."

She told me about the TV program she'd watched. She had a proud grin on her face as she described it. It felt like she was showing me her most treasured possession.

"I thought those adventurers were so cool. Working together to beat big monsters and risking life and limb to explore the unknown. They were so bright, so dazzling..." She described it as a divine revelation. "I was just so excited. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I became obsessed. I just *knew* from the bottom of my heart that this was what I had been born to do. Before I even realized what was happening, I was watching videos, attending clan meetings... I was so, so happy."

Becoming an adventurer seemed like the most natural thing in the world to her.

"I begged my mother to let me try. I had to fill out tons of paperwork and follow a bunch of annoying instructions... But once I got here, I was so happy I could have cried."

She looked up at Moon's Eclipse. The large tree stood with its gate still open.

Despite undergoing some inspections after the appearance of an Irregularity, the Moon's Eclipse dungeon was still operating normally. It continued to welcome beginner adventurers as it always had.

The miracle we had brought into this world was still here, alive and well.

"I was just so happy. I mean, I was a little bit disappointed too, but I was so, so excited. I guess I was a little *too* excited. I got captured by the first weird monster that showed up. But just when I thought I was done for, a cool hero

arrived!"

The other miracle turned to look at me and smiled.

"...That was you, Shimizu."

The warm spring breeze caressed my cheek.

"You saved me. You put up with my selfish demands. And you fought by my side. I had a blast. I was so glad. Finally, I had a challenging opponent and a friend to fight by my side—that was my dream all along."

"....."

I couldn't find my words.

Her smiling face was so radiant. She looked positively delighted.

"And that's why I wanted to say thank you. If you hadn't shown up, I wouldn't even be here right now. I think I would have ended up in a very dark and lonely place, without ever experiencing real excitement."

For some reason, I felt a pain spread across my chest.

"Thanks for helping me. Thank you for *saving* me. I'm finally glad to be alive, from the depths of my being. I couldn't be any happier."

With those words, something inside me snapped.

I looked up at the sky. It was hard to make out the fluttering petals as my eyes began to blur.

You're glad to be alive? ...Seriously?

You? The same girl who asks your sister to kill you in the original story?

That's not fair.

If you tell me that, I might just feel proud. And then, no matter what kind of future awaits me, I won't be able to stop. If you tell me you're grateful to be alive, then I'll have to get back up no matter how many times I'm knocked down.

I've been so worried this whole time. I thought changing the future was selfish. Heck, I barely believed it was possible.

And now here you are, erasing all my anxieties with a few simple words. I

swear... I...

“Thank you’? ...I should be the one thanking *you*, dumbass,” I said, trying my best to put on a tough-guy act. My feeble voice caught in the spring breeze.

“Uh? Sorry, did you say something?”

“Forget it. Now then, Ms. Haruka Aono—”

“Just call me Haruka already. That’s easier, don’t you think?”

“Fine. Then, you might as well call me Kyouichirou. Anyway, Ms. Haruka—”

“What’s this ‘Ms. Haruka’ stuff? We’re the same age. Just call me Haruka.”

“...Haruka.”

“Yes, Kyouichirou?” she replied, flashing her white teeth.

My face suddenly felt very hot. Blood rushed to my cheeks. She could probably tell.



C'mon, Kyouichirou, keep it together, I told myself. If you get embarrassed over something like this, you're done for.

"To tell you the truth," I said, "there's something I was hoping to discuss with you."

"...Okay."

I did everything I could to push down the discomfort welling up inside of me. I built up strength in my throat. I took a deep breath. I was reminded of the embarrassing feeling of trying to ask someone out on a date. I began to tremble.

"Well, c-can we, uh... Can we form a party together?!"

My brain was on fire. My legs felt paralyzed. It was completely different from the nervousness I'd felt when I asked Albi to join me.

"I know it's not as safe a bet as joining one of the big clans. We'll pretty much have to start from scratch. And I'm sure I'll get on your nerves a bunch, but..." Despite how terrified I felt, I kept going, one word at a time. "But I'll guarantee you one thing: With me, you'll never be bored. I'll dedicate my life to showing you that this world can live up to your hopes and dreams. So...please—"

But before I could finish, something warm wrapped itself around my right hand.

"...Okay. Let's do it." Haruka gently took my hand into both of hers and smiled up at me. Her expression was so tender it looked like she might cry. "I don't know why, but I'm really, *really* happy right now."

Her smile was infectious. I felt the corners of my mouth turn up.

"Yeah. Me too."

Starting there beneath the cherry blossom tree, Haruka and I began walking a new path—one that would take us to destinations unknown.

There would be many struggles and hardships in our future, but somewhere down that path was...

End of Part 1



Afterword

I thought a proper-sounding name would be best. And if I could avoid sounding too edgy and thus lame, then all the better.

...Not to make fun of people who go for edgy names. I love titles full of edgy words like *darkness* and *moment*.

But, well, how should I put this? I'm a fairly timid person, so I tend to worry about what other people think of me. If someone said, "Why is he trying so hard to sound cool? It's so cringe," I would feel incredibly embarrassed. Even if it was 100 percent true.

For someone as self-conscious as me, there's no name more perfect than *Kotatsu*.

Just look at the characters that make up the word! One half is made up of *fire* and *giant* while the other is *fire* plus *master*. That means I could take a bombastic interpretation like *Giga Flame Master* and stand among the edgelord elite.

But at the same time, a *kotatsu* is just a heated table you sit at to keep warm. With characters like those, I can feel as edgy as I want, and if someone tries to

call me a cringeworthy edgelord, my name has all the camouflage I need built right in. I can simply shoot back, “It’s just a heated table. What’s the problem?” It’s incredibly convenient.

Anyway. Nice to meet you, everyone. I’m Kotatsu Takahashi, and Dengeki no Shin Bungei has been gracious enough to grant me this opportunity to debut. Takahashi doesn’t have any deep meaning, by the way. It’s my real family name. Although, looking at it now, the *Taka* part uses the uncommon version of the character, called its “ladder form.” Maybe that’s a little bit unique. But in the end, I’m just plain old Takahashi. If I translated the name into English, it would be *high bridge*. And *kotatsu* in characters is pretty tough to read, so I’ll probably just spell it out phonetically.

So, Kotatsu High Bridge. There we go. I think that works nicely. I used this pen name on the web novel site, Kakuyomu, to post this story.

I was only able to get this far with the support of numerous people.

I would like to thank Kakao • Lanthanum for creating the illustrations, as well as the editing, proofreading, and book design staff at Dengeki no Shin Bungei. I would also like to thank the Kakuyomu management team for choosing my novel as the winner of the 7th Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest, and all the readers who supported my web novel.

Thank you. Thank you so, so much. I’m sorry if my vocabulary is a bit lacking, but I don’t think there are any better words than *thank you* to adequately express my feelings.

And last but certainly not least, I have a few final words for you, dear reader.

Thank you so much for reading up to this point. By reading these words, you have finally brought this novel to its proper conclusion.

The End

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