

DISCIPLE OF THE LIGHT

OR HOW I WAS
CURSED BY THE GODS
AND DROPPED INTO
THE **ABYSS**!



WRITTEN BY Nekoko
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara

NOVEL

4

Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Attack of the Twin Abyssal Dragons](#)

[Chapter 2: A Visit to the Garden of Dragons](#)

[Chapter 3: Maw of the Colossal Dragon](#)

[Chapter 4: Zuul, the Third Great Holy Dragon](#)

[Chapter 5: An Audience with the Dragon King](#)

[Chapter 6: The Ruler of the Skies](#)

[Bonus Story: Studying Magic with a Certain Lich](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

OR HOW I WAS
CURSED BY THE GODS
AND DROPPED INTO
THE **ABYSS**!

“Human food is
surprisingly good!
I always thought
human food
would be bland!”

RAMIEL





"I am the king of the proud dragonkin! We do not simply allow one to admit defeat once a battle has begun! Did I not make it clear? I will not run, and I will not hide!"

"Dragon Technique: Thousand Feathers of Nirvana!"

"Uh... Ridler-san, can we just say we're done here?"

This guy...was saying things that sounded cool, but making no attempt to get closer. Not since I hit him in the face. He was constantly using all his energy to move, to keep me away while he launched his one long-range Dragon Technique, which left him with few openings.

■ KANATA

■ RIDLER

“Th-that makes it look like I think about him all the time! Th-there are days where I think of him a lot...but definitely not right now! Not now!”

“Quit saying such weird things to keep your lies going! Even if the crystal happened to activate like that, its images would be less clear!”

• LUNAÈRE

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

OR HOW I WAS
CURSED BY THE GODS
AND DROPPED INTO
THE ABYSS!

NOVEL

4

WRITTEN BY

Nekoko

ILLUSTRATED BY

Yoh Hihara



Seven Seas
Entertainment

Disciple of the Lich: Or How I Was Cursed by the Gods
and Dropped Into the Abyss! Vol. 4
© 2021 Nekoko/OVERLAP
Illustrations by Yoh Hihara
First published in Japan in 2021 by OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form without written permission from the copyright
holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are the products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events,
locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this
book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily
reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Jordan Taylor
ADAPTATION: Adam Lee
COVER DESIGN: H. Qi
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen
PROOFREADER: Jack Hamm
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Katy M. Kelly
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-643-2
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	▪	Attack of the Twin Abyssal Dragons
CHAPTER 2	▪	A Visit to the Garden of Dragons
CHAPTER 3	▪	Maw of the Colossal Dragon..
CHAPTER 4	▪	Zuul, the Third Great Holy Dragon
CHAPTER 5	▪	An Audience with the Dragon King
CHAPTER 6	▪	The Ruler of the Skies.....
BONUS STORY	▪	Studying Magic with a Certain Lich
AFTERWORD	▪

Chapter 1:

Attack of the Twin Abyssal Dragons

— 1 —

THE UNSEEN HAND OF THE GODS

IN LOCKLORE, the world was carefully maintained by the gods so that monsters remained more powerful than humans. People were kept a hair's breadth from extinction only because they were amusing playthings.

In the far north, a vast, monster-filled wilderness stretched beyond the horizon. No nation claimed these lands, for no human would dare set foot there willingly. No one ventured here, for this was monster country.

And deep within monster country was a massive building called the Arm of the Gods. And in the Arm of the Gods sat a throne...

"Hmph, it's been a hundred years. A *hundred* years since we Five Fingers were all together in one room," said the man sitting on the throne. His face was hidden behind a round mask. There was a crown upon his head and he wore extravagant clothing. A massive gold staff dangled from his fingers.

The Unseen Hand of the Gods was made up of five people anointed by the gods of the Upper Realm. They were the true rulers of Locklore. They never appeared in public, for the Upper Realm decreed that they should stay hidden in the shadows. But every single one of them had the power to influence the fate of the Locklore.

"King Veranta, Ruler of the World, I have no qualms with you calling on these...*weaklings*. But why have you gone to the trouble of calling for my presence? If you have brought me here to waste my time, then I will cut you down here and now," said a man who stood nearly ten feet tall.

His bangs were swept back and fastened in a small bun at the back of his head. He was clad in a suit of gaudy armor and wore three massive katanas on

his back. The man's face was demonically evil and ugly, and the bright red glow of his eyes denied any humanity that might have once dwelled within.

"Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. You haven't come here in a hundred years, have you? The world has its flow... You are not capable of standing against that—of standing against the higher beings—no matter how much you may try. No one should be more aware of that than you. You strove earnestly to control the entire world, but alas... You were stopped dead in your tracks by us."

"Tsk, you wouldn't stand a chance against me if it were one-on-one."

"You are no more than the second greatest of the five of us."

"Are you saying you're better than me? What a joke." Nobunaga's haggard face twisted in displeasure.

"I wonder..." said Veranta as he glanced at someone else.

Hidden below a black cloth covered in magic formulas, not a single inch of their skin exposed, was a person called Zero, nicknamed the "Silent Void." They never volunteered to speak, even at meetings like this. Zero had been around for much longer than Nobunaga, and Nobunaga knew nothing of Zero's origins. He'd never even heard their voice.

"Zero...?" Nobunaga asked, incredulously.

It was impossible to tell if Zero was elderly or still a child, but the frame below the black cloth was small. It was definitely not the form of a warrior. They didn't move at all as Veranta and Nobunaga talked. It was like they didn't care in the slightest.

"Could we perhaps move this conversation along? I have no interest in this childish argument over who outpowers whom. Veranta, there's some important matter to discuss, isn't there? Is it a message from the Gods?" asked a woman with long pointed ears who carried little in the way of weapons. Sophia was one of the long-lived high elves, and she was known as the World's Recordkeeper. Her long life stretched over ten thousand years to the beginning of Locklore. She remembered everything that had happened since the dawn of time.

"There *has* been a message from the Gods," said Veranta. "Our orders are to

kill Kanata Kanbara, a traveler currently in Manaloch...no matter what it takes.”

“What...?” said Nobunaga. “Has a message from the Gods ever so clearly indicated a single person? What does this mean, Veranta? The Upper Realm has always demanded that we never directly interfere with the travelers.”

“I, too, am at a loss. Their messages are normally much more indirect. But one thing is clear: they said, ‘No matter what it takes.’ We are free to act directly. I have no idea what this Kanata Kanbara has done, but they’ve clearly made enemies of the higher beings. We must do everything in our power to take care of them.”

Nobunaga grinned like a demon as he listened to Veranta.

“How amusing. This has piqued my interest. I shall do it,” he said.

“No, Nobunaga. You would destroy too much... The entire continent would be turned to ash!”

“Then why have you brought me here?!”

“We will send the Ruler of the Skies first for reconnaissance. We lack information on our target,” Veranta said. Then he looked up.

A massive dragon with glossy black scales and a forked tail floated overhead.

“I shall take care of it, my dear Veranta. Ha ha ha... Though I wonder if there is really any need to be so on guard. I have two pets who can make the opening move...just the two of them shouldn’t be enough to burn away Manaloch,” said the dragon in a voice that could not be heard, yet echoed in their heads.

“Good to hear. You will be going up against a traveler. Just to be safe, you should take one of the crystals. I will give you the one I developed.”

“Hmm? I can’t imagine a situation arising where I would need that.”

“You made a mistake a thousand years ago. I expect better results this time. If you cannot regain the trust of the higher beings here, you may be up for replacement.”

“You offer me credit for this mission, yet it is tempered with scorn, king among kings. That seems distasteful. Ah, well... I will do my job properly. I doubt it will be that difficult.”

Nobunaga snorted. “Hah. If this is the sort of opponent that someone as pathetic as the Ruler of the Skies can manage, then there really is no need for me to go. But listen, if this lizard fails against this ‘Kanata’...then it is my turn.”

– 2 –

I HAD MY CAULDRON and ingredients spread out on the floor of my room as I conducted alchemy experiments, still attempting to create Blood Ethers of the Gods.

There were three Masks of the Ruler of Dreams leaning against the wall. I shuddered as the three faces of Zolophilia looked my way. I wasn’t going to get any sleep tonight with those things staring at me.

The Masks of the Ruler of Dreams produced magic that could greatly assist in the transformations that occurred during any alchemy attempt...but they were really creepy. There had been only two in existence, both sparks that lit the fires of great wars in history. At least, there were two until Philia made me another. And then another. And then she just kept making them.

The primary ingredients in the Blood Ether of the Gods were Brains of a High-Level Demon, Sap of the Spirit Tree, and Adamantine Ore. The Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm meant I had access to all the brains I could ever need. I still had a lot of the Sap of the Spirit Tree from when Wolzottl gave me a bucket full. I already had the alchemy process for synthesizing Adamantine Ore down and I’d managed to get my hands on the ingredients from Garnet, who also supplied me with other minor ingredients.

“We’ve got everything we need with this. Even if it fails, we’ve got plenty to try again. We’ve got all the data from the failures so far. Today is the day we successfully make a Blood Ether of the Gods!” I said.

“...Um...Kanata. It won’t explode this time, will it?” asked Pomera timidly.

I smiled and waved my hand to clear away any doubts. “It’ll be fine. Even if it explodes, I’ll just hold it back with a barrier spell.”

“So, it *will* explode again...?” Pomera’s shoulders fell.

“Kanata, is three masks enough?” Philia asked, and I forced a smile.

“Heh, well... With four masks the, uh, speed of the change and ratio grows too intense, and I’m not strong enough to completely control it, so...you know, we don’t want to fail the way we did that one time.”

Three days ago, I tried an alchemy experiment with five Masks of the Ruler of Dreams. In theory, I should have been able to greatly reduce waste in the amount of magic the materials absorb during the alchemical process, improving crafting efficiency. I was glad for the chance to reduce the materials used per experiment as well, since I hadn’t actually succeeded in making the Blood Ethers.

But anyway, there was an *incident*.

It seemed that with five masks, the materials unexpectedly fused together and turned into some sort of slime creature that crawled around the room until it grew these massive legs and started *jumping* around the room. Pomera and I were able to defeat this strange homunculus thing before it could escape. It would have been a shame if it had destroyed Manaloch after we’d already saved the city on a couple of occasions.

It was probably because of the demon brains.

In any case, I wasn’t going to use five masks again. Even four masks seemed a little much. The changes the masks instigated were so extreme that there was no way I could tell what was going to happen until it happened.

The ingredients were simmering in the cauldron, and I applied magic to instigate a change.

“If my hypothesis is right, this should do it,” I said.

Pomera gave a tense smile. “Um, Kanata, wouldn’t it be better to get help from your teacher, Lunaère?” she asked.

“That’d be the best...if it were possible.”

“Do you mean she’s already left town?”

“No, I think she’s probably still in Manaloch. I can’t really explain it... She’s

kind of avoiding me... I mean, she's not the kind of person who goes out in civilization much. It's complicated."

The last time I talked to Lunaère was right after my fight with Mother, the spider demon king. I pushed her on a couple things she said, and that might've been the wrong thing to do. It would've been nice for the two of us to be together if she really could go out in town now, but something was giving her pause.

If I wanted to have a real conversation with Lunaère, my only option was to find a chance to corner her somehow. But Lunaère was my teacher in every aspect of battle techniques, and her abilities were way stronger than mine. It would be nearly impossible to catch her off guard. I'd have to wait for some chance to come along or just let time to move on and somehow let things fall into place. Either way, I was relying on luck or time.

"K-Kanata, we c-can talk about that later! The cauldron is boiling over! There's something...I don't know what, but it's making a really scary banging sound!" cried Pomera.

There was a thumping on the lid of the cauldron, like something was striking it from the inside.

"Sorry!" I adjusted the magic I was applying to the cauldron in an attempt to stabilize what was happening inside. "O-okay, it's going all right so far..."

Just as I said that, the three masks against the wall started clattering as they shook violently back and forth. Their clacka-clacka-clacking almost sounded like derisive laughter.

"Eeeeeek! K-Kanata, are the demon brains doing something again?!" Pomera's face turned pale, and she clung to me.

Philia bounced up and down in amusement as she looked at the laughing masks. "Everyone's having fun!"

I gently slid the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh from its sheath and pointed it at the masks. If the time came, I would have to immediately destroy them, turning them back into the Sand of Dreams.

I felt bad for Philia, but this situation was going to be anything but fun. In

terms of what would happen...well, there were still a lot of things I had no idea about. It might turn out that even using three of the masks was still a little dangerous. One of them would probably be plenty to get the job done. I really should reduce the number.

But despite Pomera's (and my) concerns, the masks' chattering laughter quickly subsided. I let out a sigh of relief and returned my sword to its sheath.

"Kanata...don't you think those masks really are dangerous?" asked Pomera.

"I think... I think I won't use more than two masks at a time. Three is probably fine, but there might be a tiny chance that those masks will somehow accidentally create a high-level demon or a pseudo-Zolophilia..." I lifted the lid of the cauldron, not expecting much.

There was some sort of green liquid inside.

I pulled the Acacia Memoirs from my magic bag before I could even think. I flipped through it without anything particular in mind and this was the page that came up:

BLOOD ETHER OF THE GODS

Value Class: Legendary

An elixir. Active ingredient: concentrated brain matter of high-level demons.

It is said to have a composition similar to the atmosphere in the gods' realm, and it is rumored that an arch-mage once discovered hidden truths of this world after drinking it.

The drinker receives increased spell efficiency and greatly recovers MP.

Th-that's it!

The fact that it opened to the Blood Ether of the Gods page without me thinking about it meant the alchemy was a success!

"W-we did it!" I shouted.

"Really? You did it, Kanata! This means you can finally make the potion on

your own!” said Pomera.

“Which means our method wasn’t wrong. I was a bit surprised when the masks laughed, though...” I said and Pomera frowned slightly.

“Kanata...you’re not thinking of using three of the masks next time, too, are you? You just said it could be dangerous...”

Well, it was dangerous...but it worked.

And if I reduced the number of masks, it would change the ratio of ingredients. Not having enough masks might result in a process that was too fiddly to manage. It might even make it so I couldn’t make the Blood Ethers at all. And the cost for materials would be absurd.

But I had to admit, I was scared when the masks started laughing.

“Pomera-san, what if we used just two masks?”

“Are you trying to convince me, or yourself...?”

– 3 –

“**O**KAY...it’s now stable and we can make Blood Ethers of the Gods,” I said as I wrapped up another test run.

“Oh good...” Pomera let out a sigh of relief. “I remember drinking oodles of these potions before, and they’re really expensive, r-right? Each one was...tens of millions of gold?”

I brought a hand to my chin and thought about the value of the currency in this world.

Something like the Jade Dragon’s Eye, a B-rank item, was five million gold. Garnet once told me that a kilogram of Adamantium would definitely go for five hundred million, assuming you could actually get that much of it in one place. That meant there was a hundredfold difference between a B-rank item and an S-rank one.

“You’ve already got a Legendary item with one of the main ingredients, the brains. We can get plenty of that...” I mumbled as I pondered.

At least that was the value rank the Acacia Memoirs gave them. All the demons that appeared in the Cursed Mirror were over level 3,000. You couldn’t hunt those demons unless you were level 3,000 at the lowest; you couldn’t even find them if you didn’t have the Cursed Mirror.

“...I think one potion could go for more than a billion gold.”

“Ugh...” Pomera looked stricken.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry I drank them...”

“That’s just an estimate,” I said with a forced smile. “It’s not like there’re that many people who would pay that much to buy them anyway.”

I’d actually asked Garnet to do some asking around to see if there was an easy way to sell Adamantine Ore, but apparently you’d end up with the royal family or governments of other countries getting involved. He even said it wasn’t something the Mithril Wand would ever have the opportunity to get their hands on.

It wasn’t like I needed money, anyway. Garnet was helping by selling off some Sap of the Spirit Tree little by little, and we were doing the occasional bout of monster hunting, which was enough to make ends meet with plenty left to pay for the materials to make the Blood Ethers.

“U-urgh...I guess, but I feel like I’ve wasted something priceless...” said Pomera, holding her head in her hands.

Philia was beside her, taking a tiny sip of a flask containing the Blood Ether. “Kanata, this isn’t yummy...it’s gross. It tastes funny and it smells yucky.”

“N-n-n-nooo! Philia! That’s a billion of Kanata’s gold!” Pomera quickly snatched the flask from Philia, who looked indignant.

“Hmph...”

“I did promise her she could drink some when it was finished,” I said with a laugh.

“S-sorry, I just...” said Pomera. “B-but this isn’t the sort of thing you can have fun tasting!”

“The Blood Ether came from Philia’s Masks of the Ruler of Dreams though, and we have plenty. Besides, it’s not like we could sell it if we tried at the shops around here.”

“I-I guess... Sorry, Philia.” Pomera bowed her head toward Philia and handed the flask back.

Philia looked at the flask in her hands like she wasn’t convinced. “Philia thought it’d be yummy...”

“If you drink some of the Blood Ether then eat something sweet, the candy might taste even sweeter in contrast,” I suggested.

“Good idea, Kanata! Philia’s gonna try!” She danced about and went to grab some candy.

“Are you sure she shouldn’t be doing that with something else bitter? Why am I the only one who thinks this seems insane...?” asked Pomera.

“We don’t need money right now. Garnet was talking about selling the Sap of the Spirit Tree at a high price little by little so the market doesn’t crash,” I explained.

The amount we got from that should be plenty to cover the costs of creating the Blood Ethers for a while. If something happened and we did suddenly need money, I still had the Gold Magnet of the Adventuring King that Lovis gave me. That was an A-rank item, which I should be able to quickly swap for gold if I asked Garnet and his people to help.

“It’s probably not the thriftiest way to handle this, but I’m not complaining if it makes Philia happy,” I said.

“Gosh! Sweet things taste sooo sweet if you eat them after drinking this!” Philia’s eyes sparkled, her cheeks stuffed full of cookies. “You try!”

Pomera just groaned. “Why not use something else...? Anything else... One billion gold down the hatch...”

“It’s okay. Philia-chan seems to like the Blood Ethers and I didn’t want her to

feel left out,” I explained to Pomera.

It wasn't like I was going to let Philia guzzle our whole supply of Blood Ethers. If she liked bitter things, we could look around Manaloch for something else. I actually expected her to get tired of it pretty quickly.

“I'm a little scared, I don't want to drink a lot...” said Pomera. “Though, I do get it's fine to drink it during magic practice and between battles...”

Blood Ether of the Gods both restored your magic and heightened your senses toward magic. Whether you had it or not was a huge factor for how efficient your magic practice was. We tried to drink them until we nearly threw up in between practice sessions.

“I did make it for you to drink, Pomera-san,” I said. “Drink up, and let's go back into the Cursed Mirror.”

Pomera jumped when she heard me mention the mirror. “S-so, we really are going back there...”

“I'd like to raise your level some more... And after what's just happened, I think we should try to be quick about it and aim higher than our original goal.”

“W-what makes you think that?” she asked.

“There's something about what the humanoid dragon Alice said...”

Just as she'd been on the brink of death, Alice had said, *“Hee...hee... I'll give you a warning, Kanata. The higher beings have turned their attention toward you. Sooner or later, you will come to a tragic end. And it won't only be you that gets dragged down. That is why I have lived my life walking the path they laid out for me.”*

Alice wasn't a traveler, but she knew about the higher beings. She knew about Naiarotop. She even said the incident with the Red Staff of Authority was a scheme he cooked up to destroy me.

I doubted she was just lying. Naiarotop was probably not happy with the fact I was still alive after he'd tried to kill me. There was a good chance that some monster more powerful than Alice or the Red King would come at me sometime soon.

“Before, I always thought that I wouldn’t draw any attention if I just behaved. But I think there’s already a target on my back,” I said.

Naiarotop and the other gods created Locklore. I wasn’t sure how much I really could stand against them if they got serious. Leveling up in the Cursed Mirror wasn’t enough...I needed some trump card that would let me go toe-to-toe with them.

I’d explained a long time ago to Pomera that we might end up fighting against someone dangerous because of my level or my origins. I’d had other travelers and humanoid dragons in mind when I said it, but now I knew something bigger might move against us. I’d only met him once, but Naiarotop was cruel, selfish, and spiteful. If he aimed to do me harm, our training alone wasn’t going to cut it—no matter how careful we were.

“I don’t know how much I can trust what Alice said... But to be honest, I’ve wondered if I should let you stay with me, Pomera-san.”

Pomera listened in silence, then grabbed my wrist and looked directly into my downturned face. “If you’re in danger, then I want to help even more! I haven’t paid you back for everything I owe you. And...helping out when we’re in trouble is what friends do!”

“Pomera-san...”

“B-besides...I really don’t want to leave you!”

I was surprised. But this just reinforced my resolve to raise her level as quickly as possible. She had to be able to protect herself if she came up against the worst of the danger.

Philia clung to my left arm. “Me too! Philia loves Kanata and Pomera, Philia will work hard with you!”

“Thank you, both... All right! We’ve got our Blood Ethers ready. Let’s get inside the Mirror and boost some levels!” Up until now I hadn’t considered the need to raise Philia’s level...but she’d be in harm’s way too if Naiarotop came calling. I didn’t know if I would be as good of a teacher as Lunaère, but I had to try. Even if it meant pushing them past their limits.

“Philia’s going to work hard to be stronger!” she cried as she squeezed her

hands into fists.

“Yes. The Cursed Mirror...” muttered Pomera weakly.

– 4 –

I GAVE POMERA THE RING with the coiled, two-headed snake. It was the Ouroboros Wheel, which prevented auto death. Someone of Pomera’s level couldn’t even dream of fighting in the Cursed Mirror without it.

“Having this makes me realize I’m walking to my own death...a-again,” murmured Pomera as her eyes locked with those of the snake on the ring. I passed my magic bag to her as well.

“There are recovery potions and the Blood Ethers inside. Use them whenever you can,” I explained.

The recovery potions were an item called a Nine Lives Elixir. One of the primary ingredients in that was the blood of a monster that appeared in Cocytus, so I couldn’t produce large quantities of it. Ideally, Pomera would use her white magic for healing...but sometimes the demons came at us too fast.

“Philia’s going in for the first time! It’ll be fun!” cried Philia.

“It’s really not a *fun* place...” said Pomera, sullenly.

“Philia-chan, do your best to protect Pomera-san, okay? If you think it’s getting dangerous, pull back right away and hide behind me,” I said.

“Okay! Philia will protect Pomera!”

Philia’s base level was close to 2,000, but the Sand of Dreams’ properties were incredible.

She could change her shape and her level, letting her bump it up to more than 3,000 which would let her fight on even footing with the demons. And whenever she changed form, any damage she’d taken was wiped clean. She was far tougher than her stats implied.

I placed the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm on the floor of my room and the three of us stepped inside.

The absurd rainbow glow spread out around us.

“...W-well, here we are again.” Pomera clutched her staff close, her eyes downcast as she sighed.

There was a horde of blueish-white humanoids ahead of us, coming at us silently yet with unnerving speed. Each had a weird deformity: one with only one leg, one with a face on its chest instead of having a head, one that was just a torso floating in air. Pomera wasn’t looking in their direction, and they were approaching too fast for her to react.

“Eeek!” Pomera shrieked as I slipped an arm around her then leapt to the side. Every attack from the rapidly oncoming horde of strange humanoids struck the area we’d just been standing.

The one that was just a torso was clearly faster than the ones with other abnormalities. It rushed us and I used the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh to slice it in half.

“Pomera-san, you don’t have time to be distracted! Just keep firing magic off like you normally do!” I shouted.

“O-okay!”

She raised her staff as I kept the strange horde coming from the front at bay and quickly checked behind us. From the back came a group of countless *otafuku* faces. They looked like joy-filled, homely women with large chubby cheeks and a dim gleam in their narrow eyes.

When Lunaère would save me from being the chew toy of demons and take me outside, she would sometimes say, “That was a bad run.”

“*This* might be a bad run,” I muttered.

Every time we entered the Cursed Mirror, the demons that came at us were wildly different. Certain combinations and their numbers could mean we were just going to have a bad time. Our only choice when this happened was to

escape and try again...but that was easier said than done.

Suddenly, hundreds of massive, pure white arms sprung from the ground. They had eyes on their palms and formed a circle around us.

For a moment I thought these were new enemies, but then I realized I'd seen these arms when the Sand of Dreams saved us during the ragno incident. The huge arms swatted the women's faces and prevented the approach of the strange humanoid horde. Our enemies could no longer move freely.

"Spirit Magic Level 8: Salamander's Claws!"

Pomera raised her staff. Flames rushed out in lines, hitting the *otafuku*. They didn't even flinch, but it must have done some damage.

This is working! Having Philia there meant the situation was more stable for raising Pomera's level. She was turning a bad run into a manageable one.

...Until the gigantic face of a teddy bear appeared floating in the sky. It was sewn from fluorescent pink cloth and had two huge buttons for eyes.

"Cuuute!" cried Philia happily, but I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Th-this isn't just a bad run, this is a *terrible* run! Philia-chan, your arms, pull back your arms!" I shouted.

I knew because I'd fought her once before myself that Philia's Sand of Dreams had a weakness. The things she created weren't separate objects, but part of her body. If she was subjected to an area attack that wiped those arms out, she would suffer incredible amounts of damage. When I defeated her, it was because I used Gravity Bomb to blow away the three pieces she'd divided herself into, then attacked while she was still weak.

"Huh...? But then the scary faces will—"

"It's okay! Hurry!"

Philia did as I said and pulled back the huge arms from their circle around us.

The cloth tore in the area of the teddy bear's mouth, ruining its whimsical appearance. It revealed a gaping mouth lined with clearly human teeth; blood oozed from between the gaps. Raging flames erupted from deep in its gullet, casting a red glow over everything in sight.

I hugged Pomera and Philia to me, one on either side, and leapt.

“Space-time Magic Level 4: Short Gate!”

We leapt as far as we could within the limits of the spell. Behind us, the strange hoard of monsters and the *otafuku* faces burned in a sea of flames.

I lifted the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh toward the teddy-bear face floating in the sky.

“Space-time Magic Level 18: Gravity Bomb!”

Black light surrounded the teddy bear and space began to warp and contract. Pressed in from all sides, the face shrunk for a moment before it exploded. Thread and scraps of cloth scattered across the area.

“...Guess I can’t expect things to go well every time in the Cursed Mirror,” I said.

“B-but, Kanata, that teddy bear reduced the number of enemies, which gives us a bit of a break!” said Pomera as a massive shadow fell over us.

A gigantic centipede-like monster barreled toward us, its body flexing. As always, the centipede wasn’t really a centipede. It was a creature formed from a chain of huge human heads in a centipede form. Each section of its body was made of a human head with a massive grin on its face. Tentacles resembling centipede legs sprouted from their cheeks and temples.

I swung my sword, cutting the oncoming human-headipede in half. The bottom and top sections of it continued to circle us at high speeds.

This was just beyond the limits of acceptability for Pomera, who was now frozen with her staff half-raised. It’d been so long since she’d been in the Cursed Mirror that she must have forgotten how grotesque and weird things could get.

I couldn’t blame her. I sort of forgot what it felt like, too. You couldn’t really begin to handle the demons in the Cursed Mirror until you became numb to fear and pain.

Philia split herself into three, lined herself up in front of Pomera, and cried, “Philia will protect this side!”

“Thank you, Philia-chan! I’ll cover the rear. Pomera-san, please try to hit the demons with magic!”

“H-hiyah...” Pomera managed to wheeze. Her eyes were full of tears.

– 5 –

A WEEK HAD PASSED since we resumed leveling up in the Cursed Mirror.

Pomera was sitting on the floor in my room, slumped listlessly against the wall. There were empty flasks of drained Blood Ethers around her.

“My tummy’s all sloshy... Kanata, I can’t drink any more...”

“Are you sure? It’s most effective if you drink as much as you can after casting spells and using all your magic.” I reminded her.

“Have I actually gotten any stronger...? I don’t know how many times I’ve nearly been killed by demons, and I still don’t feel like I can hurt them at all,” she said.

“There’s no doubt you’ve gotten stronger. Today, you reached level 1,032.” The demons in the Cursed Mirror were around level 3,000. We still had plenty of room to grow before she started seeing diminishing experience from killing demons.

“Sure, but...” she said, but only got that far before her eyes opened wide. “L-level 1,032?! I-is that even possible?”

“What do you mean? It’s *your* level, after all. If you don’t believe me, use the Level Slate.”

“I-it’s not that I don’t believe you... I-it’s just, how powerful is level 1,000?”

“There’s not really anything you can compare it to.”

Out of everything I’d seen so far, the spider demon king Mother was the highest at *nearly* level 1,000. That was about five times as powerful as Lovis.

Philia’s base level used to be around 1,800, but it’d jumped up all the way to

2,900 through the Cursed Mirror training. Considering how powerful her Sand of Dreams was, even I would be in serious trouble if she went all out.

“It’d be nice if there was a decent opponent for you to fight against and get a feel for how much you’ve leveled up,” I said. “Something only level 500-ish or so...”

“*Only* level 500...?! Kanata, a level 500 demon king is powerful enough to throw an entire country into chaos! D-do we really need to level up more?”

Actually...I didn’t even think just raising our level was going to be enough.

I wanted some sort of proven power that could work against an opponent like Naiarotop. Like one of these “bugs” that Alice mentioned. Travelers from other worlds were the only ones to get gift skills from the gods, and these skills weren’t balanced. Some were worthless, others were totally OP. Alice made it sound like the higher beings called the OP travelers “bugs” and hated them.

Maybe if I couldn’t win, I could cheat...

I wanted to talk to Lunaère about it. There was one problem: even though I’d spent this past week walking around town looking for her, I wasn’t able to find her.

“I still think we should start with getting you to level 3,000...” I said.

“*Start* with 3,000?! That means there’s more coming after that?!” Pomera’s eyes grew wide.

“But we don’t have many Nine Lives Elixirs. I think I’d rather have you work on studying white magic than on leveling right now.” If Pomera could use higher white magic, and improve her skill with it, then we could ration our healing potions. “We’ve also gone through our Blood Ether stock, so I want to go talk to Garnet. It’d probably be a good idea to accept some requests too, just for a change of pace.

“We haven’t gone to the Adventurers’ Guild in a while either, so something new is probably going on...”

Just then there was a knock at the door. Pomera, Philia, and I all looked at each other and stood.

“I’ll get it,” I said and stood to open the door. “Oh! Hello, Garnet-san...!”

Speak of the devil. Busy as Garnet was, I wouldn’t have him expected him to come to visit in person. It was common for him to send a messenger, even in emergencies. Something must have been terribly wrong.

“It’s been some time, Kanata. I haven’t seen you since we went together to apologize to Miss Kotone. I am sorry for the trouble I caused,” he said with an apologetic smile. “Actually, I’ve come to ask something of Miss Pomera.”

By now I was sure that Garnet had guessed my level was higher than Pomera’s, but he still acted like he had no idea. Part of me felt like there was no need to hide the truth from Garnet at this point anymore, but he was being so considerate of us that it made it difficult for me to say anything. We settled into this same song and dance as a result.

I took a half step back and Pomera stepped forward.

“Um, what is it...?” she asked.

“These past two days, the weather in Manaloch has been somewhat odd,” he said.

“The weather...?”

“Yes. Now, it’s not extreme, but there are temperature fluctuations that are clearly not possible during this season. After comparing this situation to historical records, we have cause to believe that it may indicate the return of the two evil dragons who come to this region every few decades.”

They threw the weather out of balance just by visiting? Something as incredible as that lives here, in this world?

“The Abyssal Fire Dragon, Dis, and the Abyssal Ice Dragon, Ptolomea—one or even both of them may be on the move. Either one of them could destroy an entire city for fun just by passing near it.”

I gulped as I listened.

The people of Locklore couldn’t catch a break. They had to do all sorts of things to make sure their cities weren’t dragged into something like this. I’d thought for a while now that Garnet was an incredible person for constantly

dealing with crisis after crisis and not cracking under the pressure.

“I hope we are simply jumping to conclusions,” he continued, “but there is a small chance it might be true. I have contacted all adventurers above A-rank and asked them to investigate. If the two evil dragons really are on the move, we need to know their path as soon as possible.”

Pomera glanced at me, and I nodded back.

“We accept your request to investigate.”

— 6 —

POMERA AND I made our way to the conference room on the second floor of the Adventurers’ Guild. Philia stayed back home where it was safe.

The usual cast of characters was already assembled: the man wrapped in bandages, the elderly magic user, the gold-haired swordswoman, and Rosemonde. These were the four A-Rank adventurers of Manaloch.

Rosemonde came over to us and took off her goat mask. “You too, huh? Everyone was invited. Which means...”

The sound of footsteps approached. I looked toward the door and saw Kotone appear. Her somewhat harsh eyes narrowed and swept over the area, like she was on guard.

“K-Kotone-san...”

She was probably still angry about the manga thing. I thought about telling her that other people were totally fine with her shipping stories, but I decided that would just be pouring more gas on the fire.

Kotone spotted me. She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. Her expression turned even more severe, then she walked in my direction. For a brief moment, I considered running.

She stopped in front of me and stared. Her silence went unbroken.

“Uh...” I struggled for words for a moment before Kotone cleared her throat.

Her cheeks were tinged slightly pink as she mumbled, “...I’m sorry about the manga thing. I was kind of a mess. Sorry for taking a swing at you...and for staying mad for so long.”

Then she bowed her head.

“K-Kotone-san...” I said.

“I thought about it and there was no way you had anything to do with...*that*. Garnet told me the whole story after I calmed down. You helped get the other manga into the right format, but you didn’t have anything to do with that other one.”

That was the slash manga that ended up getting published because some of the Mithril Wand staff adored it. I was worried she would never forgive us, but now our relationship seemed to be on the mend.

“I really took it out on you.” Kotone shook her head weakly and let out a sigh.

A wave of relief washed over me. “It’s okay... I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything about it.”

I had a feeling something bad might happen if I left the manga manuscript with Garnet, since he didn’t fully understand its significance. I had even considered destroying it to prevent it from being published. If I’d been more insistent, we could have avoided the worst of the fallout.

“Well...if you feel bad about it, then you can pay me back with a favor,” she said, her mouth hidden behind her hand and her eyes looking elsewhere.

“I-I’ll do it if I can...”

She didn’t seem to think I was to blame, but apparently she wasn’t about to let me off the hook just yet.

“It’s just...no one in this world knows *anything* about manga.” Her voice was muffled and she seemed nervous. “I was thinking it’d be a big help if you could help me come up with ideas, or if I could ask your opinion on things...”

“O-of course! If you’re happy for me to do that, I’d love to!”

I was sure she was being sincere, but assumed what she really wanted was to chat about manga with someone from home. She seemed to have a lot of fun the last time we talked about it. And I liked talking about manga too—it brought back a lot of memories. I was happy to agree.

She'd already sort of forgiven me, but this resolution would hopefully make any lingering awkwardness between us disappear.

"I apologize for calling you all here on such short notice and then making you wait," said Garnet as he strode into the meeting room. He was accompanied by a subordinate. "We've just received new information from a merchant who traveled here from another city. It took some time to organize my thoughts about what he had to say, and it lends credence to our theory about the evil dragons."

He looked around the room, and then his eyes settled on Kotone. "Oh, Miss Kotone, you came! I am overjoyed that you have decided to assist us."

Kotone glared back at Garnet and settled into a seat without saying a word.

...G-guess he's still in the doghouse.

"K-Kotone-san, G-Garnet-san didn't—" I whispered to her.

"I'm not mad at him. He's done a lot for me. That's why I'm here for the adventurers' meeting."

Sh-she's definitely mad.

To be completely fair, manga was an unfamiliar cultural expression to Garnet. On top of that, he was quite old and focused entirely on his work. He likely delegated decisions about publishing to someone more...*open-minded* and let them make the decisions. After that, things just sort of happened. No point telling Kotone that, though—she was holding Garnet responsible, and that was that.

"W-well then," said Garnet with a slight grimace. "Let me get right into explaining the roles I hope each of you will agree to take on. Please take a seat, everyone."

I sat on Kotone's left, then Pomera sat on my left, and Rosemonde sat next to

her.

Garnet wanted to assign certain areas to the different adventurers and have them investigate. We needed to find out if these evil dragons were really in the country; and if they were, what their path was going to be.

We would be paid for an agreed-upon number of days of work, regardless of whether or not we found anything. This was quite an urgent situation.

At one point while Garnet was talking, Rosemonde leaned over both Pomera and me to glare at Kotone. Kotone noticed and returned a sharp look. “What?”

“Hmph. Aries’s Hand...always thought you were a little weird, kid...but I never imagined you were an *artist*,” said Rosemonde, a little disgust finding its way into the last word.

Rosemonde’s pride was being an adventurer. I figured she couldn’t understand how an S-rank adventurer would ever stoop to dabbling in art.

“What’s it to you?” replied Kotone, again without hiding her distaste.

Being caught in the middle of this whispered conversation was not comfortable. Pomera was biting her lip awkwardly.

Rosemonde’s hand strayed to her waist and behind the back of her coat.

“H-hey, Rosemonde-san, we’re in the middle of an adventurers’ meeting. This is no time for a fight,” I whispered urgently.

From out of her coat, she pulled a copy of a manga.

“Sign this for me, will ya?” hissed Rosemonde. “And there’d better be a sequel.”

Kotone sat frozen there for a good ten seconds, eyes wide, glaring at Rosemonde. Then her eyebrows formed an uncertain scowl and she turned away. Face slowly reddening, she coughed to clear her throat.

“Fine, but I’ll do it later. Okay...?”



AFTER THE ADVENTURERS' MEETING, we had to leave Manaloch and head toward Ploroque, the merchant city to the south. It had been the planned evacuation location for Manaloch's citizens during the spider demon king incident.

If they existed, the evil dragons would be coming from the south—*far* from the south. Ploroque would only be our first stop as we scouted, so we wasted no time getting our things together and leaving Manaloch.

"I can't believe they stuck me with you guys," griped Rosemonde. "Why am I even here? You don't need me to babysit."

She glanced at Philia, who was holding Pomera's hand and pulling her forward as she skipped happily.

"Are you still afraid of Philia-chan?" I asked. Rosemonde had once been caught in the backblast of one of Philia's attacks, along with a bunch of ragni.

"I'm not scared, kid! I'm just necessarily cautious! Where'd you pick up that girl anyway? I bet you're keeping her close cause you're afraid of what she might get up to."

"W-well..."

She wasn't wrong. If I left Philia at an orphanage, that would be a recipe for disaster. If there was a fight, the entire city could be wiped from the map.

"Are you talking about Philia?" asked Philia, turning back to look at us. Rosemonde broke her stride and raised her arms to fend off any attack.

She then jerked toward me and said, "Like I said, kid...just being cautious!"

"I didn't say anything..."

Rosemonde stopped walking. "By the way, how are you planning on getting there? You turned down Garnet's carriage. You've got somethin' in mind, don't ya?"

“He said it was urgent, so I thought we’d travel on the back of a spirit.”

It would be faster for us to travel to a different city if we rode on Wolzottl’s back. And we’d also be flying, which might help us spot the dragons from farther away.

“Jeez...what *can’t* you do, kid? But are we all gonna ride, or just the person with the contract? Sounds like a pretty friendly spirit...”

“Yeah, he’s gentle and loves people. He’s a good boy. And he’s as fast as we need.”

“Hmph, the stronger the spirit is, the more temperamental they are. Sounds like this one might be a little on the wimpy side. Maybe I need to go back and ask about the carriage.”

Now Philia was clinging to Pomera’s sleeve, shaking. “Philia’s not good with doggies...”

“Guess even that monster is scared of something,” said Rosemonde.

“Please don’t call her that,” I said, but Rosemonde didn’t reply. I sighed, pulled out the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, and pointed it to the sky.

“Summoning Magic Level 18: Wolzottl.”

A magic circle unfolded and out stepped a massive ten-foot-tall beast with beautiful blue fur. His golden eyes looked at me then to Pomera, Philia, and finally Rosemonde.

“R-right... Looks like you made friends with a reliable spirit,” she said as she took a big step back. Wolzottl’s eyes were glued to this new friend, and he took a big step forward as his double tails wagged furiously in excitement.

“Wuff!” He rushed toward Rosemonde. She let out a scream and tried to bolt.

I placed myself between the two of them and took Wolzottl’s tackle just as Rosemonde stumbled and fell on her rear.

“Woof, woof, woof!”

“Calm down, Wol! I have something I want you to help us with,” I said while Wolzottl pressed his face against my head and nuzzled. I used one arm to hold his body back and the other to pet his head. “Sorry he surprised you,

Rosemonde-san. Wol's a good boy—he just likes to play.”

“S-sure, kid. I was only a *little* surprised. So, you're planning to have us hitch a ride on this dog spirit, huh? Not bad.”

Wolzottl shifted his gaze from me to Rosemonde while panting excitedly, letting his indigo tongue loll out of his mouth.

“Thanks for the help, pup. Wol, right?” said Rosemonde as she gently held out a gauntlet-clad hand toward him.

Wol's eyes sparkled and his two tails wagged violently as he strained against me. He stretched his neck out and tried to lick and nip at Rosemonde's hand. I immediately grabbed his shoulders and forcefully pulled him back. His jaws snapped together powerfully.

“Uwaaah!” Rosemonde screamed again and fell over. “I thought you said he was gentle and loved people! What's up with that?!”

That was close. One wrong step and Rosemonde's arm would have been chewed to shreds. I scratched Wolzottl under the chin. He closed his eyes and sighed, stretching his neck in enjoyment.

“Sorry,” I said. “He likes to give little love bites when he gets excited. We're still trying to train that out of him.”

When Wolzottl heard what I said, he hung his head low like a scolded kid.

— 8 —

WE CLIMBED ONTO Wolzottl's back and headed south. The scenery seemed to change every time he leapt from the ground.

We were moving far faster than any carriage could. Relying on Wolzottl for travel was great, so long as we weren't expecting to actually enjoy the trip.

“Kanata, with how fast we're moving, it might be better to just go search for these dragons ourselves rather than stopping in Ploroque,” said Pomera, and I

noded slightly.

“You’re probably right. Going into the city might be a waste of time.”

Garnet seemed to be treating this issue with great importance. If we didn’t find the dragons in the south, then we could move on to looking elsewhere.

Just then, some sort of ice pellets stung my face. I wiped them away with my right hand. “Rain?”

“It’s sleet. That’s odd. It’s not the season for sleet...” said Pomera. “I wonder if this sort of thing happens a lot around here?”

That made me remember something Garnet said during the mission briefing, *“Now, it’s not extreme, but there are temperature fluctuations that are clearly not possible during this season. After comparing this situation to historical records, we have cause to believe that it may indicate the return of the two evil dragons who come to this region every few decades.”*

“They might already be nearby,” I said. It seemed these dragons had so much power they could throw weather out of balance just by existing.

We kept going south. Eventually we could see the high-walled city of Ploroque, not even an hour since we’d left Manaloch. Wol had even been taking it a little easy since we had Rosemonde along for the ride.

Wolzottl’s feet stopped moving and he turned his head to look at us. He appeared to be asking what he should do next.

“Not wastin’ any time, huh, kid?” croaked Rosemonde, sounding overwhelmed.

But something other than Ploroque had caught my eye...something high in the sky beyond the city. “Speak of the devil...”

High overhead were two masses, one of fire and one of ice. If I squinted, I could just about make out the two dragons at the centers of the hellfire and the blizzard. The chunks of ice were being melted by the heat, turning into sleet and falling to the earth.

“W-would ya look at that... I’ve heard of them in stories but I never thought they were this powerful. Dis, the Abyssal Fire Dragon and Ptolomea, the Abyssal

Ice Dragon... Bad omens, kid. And the two have appeared together. Hah, it's like they're hosting some sort of dragon party..." Rosemonde might have been trying to make light talk, but her voice was trembling. "You kids might be tough, but you've gotta know they're even tougher than a demon king. Looks like they might do some damage to Manaloch too, the direction they're headed. We need to get back and warn that old fox."

"Are dragons particularly bad?" I asked and Rosemonde glared at me.

"You thinkin' they're just some big monsters, aren't you?" she said.

"They're not?"

"...Most dragons don't give a damn about humans," Rosemonde explained, exasperated. "They've got wisdom far beyond any human knowledge and magic so advanced that humans couldn't begin to comprehend it. And they're *huge*. They normally stay in monster country and fight back the monsters to prevent the world from collapsing."

"Humanoid dragons" were just normal (but powerful) humans and the Jade Dragon's Eye was just a crystal that looked like a dragon eye. I'd seen a spirit that looked like a dragon, but spirits were a completely different thing. But it seemed that in Locklore, *actual* dragons were tantamount to gods.

"Evil dragons are dragons who don't ignore humans like most dragons do. They have a history of harming us. And there's nothing we can do about it, kid," said Rosemonde like she was trying to convince me.

She had seen what Philia could do...several times in fact. For her to still say this meant that dragons really must have incredible power.

But at the moment, things were looking pretty bad for Ploroque. I looked toward the two dragons of fire and ice, thinking I would at least check their statuses first.

Just then, Dis breathed out a massive ball of fire that headed straight for the city.

"Wol!" I shouted and he leapt into the air.

"Aww, come on! Wh-what do you think you're doing, kid?!" shouted

Rosemonde.

“Please stay calm and hold on tight, Rosemonde-san!”

I suddenly regretted not getting Rosemonde off Wolzottl before we jumped up, even by force if I had to. If we needed to push our limits, she was going to have a bad time.

I glanced back and saw Philia pushing Rosemonde down onto Wolzottl’s back to make sure she didn’t fall. Rosemonde was squirming in pain, but she wasn’t budging.

“Kanata...is this okay?” Philia asked uncertainly.

I gave her a thumbs up and her expression brightened.

Rosemonde wasn’t going to enjoy the trip, but this was far better than falling to her death.

Wolzottl quickly moved until we were above Ploroque, ahead of the ball of flame. It was way bigger than he was.

“Water Magic Level 12: Sequana’s Mirror!”

A magic circle appeared, and a circular, shield-like sheet of water unfolded in front of me. The rapidly swirling water swallowed the fire ball and hissed into steam as it evaporated.

I let out a sigh of relief, but I couldn’t afford to assume we were out of the woods yet. The two dragons were accelerating toward us.

“Good work, kid, but now they’ve seen us! What’s the plan?!” said Rosemonde. She raised her huge cross-shaped staff toward the dragons while still clinging close to Wolzottl. It was a valiant bluff, but the dragons didn’t let up their pace.

The situation didn’t look good, considering we were right next to Ploroque. The city could end up getting hit by stray attacks. It didn’t matter if we were going to stand and fight or flee, we needed to do it somewhere else.

“Wol, take us far away from the city!” I ordered.

Wolzottl turned his back to the dragons, and the sudden movement caused

Rosemonde to stumble. She'd been holding her staff in one hand and was unprepared for the maneuver. Wol corrected his course, and Philia quickly snatched her arm and held on tight.

"S-sorry..." said Rosemonde.

She was okay thanks to Philia, but the brief hesitation gave the flame-wreathed dragon a chance to circle around and cut Wolzottl off.

The flaming dragon bared its fangs and glared at us. Suddenly, its thoughts echoed directly in my mind. *"Well done, pathetic humans. You managed to obliterate my flames. But do you really think you can run from me?"*

"It appears that Dis is losing some face, his prized flames stopped by something as miniscule as a human." Behind us, the icy dragon let out a condescending sigh.

We were caught between the two.

"What was that? I could vaporize your icy bones with my hellfire, Ptolomea. My flames have not lost any of their fury," said Dis. He narrowed his eyes until creases formed between them.

Ptolomea shook her head in frustration. *"Vaporize me with...what? Your pathetic flames that even human magic can eliminate? You can lie to yourself, but not to me, Dis."*

Ptolomea's jab enraged Dis, and the flames surrounding his body fanned into a raging whorl.

"I was holding back! And to prove it, I shall burn these humans away. Rejoice, humans! You will experience my true fire—an honor for ones such as you!"

The dragon's hostility was like an overwhelming aura. His presence was significantly different from any opponent I'd fought before; I saw now why they were so venerated in Locklore. We had to somehow find an opening and run. I turned the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh toward Dis, intent on making sure that at least Pomera and the others could escape.

If I cast a series of Short Gates, I should be able to fight alone in the air. I could buy some time if I circled around him and served as a distraction, even if both

dragons were more powerful than me.

I needed to see what I was up against...

DIS

Race: Dragon

Lv: 711

HP: 4195/4195

MP: 3484/3484

R-really? Were Mother and Alice actually just absurdly powerful?

Rosemonde said that dragons were beyond even demon kings...but there was variation among demon kings, too. I'd heard the weakest ones were around level 300. Maybe she was comparing dragons to those kinds of demon kings.

"Hm? One moment... A black-haired man, a blond half elf... Are you Kanata Kanbara?" asked Dis. His eyes narrowed and his jaws opened wide in a grin.

"You've heard of me?" I asked.

"Hah! What fine luck we have! I was getting bored flying aimlessly around these uninteresting human lands. We have orders from the Ruler of the Skies! We are to kill you and prove our loyalty!"

The Ruler of the Skies? Was this another one of Naiarotop's schemes?

"Who's the Ruler of the Skies? And why me...?" I asked.

But Dis didn't answer. The flames surrounding him began to gather in his mouth. A moment later they were white-hot and flying right toward us.

"Burn and die! Feel the power of a dragon, pitiful humans!"

Then Pomera pointed her staff toward Dis. "Spirit Magic Level 8: Salamander's Claws!"

Flames slashed at the beam of light coming from Dis, blotting it out.

And they didn't stop there. A huge slash cut across Dis's chest and gouged deep into his flesh. The sheer force of the impact wracked his serpentine body as it was launched back from the point of impact. Both his wings were shredded, the thin membranes torn to ribbons.

"Gaaaaaah!" Dis screamed as he fell.

"U-um... I attacked because I thought I could make an opening..." said Pomeria, sounding confused.

"Looks like we found a suitable monster for you to really feel the results of your training," I said with a small nod.

"Y-you couldn't do that a few weeks ago! Wh-what the hell...?!" said Rosemonde in bewilderment.

"Where's the other one?" I looked up, but Ptolomea had vanished. I looked in the distance to see where she had gone and saw her racing away.

"This was not the enemy we were told we would face!"

"Woosh!" said Philia, swinging her arm toward Ptolomea as if throwing some unseen object. A huge tetrahedron with a giant eye on it appeared above Ptolomea's head. The strange construct dropped rapidly and struck the dragon, causing her to plummet to the ground in a spectacular crash.

"Thank you, Philia-chan. Is she...still alive?" I asked. I needed to ask these two dragons a few questions.

"Yep! Philia held back! Philia's awesome!" She puffed up proudly.

"What the hell is wrong with you kids...?" muttered Rosemonde as she looked down at the remains of the dragons.

AFTER WE TOUCHED DOWN, Philia restrained the two dragons by using the Sand of Dreams to conjure up brambles and pin them down. The brambles even

had creepy flowers with little eyes in the centers of the petals.

Rosemonde held her cross-shaped staff at the ready and stared at the strange blooms with a blank expression. The flowers stared back.

“What’dya think? Philia’s amazing, right? Say Philia’s amazing!” crowed Philia proudly.

I patted her head then looked at the two dragons. “Philia’s amazing. Right... So, we have Dis-san, the Abyssal Fire Dragon, and Ptolomea-san, the Abyssal Ice Dragon. You two seemed to know about me. Care to explain?”

Dis had said they’d had “orders from the Ruler of the Skies,” but that was new to me. I couldn’t help but think Naiarotop had something to do with it.

“How can a human defeat and bind me? Me!” wailed Dis. *“I have nothing to say to inferior beings. If you intend to kill me, then make it swift! I am a proud dragon and I will never submit!”*

“Wol, you can eat him,” I said, turning to Wolzottl. He panted and looked toward Dis. Saliva overflowed from his mouth and dripped to the ground where it caused black smoke to rise from the soil.

“I-I am prepared to die, but our master the Ruler of the Skies will not remain silent after you kill his loyal servants! The Ruler of the Skies is far more powerful!”

“I don’t know who that is, so I can’t be afraid of them. Could you please explain?” I asked, and Dis grimaced and fell silent.

It seemed I got to him somehow, though. After hesitating for a moment, he turned to look at Ptolomea.

“Th-the Ruler of the Skies dislikes being talked about,” she said and shook her head.

Then Dis said, *“How foolish of you humans to attempt to threaten a proud dragon! We dragons live long—we do not cling as desperately to life as you humans! We were created for one grand mission: to maintain the natural order of Locklore! For such puerile, greedy, procreative wretches to speak to us as equals...it is disgusting!”*

What message had passed between the two? His stance seemed to be flip-flopping every time he spoke.

“Wol, you can eat him,” I repeated.

“...But even if you pathetic little humans learned about the Ruler of the Skies, there would be nothing you could do! Let me inform you of the Ruler of the Skies, so that you may understand the true depths of your despair!”

I glanced sideways and saw that Pomera had also noticed how pitiful this was getting. She was observing this latest stance flip with emotionless eyes.

“Dis... You cannot intend to sell out the Ruler of the Skies! You have no idea what could happen!”

“I-I am not! I am merely enlightening the uncivilized humans so they may learn to fear us! That is not betrayal!” After making that excuse to Ptolomea, Dis turned back to me and said, *“The R-Ruler of the Skies once transgressed a taboo among dragons and received incredible power for it. But that power brought attention from the will of the world... In order to have the crime overlooked the will of the world selected the Ruler of the Skies to be one of the Five Fingers—part of the Unseen Hand of the Gods! They are the true rulers of the world who hide in the shadows.”*

“The Unseen Hand of the Gods...” I murmured. I’d heard that name before.

Alice had said, *“I’ve lost the Red Staff of Authority, but I’ve gained something even more powerful. As long as I have your strength, I can join the Unseen Hand of the Gods!”*

Alice’s original reason for going after the Red Staff of Authority and Kotone’s Aries’s Hand was so that she could join the Unseen Hand of the Gods. Alice also apparently thought that the higher beings were orchestrating her scheme in order to kill me.

She might have been right. When I defeated the Red King, I heard a voice that sounded like Naiarotop interfering to ensure I would die.

It was pretty easy to imagine the true nature of the Unseen Hand of the Gods. It was an organization working directly for Naiarotop and the other higher beings to control Locklore. They created problems, then fixed them in such a

way as to keep humanity teetering on the brink of extinction.

But Alice was a really roundabout way of getting me out of the picture. It looks like they've decided to be more direct.

If Naiarotop really wanted to destroy me, then he just needed to bring a higher being down here to get me. A higher being should be way more powerful than Zolophilia or the Red King. The fact that he didn't do that meant he must have serious restrictions on how he could interfere with the world. The Unseen Hand of the Gods was his only real way to meddle directly.

I wanted to find a way to contact Lunaère and ask her opinion about this, but I wasn't even sure where she was. And she was being weird—even if I did see her, odds were high that she'd run away. I needed to draw up some plans to corner her so we could have a real conversation.

“Okay then, who else is working for this Ruler of the Skies besides you two? And who are the other Five Fingers?” I asked, coming back to the more immediate problem.

“I-I know nothing of the other Five Fingers! All I know is the Ruler of the Skies is hated among dragons for violating the taboo. Others to follow the Ruler would have to be like us, outsiders who have strayed from the customs of the dragons.”

Which meant other evil dragons. That didn't really tell me much.

“But the Ruler of the Skies will not send more followers after you! The Ruler of the Skies will come to this land at any moment and roast you alive! You will be shown no mercy for defeating us! Drown in your terror, Kanata Kanbara!”

As Dis spoke, a black fire began to burn across his and Ptolomea's body. I quickly readied my sword.

“Stand back, I'll—” I started, but the two dragons began to flail in agony as they burned. The flames surrounding Dis were swallowed up in black fire and the ice coating Ptolomea boiled away.

“Th-this is the Sacrificial Curse! No, my Ruler! I simply tried to express your greatness to this ignorant human! Please, have mercy!”

“But I...I tried to stop him! Why me too? Ruler!”

It seemed like the Ruler of the Skies was using a curse to monitor them. I stepped forward to try and save them, but Rosemonde called from behind.

“Let ‘em burn, kid. They’re evil dragons, they’ve caused humanity so much suffering... They think of us as nothing more than insects. They’d never return the favor even if you did put ‘em out.”

I had raised my sword but stopped. The black fire didn’t spread. It stayed only on the two dragons.

Then Rosemonde said, “This Ruler of the Skies sounds like the wrong guy to cross. What the hell have you been up to, kid?”

Chapter 2:

A Visit to the Garden of the Dragons

– 1 –

WE ENDED UP STAYING for a night in Ploroque. The sun was setting by the time we'd dealt with the evil dragons.

Dis said that the Ruler of the Skies was going to kill me very soon, but I had no idea when. Since I had no way of going to find them, I had no choice but to wait for them to come find me.

I thought through my list of enemies. The Ruler of the Skies was apparently far more powerful than Dis and Ptolomea. If I managed to defeat the Ruler, there were still four more people in the Unseen Hand of the Gods...and Naiarotop, after that.

I wasn't strong enough right now. Raising my level in the Cursed Mirror just wasn't going to be enough. I needed to search the world for some way of standing against a higher being.

As I was lying in bed reading a magic book and thinking, there was a knock on the door. It was either Pomera, Philia, or Rosemonde...probably Pomera. I set the magic book down, got out of bed, and opened the door.

"What's up?" I said as I opened it, but there was a girl I didn't recognize standing at the door.

Her hair was navy blue and wavy, framing a face with large, golden, cat-like eyes. She wore a flashy necklace with a bright red crystal set in it. All that seemed mundane enough, but the draconic horns on her head and the wings sprouting from her back were less so.

She looked at me like she was expecting something.

She had to be another assassin sent by the Ruler of the Skies. I quickly

stepped back and put my hand on the hilt of my sword.

“You’re—!”

“Ah! I-I’m sorry for dropping in! B-but you don’t have to be afraid of me!” The girl flapped her hands about and held them forward as if to protect herself. I took my hand off my sword for the time being, and she dropped her hands with visible relief. “I *really* am sorry for coming all of a sudden! But you’re the one who was riding the doggy outside of town, the one who beat the Twin Abyssal Dragons, aren’t you?”

Twin Abyssal Dragons...that must be Dis and Ptolomea.

“I am...” I replied, warily.

“I knew it! We dragonkin have sharp eyes. I sketched your portrait and went around looking for you! Your name is Kanata, right? I’m here because I knew the evil dragons were going to attack human settlements. I was going to let the humans know so we could try to find a way to stop their evil deeds! I didn’t make it in time though... But I’m so glad you and your friends did!”

She spoke without pause out of sheer excitement, words tumbling out. “I never knew there were humans who could overpower the Twin Abyssal Dragons... Those two are considered dangerous even by other dragons! We dragonkin are always super worried that the humans are going to get destroyed someday, but it looks like we don’t have to worry if there are people like you and your friends!”

It seemed like the dragonkin viewed things like the not-evil dragons did.

“Sooo...why are you here?” I asked.

“Ohmigosh, sorry! I forgot to introduce myself! My name’s Ramiel! I’m a dragonkin from the Garden of Dragons! One of our duties is to defeat evil dragons, so thank you for taking care of it! I wanted to thank you myself!”

“Uh, you’re welcome...” Dragon society sounded complicated.

My response was only half-hearted. Partially because I was tired, but mostly because I realized that if Ramiel knew a lot about the Twin Abyssal Dragons, she might know something about the Ruler of the Skies.

There were far fewer dragons within dragon society, so it wasn't as large as human society. Each one lived for a long time, too, so they had good records on the past.

While the Ruler of the Skies' might be a pariah, their name would be known among other dragons. And if I could learn where they were, I could go there myself and defeat them. It would be more preferable than another destructive fight over a crowded city.

"Would you mind answering a few questions for me...?" I asked.

"Sure! Anything you want! I'll tell you anything I know!"

"Do you know about the Ruler of the Skies?"

Ramiel's eyes grew wide when I asked that, and her expression stiffened. She didn't reply right away.

"Hmm, you *do* know something, don't you?"

"You've heard of the Ruler of the Skies...? Both dragons and dragonkin are ashamed of that evil dragon, and we don't bring the matter up in polite conversation if we can help it. This might sound rude, but you won't be able to do anything about the Ruler even if I do tell you."

I gulped.

– 2 –

THE NEXT DAY, I brought Ramiel with me to the tavern and asked her to tell me about the Ruler of the Skies in detail. The five of us sat at the table: me, Pomera, Philia, Ramiel, and Rosemonde, who was along for the ride whether she liked it or not at this point.

"I've heard rumors about dragonkin, but this is my first time seeing one in person. Still..." said Rosemonde, then she let out a frustrated sigh.

Ramiel's eyes were shining as she sank her teeth into a chicken thigh. It sent

sauce dripping down her chin. “Human food is surprisingly good! I always thought it would be bland!”

“...She can knock it off with the backhanded compliments. And here, I heard dragonkin were holy beings who stayed hidden in a mysterious land where they trained constantly and kept a quiet vigil over humans and monsters,” said Rosemonde, her eyes narrow as she glared at Ramiel.

“All dragonkin food is simple, with no frills,” said Ramiel. “We basically just have roast meats with a couple of seasonings. Or salads. But this food has so much work put into it. I can tell just by tasting it! It’s amazing! Leave it to humans to develop cuisine that speaks directly to their hedonistic desires! Dragonkin are always focused on peace or balance or how to get stronger... Everything else is secondary. It makes it hard to develop good food!”

“The worst part is I don’t think you even know you’re being a jerk,” said Rosemonde, her eyebrow twitching.

“S-sorry... But I think it’s incredible that a race can be so carefree and laid back. Dragonkin live longer than humans and we’re tougher. That must make our physical desires less powerful.”

Ramiel bowed her head in apology.

“She’s very...intense. Um, Kanata, are you sure she knows something about the Ruler of the Skies?” asked Pomera.

“Y-yeah. I heard the basics from her last night, but I thought it would be better if we all heard it from her directly.”

The excitement of the situation also seemed to be loosening Ramiel up a bit, not to mention how the presence of food was highlighting how different dragonkin truly were to humans.

Ramiel bit the chicken bone into shards and turned to look at Pomera. Her expression was serious as she mumbled around a mouth of food, “The dragons’ goal is to protect the natural order of the world. It’s just that their predisposition is so different that they tend to butt heads with humans a lot, which causes a lot of unnecessary fighting. In order to avoid that, they needed a go-between. So they bred with humans and created the dragonkin.”

“O-oh...so that’s where the dragonkin came from.” Pomera nodded.

“The Garden of the Dragons—where I’m from!—was built to protect the Dragon Vortex. That’s, like, a tear in the world where the energy from the world’s ley lines accumulates. It’s sort of like one of the world’s organs.”

The Dragon Vortex...the world’s organ? This was getting nuts.

Ramiel continued, seeming to talk without ever taking a breath. “There are pieces of crystalized magic around the Dragon Vortex. And plants grow everywhere, taking on powerful magic. All those things are precious and someone doing whatever they liked with them would cause great disaster throughout the world...making trees and plants wither, stuff like that. Normally that’d fall under the dragons’ jurisdiction to protect, but since it was already inside the dragon kingdom to start it’s a bit more complicated. That’s another reason why the dragons created the dragonkin—to watch over the Garden of the Dragons and all that stuff. That was nearly a thousand years ago.”

Pomera nodded, though it was obvious she wasn’t grasping how this connected to the Ruler of the Skies. Ramiel kept rambling on, undeterred.

“...The thing is, the Ruler of the Skies came to the Garden of the Dragons recently hoping to get at the Vortex. With the help of some dragonkin that worshipped them, they walked into the Garden in a disguise. This was before someone working for the Ruler framed me for a crime and I was run out of the Garden of the Dragons. I only found out about all of this then.”

By “all of this,” she was referring to how the Ruler of the Skies had sent the Twin Abyssal Dragons to the human civilization. Long ago, the Ruler of the Skies became known as an evil dragon for violating a taboo in order to obtain power. They wouldn’t care if they had a negative impact on the world—all they wanted was to draw magic without limit from the Dragon Vortex. This was something the dragonkin had to prevent.

But my status check last night revealed Ramiel wasn’t going to be doing anything on her own.

RAMIEL

Race: Dragonkin

Lv: 10

HP: 45/45

MP: 45/45

“You’ve been through a lot, Ramiel...” said Pomera, looking at her with sympathy.

Ramiel’s eyebrows drooped apologetically, and she bowed her head to us.

“Ramiel-san?” I said.

“I didn’t tell you last night, Kanata, but...I came to ask for help! Would you please go to the Garden of the Dragons and give this information to the leader of the dragonkin, the Dragon King? You all managed to defeat the Twin Abyssal Dragons, I’m sure you can fend off the followers of the Ruler of the Skies and get an audience with the Dragon King!”

“Please raise your head,” I said.

“I’m begging you! This isn’t the kind of problem I want to leave to humans, but...if we don’t do something, then it’ll be too late! I am a dragonkin, and yet I bow my head to humans!”

Unintended rudeness aside, she was really swallowing her pride on this one. I brought my hand to my mouth and thought.

No matter what I did, the Ruler of the Skies would come at me at some point. It might not actually be a bad idea to go to the Garden of the Dragons instead of wandering around human settlements and putting everyone at risk.

“I don’t have any reward to offer you, but...the Garden of the Dragons is a beautiful place!” continued Ramiel. “The entrance is kept secret. The location is only shared with humans who are owed a debt of gratitude by dragonkin.”

“It’s a beautiful place, huh...” Being a tourist seemed like poor compensation, even if I was headed there anyway.

“And also, if you get an audience with the Dragon King and he acknowledges

your power, then you will be granted a valuable item from the ones he guards! There are history books of the past 5,000 years written by dragons, stone tablets engraved with accounts of old, powerful magic said to have been used by the gods, and so much more!”

“...Old, powerful magic said to have been used by the *gods*?”

Could that be magic used by a higher being like Naiarotop? If it was, and I could learn it, then it could be the answer I was looking for.

“Kanata, it sounds like an opportunity, doesn’t it?” said Pomera. She was thinking the same thing as me.

I nodded slightly then turned to Ramiel. “Ramiel-san, could you tell us a little more about—”

Ramiel cut off my reply with a wave to the waiter. “Excuse me, waiter! Bring me two more helpings of this meat! Oh, three, actually! And then bring me two more of this food, and two of this food, too. Plenty of room left in my belly!”

S-seriously...?

“Um...you seem to be eating quite a lot. Will you be able to cover the cost? Our establishment is very careful about the ingredients we use, which makes our prices somewhat higher than other similar taverns nearby...” said the waiter hesitantly.

The chicken bone in Ramiel’s hand dropped to the table. “I-I have to pay? Like with *money*? But I’m a dragonkin, born to protect the world and humans...”

When Ramiel said that, Pomera’s shoulders slumped in dejection. The waiter looked shocked, his mouth hanging open.

“...Put it on my tab. Please bring her whatever she orders,” I said, a little frustrated.

Ramiel beamed. “Thank you! You’re the best human I know, Kanata! Okay, bring me everything I just asked for!”

SO NOW all we had to do was go to the Garden of the Dragons, then gain an audience with the Dragon King and inform him that the Ruler of the Skies was trying to take over the Dragon Vortex.

But that was just what Ramiel had asked me to do. Our real goal was to learn something about the Ruler of the Skies. And we were doing all of this so we could get the stone tablet in the dragonkin treasury that was said to record the magic once used by the gods in order to gain a way of standing against Naiarotop.

Seemed easy.

We rode Wolzottl in the direction Ramiel indicated, even further south of Ploroque, until we reached a valley. There, we saw a huge waterfall in the distance.

“The Garden of the Dragons is hidden behind that waterfall by an illusion. If you fly through the waterfall without fear, you’ll make it!”

“Right...” I said.

“I’m sure you can get an audience with the Dragon King and stop the Ruler of the Skies!” Ramiel clenched her fists. “Okay, good luck!”

“You’re not coming with us?” I asked, and her shoulders tensed.

“I was framed and chased out when I learned about the evil schemes of the Ruler of the Skies. If they see me return, we’ll all be killed by his followers before we can meet with the Dragon King...” Ramiel shuddered.

I’d forgotten about that. But this meant we’d have to go into the Garden of the Dragons without any contacts, and somehow manage to get a meeting with the infamously elusive Dragon King while we were at it.

“...Looks like this is going to be pretty tough...” I said.

“It’s okay, Kanata! Dragons and dragonkin respect strong people, regardless of their race! With how strong you are, you’ll all easily be able to get a meeting with the Dragon King!”

“I hope so,” I grumbled.

“A strong person will be recognized as an honorary dragonkin, even if they’re a human! If you go in there and do well on the trials, then I’m sure they’ll recognize you! And depending on how you do, you’ll be able to meet with the Dragon King as much as you want!”

I couldn’t help narrowing my eyes at something Ramiel said. “Honorary dragonkin...?”

“I still can’t tell if you’re making fun of us or not,” said Rosemonde, obviously irritated.

“Why are you so upset?! It’s a huge honor for a human to become an honorary dragonkin!” Ramiel raised her arms and pouted.

“Pretty much *everything* about this upsets me, but since you’re asking, it’s that arrogant attitude that annoys me the most!” Rosemonde bent over to Ramiel, pinched her cheeks, and tugged.

“Ow! Shtop it! I might fohgive da oder two foh being wude, but you’re not eben dat stwong!”



“There it is! Now it all comes out!” Rosemonde pulled back an arm to punch Ramiel, but Pomera rushed over and grabbed her arm from behind.

“R-Rosemonde, please stop! She’s just a child! A child!”

I sighed, then turned back to Ramiel. “It sounds like there’s a place inside where we can prove our strength. And if we do well, we can meet the Dragon King, right?”

“Strength is everything to dragonkin. As long as they’re strong, even humans will be accepted. On the other hand, if they’re weak...even dragonkin won’t be accepted as dragonkin. Dragonkin *say* their life’s purpose is the world’s natural order, but it really just comes down to whether or not you’re strong...and if I were just a little stronger, I’m sure I could have gotten the Dragon King to listen to me before things got this complicated...”

Tears filled Ramiel’s eyes.

“Ramiel-san...”

Ramiel’s level was not high. She was about the same level Pomera had been, back when she was forced to do all her party’s chores as the resident weakling. I could only imagine how much worse the dragonkin’s culture must have made it.

“If I’d been stronger, I wouldn’t have had to ask *humans* for help...” said Ramiel as she wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“...You never let up, do you?” I said, glancing behind me.

Rosemonde was there, gritting her teeth behind her mask and glaring at Ramiel, while Pomera tried desperately to pacify her.

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot,” said Ramiel. “If anyone asks how you learned of the Garden of the Dragons, you can tell them you saved a dragon. You can’t mention me, because I’m considered a criminal. And if anyone finds out you’ve met me, you’ll draw the attention of the followers of the Ruler of the Skies. The only person you can tell everything to is the Dragon King.”

“Okay. We’ll take care of things in the Garden of the Dragons,” I said.

“Thank you! I’ll go back to that human city we were in before.”

“Hm...I’m going to have Wol take you back, but something worries me about leaving you alone in the city.”

There was a limit to what a spirit could do when it was away from its summoner. He could probably only stay here a couple of hours. That should be enough to get Ramiel back to the city, but it wouldn’t help if the Ruler of the Skies’ followers targeted her later.

“We’ll go back to *my* city,” said Rosemonde as she clamped a hand on Ramiel’s shoulder. “I’ve only got one life, kid...and I’m not spending it caught up in whatever mess you’re making. We sent a letter to Manaloch but it’s best I tell that old fox Garnet what happened here so he can stop worrying.

“As for you...” she continued, to Ramiel now. “Sorry, but you’re coming with me. How do I always wind up babysitting?”

Ramiel’s jaw dropped as she looked up at Rosemonde. “Y-you’d do that for me?”

“Rosemonde might sound mean, but she actually likes taking care of others. Don’t worry, Ramiel,” whispered Pomera.

Rosemonde harrumphed and glared at Pomera, then clicked her tongue in annoyance and turned back to Ramiel. “You think I’m not strong enough?”

“N-no, I wouldn’t say that... I’m a little surprised, that’s all. Thank you.”

“Oh no. Don’t get all sweet on me now. It’s weird.

Throws me off balance,” said Rosemonde gruffly and looked away from Ramiel, perhaps trying to hide her embarrassment.

– 4 –

“**T**HERE REALLY IS A CAVE behind the waterfall... It’s not like I doubted what Ramiel-san said, but it just seems so cliché,” I said.

Pomera, Philia, and I had passed through the waterfall and into the cave

behind. If you looked at the cliff from outside, there were absolutely no signs that there was a path behind it, but if you reached in, your arm passed through the wall.

If what Ramiel said was true, the Garden of the Dragons where the dragonkin lived should be nearby.

“But...is this Garden of the Dragons in a cave? Where there’s no sun?” asked Pomera.

We’d flown here on Wolzottl but hadn’t seen anything like a bustling settlement outside.

“Philia’s super excited ’cause Ramiel said it was a pretty place!” said Philia as she rushed ahead in excitement.

“Philia-chan! It could be dangerous... Actually, you’ll probably be fine.” At this point, I had a hard time imagining any place would be dangerous for Philia if she went

a little way ahead on her own. She was talented enough to fight in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm, after all.

“Eek! Sorry!” Philia crashed into someone in the darkness of the cave and fell backward onto her rear.

“Hey, now...that hurt. What’s a kid doing here? Is our sacred Garden of the Dragons some sort of human tourist destination now? Hm? This is the second group of your kind.”

Out from the darkness stepped a bare-chested giant of a man, over six and a half feet tall. He had yellow spiked-up hair and a beard. Just like Ramiel, he had horns, wings, and a tail.

“Tsk, figures you wouldn’t be alone...but you’re all children? Ridiculous. You might’ve proven yourself to one of my kind, but you look puny to me. I can’t believe my fellow dragonkin are so easily impressed! Makes me think they don’t take our noble mission seriously.” The large man glared at us.

“...A dragon told me that dragonkin took their debts seriously and would be happy to invite someone who saved them to the Garden of the Dragons,” I said.

“Impudent. Debt? Don’t make me laugh. Any lowlife who forgets our mission and invites humans here is no longer kin of mine.”

What Ramiel told us was already turning out to be untrue. A warm welcome for humans was not on the cards.

“I am Thunder Fang Raigan! One of the Twelve Gold Dragons, a dragonkin among dragonkin! Due to humans like you wandering aimlessly into the Garden of the Dragons, I have proclaimed myself the gatekeeper of the Garden!”

“...Proclaimed yourself? So, it has nothing to do with the Garden as a whole or the Dragon King?” In other words, he didn’t like how things were going, so he took it upon himself to stand in the entrance and chase off humans—so he was nothing more than an annoying racist.

“Kanata... Apparently, a lot of dragonkin have very...distinctive personalities,” said Pomera through gritted teeth. She was probably thinking about Ramiel too.

“I’m going to kindly ask you humans to leave before you can sully our sacred lands! The Garden of the Dragons is not a place for weaklings like you! Don’t underestimate the Garden of the Dragons!” said Raigan.

He reached out to grab Philia. Huge white arms appeared immediately from both walls of the cave to protect her and interlaced their fingers, forming a double layered wall to repel the large man.

“...Hmph? Wh-what in the...?!” Raigan exclaimed in surprise. “This is a strange craft. And it blocked an attack from *me*, who excels in offense even compared to the other members of the Twelve Gold Dragons...”

“Mister, are you Philia’s *enemy*?” asked Philia, her eyes cold as she stood and looked up at Raigan.

Sweat ran down his face. His expression tensed, forming a furrow between his eyebrows. Muscles bulging, he said, “Maybe you’re not as weak as you look... but don’t take me lightly! Let me show you why I’m called Thunder Fang Raigan! Witness the power of the lightning dragon! Haaah!”

Electricity arched across his body.

“This is my full power!”

A large white fist smashed into Raigan, knocking him off his feet.

“Gaaah!” His body crashed into the ground, then rolled further into the cave.

As I should have guessed, it wasn’t Philia’s safety I should be worried about. It was her opponent’s.

“Philia-chan...he’s still alive, right?” I asked.

“Philia tried really hard to hit him just a little...but he’s weaker than Philia thought, so Philia doesn’t know...” she murmured while looking sheepish.

It would make a pretty bad impression if we killed the first dragonkin we met. I gulped and ran forward. “A-are you all right?”

Raigan was embedded neatly in the cave wall. His expression was lifeless, but his eyes were blinking.

“Impossible... How could I, Raigan, lose to two *humans* in such a short time...?”

Good...he’s alive. I let out a sigh of relief.

“No... I haven’t lost yet... Yes, I was just trying to threaten her when she caught me off guard with a surprise attack. This isn’t defeat...”

“Philia-chan, can you hit him one more time?” I said, and Philia rolled up her sleeves and held up her fists.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! I was j-just testing you! Just to see if you could survive here in the Garden of the Dragons! Y-you’ve managed to eke through with a pass, good job!”

I turned back to look at Pomera. She looked unconvinced... *Are all dragonkin like this?*

My confidence in our ability to gain the dragonkins’ trust and get an audience with the Dragon King was dropping rapidly.

“Okay, please show us the way,” I said, pressing a hand against my head to ward off a headache.

“Wait. Before that, there’s something you have to do,” said Raigan.

“Something I have to do...?” I asked, and Raigan held his hand out toward us.

His hand...? Was he saying that we should shake hands to settle things now that this vaguely fight-like encounter had ended? Both dragons and dragonkin were races who valued pure strength and strove to grow stronger. They considered battle to be sacred, and might have all sorts of customs surrounding it.

“So, then—” I started to shake his hand.

“What are you doing that for?! Hurry up and pull me out of this cave!” shouted Raigan.

“Oh, sure...”

He acted so arrogant that I hadn’t realized he was asking for help. As I pulled Raigan out of the rock, I felt, with every fiber of my being, that things would not go well for us in the Garden of the Dragons.

— 5 —

RAIGAN LED us through the cave.

“...Guess I have to admit that the little girl can actually hold her own, seeing as she did get a hit in on me. Even if it was a surprise attack. And you two are chaperoning this weird, powerful kid?” he asked as he jabbed his thumb in Philia’s direction.

Could you really call it a surprise attack, though? He tried to grab her first and she clocked him. That seemed like a pretty fair fight to me. If that was a surprise attack, then all attacks in the world were surprise attacks.

“And though it was a surprise attack, she did manage to hit me, one of the Twelve Gold Dragons,” he continued. “I accept *her* power. But there’s no place for the weak in the Garden of the Dragons, so you two should stick close to her.”

“About these Twelve Gold Dragons...” I asked.

“It’s a collective name for the twelve warriors who managed to get the title of

Gold Dragon from the Dragon Trials in the Garden of the Dragons! I don't know what it's like in your pathetic human world, but strength is everything here in the Garden! We Twelve Gold Dragons have a lot of sway in the governing of dragonkin. We normally don't even talk to humans."

Raigan didn't stop talking, though. He made himself sound like a big deal, but he'd been blown away by Philia minutes before. His jabbering wasn't raising his stock in my mind, it was lowering the stock of the Twelve Gold Dragons and the Garden of the Dragons itself.

I used Status Check to see Raigan's information and learned that his full name was Raigan Lionel Dragohart—which was a mouthful—and that he was level 212.

In human civilization that was high enough level to be an S-rank adventurer. Having twelve individuals of similar power in such a small area seemed like a collection of abnormally powerful creatures from a human's perspective.

But what were these Dragon Trials? Ramiel had definitely said something along those lines:

"A strong person will be recognized as an honorary dragonkin, even if they're a human! If you go in there and do well on the trials, then I'm sure they'll recognize you!!"

...Honorary dragonkin, huh?

"What's wrong, Kanata?" asked Pomera.

"Nothing, nothing." I shook my head and brought a hand to my chin. "Uh... Raigan-san, humans can take these Dragon Trials too, right?"

"Think you're worthy, do you? Give up. The Trials aren't made for weaklings."

"And, um...you get a title based on how well you do in the Trials? So, if Philia-chan did well, then you'd be the Thirteen Gold Dragons, with her, right?"

Raigan's mouth clamped shut and his expression soured. His eyes shifted from me to Philia and he bit his lower lip.

"I...I don't like that," he said in a strangled voice.

"Raigan-san?"

“Th-the Trials aren’t so easy that a human can just waltz in and get a Gold Dragon title! Don’t insult us! We Twelve Dragons... We’re not to be taken lightly!” He gestured desperately, as if to cover up for his complaining earlier.

“Oooh! Philia’s going to be one of the Thirteen Gold Dragons!” declared Philia with shining eyes. Something about the idea must have struck a chord with her; she locked onto it with all her focus. “With Kanata and Pomera, it’ll be *Fifteen* Gold Dragons!”

“It’s not that easy to become a Gold Dragon!” shouted Raigan, his teeth bared.

“B-by the way, you said something that made it sound like you fought another human recently?” I asked.

It was something he’d said after he lost to Philia. *“Impossible... How could I, Raigan, lose to two humans in such a short time...?”*

I could guess from that that there had been another human who had visited the Garden of the Dragons recently.

“...Yeah. Some other human who an idiot dragonkin picked up. Tsk. Unlike most humans, he’s some overpowered guy. Someone you know?” said Raigan.

“I can’t think of anyone like that.”

“*Sixteen* Gold Dragons...” murmured Pomera. Raigan shot her a glare. “Sorry! I, uh, I didn’t say anything!” She rapidly waved her hands and tried to brush the comment aside.

After that, Raigan sulked in silence as he walked on ahead.

“Pomera-san...you shouldn’t have said that,” I said. “Philia-chan’s a child so she can get away with it, but you going that far definitely gives the impression that you’re looking down on them.”

“I’m sorry... But, if things go according to plan, that’s how things are going to turn out... We’re pretty strong, and this other visitor sounds like he is too.”

“Aaand we’re here,” said Raigan as he glared at us with resentment-filled eyes.

“O-okay!” I said. Ahead I could see a light in the tunnel. We picked up speed

and stepped out to find...a huge meadow stretching out ahead of us.

Flowers bloomed everywhere. Beautiful pink petals fluttered from the branches of trees, resembling cherry blossoms but not quite the same. There was a large waterfall that fed into a river.

With a quick glance around, I saw deer with large antlers and birds with rainbow-hued feathers. I'd never seen or heard of animals like these in this world. And, of course, I saw dragonkin here and there, along with statues of dragons dotting the landscape. It was breathtaking.

The buildings made me think of the palaces from the Heian period. They were built in an open style that harmonized with the nature in the Garden of the Dragons, displaying elegance and a sense of taste.

Ramiel had said it was a beautiful place, and she was right.

"Th-this place shouldn't be able to exist though..." said Pomera, her wide eyes shining as her head moved side to side to take in everything around her.

Philia was shouting "Wow! Wow!" as she ran around happily.

"It's because of the barrier put in place using the Dragon Vortex. The magic from the Vortex also allows nature to fill this area. This isn't the kind of place lowly humans should see—they live only for their greed and see nature as a resource. Make sure you burn these images into your mind," said Raigan proudly, his arms crossed as he spoke.

He'd seemed disheartened earlier, but our reactions restored his pride.

— 6 —

WE WERE INVITED to Raigan's mansion in the Garden of the Dragons. This surprised me, since he'd been acting like we were a nuisance.

"Normally, the dragonkin who invited you to the Garden would have the responsibility of keeping an eye on you. We don't know what a lowly human would do to our beautiful Garden if we left them to their own devices. But...

since you were invited here by a dragon, we owe you a little respect,” explained Raigan as if it were tedious.

Ramiel had said she didn’t want us to mention her name, so we told Raigan we learned the location of the Garden from a dragon we helped.

“Thank you very much...” I said, forcing a smile.

As Raigan watched me, a teasing smile tugged the corners of his mouth up. “I can’t treat you with disrespect since you were invited here, but we have our own customs in this land. When in the Garden, you have to follow our rules. Even if you are accompanying a child.”

“Which means...?” I had a bad feeling. Raigan was going to try something on us, using “custom” as an excuse.

“This place is remote, distant from human civilization. You’ve traveled long and hard to be here. I imagine you’re hungry, aren’t you?” said Raigan, then he turned and shouted, “Bring me food, then...dragon wine!”

Two female dragonkin that looked to be servants appeared from the back of the mansion carrying dishes and food. Just as Ramiel had said, the meal looked fairly plain. Roasted chicken and fish were served along with a salad of simple mixed vegetables. Nothing was cut into manageable pieces. Each chunk was large and hearty.

I’d heard from Ramiel that the cuisine here wasn’t that developed, but it seemed fine. And the portions were certainly generous.

...This was my first time hearing about dragon wine, though.

“First, let’s have a drink,” said Raigan as he set a jug on the table. A dragon was carved into its side. “Dragon wine... If a low-level person takes a drink of this, they’ll feel like they’re being burned from the inside. I’m not sure I can accept you even as visitors if you can’t stomach a few sips. Strength is valued here in the Garden of the Dragons, so I hope you understand that this is just one of our *customs*.”

His tone was civilized. His smile certainly was not.

So... He saw us as nothing but Philia’s attendants and assumed our levels

weren't on par with hers.

"Even I can't drink several glasses of this easily... But I ask you to have just one sip, though I do understand it's difficult with your puny human bodies," said Raigan and one of the servants brought what looked like a large bucket. "If you have a drink and it's too painful to bear, you can use the water to soothe your mouth. It's not dignified, but I think you'll need the whole bucket."

Aha. If your level was too low, the extreme pain of the dragon wine forced you to dunk your own head in the bucket of water. How embarrassing.

"...Since Philia-chan is a child, would you let her sit this one out?" I asked.

"She could...but that means she'll be seen as even less than an infant dragonkin here in the Garden, which means we can't give her the right to take the Tria—"

Just then, a large mouth appeared on the table, swallowing both a portion of the food and the entire jug of dragon wine. It closed, then disappeared back into the table. I looked at Philia to see her chewing.

"Philia wants...something *sweet*," she complained, fragments of the jug falling from her mouth.

"Even I can't drink several glasses of that easily..." mumbled Raigan. He turned to the back of the house and shouted, "Bring me a fresh jug of dragon wine! Hurry!"

Another jug of dragon wine was quickly brought out. Raigan poured some into a small glass and held it out toward me.

It appeared to be quite hot; there was steam coming off it. I sniffed it, then took a drink. It was hot and oddly spicy, which made my tongue feel tingly and numb. It must have had a high alcohol content. I guessed it had been made by mulling spices in high proof spirits.

"I'm not really a drinker..." I said after draining the cup.

Raigan bit his lower lip. "Well... you're putting on a good show of enduring it. All right, Pomera or whatever your name was, you're up next."

"M-me too...?" she stammered uneasily.

I felt the blood drain from my face. I'd completely forgotten: Pomera was a terrible drunk.

"U-uhm, Raigan-san, I'll take her drink. I understand it's your custom, but it's just... She has a special condition." I said.

Raigan's face crinkled and grinned. He thought he'd stumbled upon our weakness. "I can't allow that. She's not young enough to use her age as an excuse. She *must* give it a try. Refusing would be disrespectful. We can't dishonor a custom."

"I-it's okay, Kanata... I'll try! We raised my level, so I don't think it'll be a problem!" said Pomera.

"That's not what I'm worried about..." I said.

"The lady said she'll give it a go. It'd be rude to stop her, wouldn't it? Okay, Pomera. Take this," said Raigan as he filled a glass to the brim with dragon wine and pushed it toward her.

She gulped, then brought the glass to her lips.

"Pomera-san! Just a sip will be fine...you shouldn't knock back the whole glass!" I said.

An hour later, a drunk Pomera had forced so many draughts of dragon wine on Raigan that he'd plunged his head into the bucket and was letting up a stream of bubbles.

She, on the other hand, was red-faced and drinking straight from the jug. "Kanataaaa! This wine is so goood! Have some!"

"...I'm fine, thanks." My shoulders slumped in disappointment. I felt as tense as if I were at a funeral.

"How 'bout I put some in my mouth, and then we kiss, and—"

"No."

"Don't be embaaaaarrasssed. You're so cute."

Pomera's bad side had emerged in full force.

Was I in hell?

Philia was leaning happily against Pomera, who tousled her hair.

“I’m soorry, um, Mishter Raigan, but I asked for more wine! Raigan!” said Pomera as she waved a hand toward the servants.

Raigan was so drunk that he’d passed out.

I leaned my head on my hand and sighed.



THE NEXT DAY, Raigan took us on a walk around the Garden of the Dragons.

“...Are you okay, Raigan-san?” I asked.

“I’m not a lightweight. You lot don’t need to be worried about me!” he said, baring his fangs and glaring at me. The next moment, he pressed his hands to his head. His gait grew unsteady. Pomera had plied him with dragon wine until he was wasted, and he was facing the consequences now.

“Um... I-is this my fault? Did I say or do anything out of line?” Pomera asked me quietly, her face pale.

I looked away quietly.

“K-Kanata?! Stop that! Any reaction would make me less uneasy than that one!”

“Pomera was way more fun than normal. Philia thought it was funny!” said Philia.

Pomera’s uneasy grimace only grew deeper.

Her expression turned to one of grim resolve and she quickened her pace until she was beside Raigan. “Um... Raigan, I would like to apologize for yesterday! I’m...not very good with alcohol, and I...”

“Did you do something? I don’t remember much after Kanata took a drink,” he said, looking confused.

Pomera blinked. Dumbfounded, she mumbled, “Um, I...uh...”

I grabbed Pomera’s shoulder and gently pulled her back. “...Thankfully, it looks like he forgot too. Let’s just act like nothing happened. If both of you have forgotten, then it’s definitely for the best.”

Dragonkin were prideful. Raigan probably didn’t want to know that he’d spent most of the night dunking his head in the bucket after forcing Pomera to drink the dragon wine. Best to forget it ever happened.

“What the hell are you two talking about?” asked Raigan.

“N-nothing! Anyway, we’re heading to the grounds for the Dragon Trials, right? Could you tell me more about that?”

“We’re actually going to the Dragon Head Crag. It’s one of the three trials. Before I explain the Dragon Head Crag, though, I should probably explain more about the Dragon Trials.”

Raigan sounded irritated. He seemed resistant to our attempting the Trials. But since we claimed to have been invited to the Garden of the Dragons after helping a dragon, and he’d determined we weren’t too weak, he was obligated to treat us as guests.

“Your final score for the Dragon Trials is the sum total of your score from each of the three trials. That score is directly related to your value here in the Garden. You can use the trial grounds for simple training, or if you like, retake the Dragon Trials after a year of training. You’ll also get a title based on your score.”

He then went on to explain the titles for the various scores. This was essentially what it came down to:

Wyrmiling: 100 to 299 points

Adult Dragon: 300 to 599 points

Gold Dragon: 600 to 999 points

Holy Dragon: 1,000 to 2,199 points

Royal Dragon: 2,200 points or higher

“Wyrmplings are considered an Infant Dragon regardless of their age, and they’re put under several restrictions. They’re not allowed out of the Garden for their own safety...unless they’re outsiders, in which case they don’t get a title and don’t deserve equal treatment among dragonkin in the Garden,” explained Raigan.

Did Ramiel manage to even get Wyrmling status...?

No, I had a hard time believing she did. Which would mean she broke the rules. But if the followers of the Ruler of the Skies were trying to kill her, then the rules would be the last thing to worry about. Still, I wondered what that would mean if she ever returned.

“There are two ranks above Gold Dragon. I was sure Gold Dragon was the highest,” said Pomera with a polite smile. With everything Raigan had been saying about the Twelve Gold Dragons, I’d assumed that was the highest rank too.

Raigan’s eyes tensed. “And what’s strange about there being more?”

“N-nothing...” Pomera shook her head vigorously.

“Raigan-san, we really do want to have an audience with the Dragon King. I heard that power reigns supreme in the Garden of the Dragons and that if we did well on the Dragon Trials, we could get an audience with the Dragon King immediately. Can I ask how many points would be needed for that?”

“*Humans* getting an audience with the Dragon King?” Raigan snorted. “Don’t make me laugh! Even we can only meet the Dragon King when we’re summoned.”

Ugh. That was frustrating.

I thought that if it came down to it, we could gamble on Raigan not being a follower of the Ruler of the Skies and ask him to deliver the message to the Dragon King on our behalf, but nope, apparently, not even he could see the Dragon King when he wanted. He didn’t seem all that bad a guy at heart, even if he was a little too proud for his own good.

“So only a Royal Dragon has the opportunity to see the Dragon King...?” I asked.

“Don’t be an idiot. The 2,200 points for the Royal Dragon rank *is* the Dragon King’s score. Outside of the current King himself, only the greatest dragons and some powerful spirits would be able to achieve that. You won’t even get close.” Raigan sounded exasperated.

So that's why the Royal Dragon rank was so special...

The Dragon King must be pretty confident in his own ability if he was willing to have it quantified and displayed to the public. If a dragonkin came along who could beat his score, it would do a serious blow to his image.

"Those who attain the Holy Dragon rank are given the right to see the Dragon King when they wish, but only three people in the Garden of the Dragons have achieved that. I don't think you have a shot," continued Raigan.

Fine. We would aim to be Holy Dragons, then.

— 8 —

“WE'RE HERE. This is where the first trial is held, Dragon Head Crag.”

Raigan had led us to a rocky area with sparse vegetation. Among the rocks lying around were many shaped like dragon heads. I guessed that was how the place got its name.

There were numbers carved into their foreheads, like “20” or “80.”

“Are those numbers directly related to your score?” I asked.

“They are. The trial here at the Dragon Head Crag is to see how heavy a dragon head stone you can lift. In order

to reach the lowest rank of Wyrmling you need to get a total of a hundred points. If you can't even lift a 30-point stone here, then get ready to fail the Trials,” said Raigan with a mocking smile.

In order to get the Holy Dragon rank and meet with the Dragon King, we'd need to get more than 1,000 points. I wanted to get at least 300 points here... 400 if possible.

Looking around, I saw other dragonkin here and there, presumably to lift stones for training. It also seemed like humans really were rare around here, considering the stares we were getting. Some of them looked friendly while

others showed clear disgust. I gave them a slight bow of my head.

“Ah, if it isn’t one of the Holy Dragons, Sir Odio!” said Raigan loudly.

I looked up to find a thin, elderly man framed between two massive dragon head stones. He was in a sitting position, though only balancing on the ball of one foot. His eyes were closed and balanced on the tips of three of his fingers was a dragon head stone with “300” marked on it. I assumed he was in the middle of training.

“A-amazing... As expected from Sir Odio! He’s between two 300-point dragon head stones and maintaining balance with only three fingers!” cried Raigan.

“U-um... Is there really any point to the dragon head stone he’s sitting on?” asked Pomera, throwing cold water on Raigan’s excitement and earning another glare. She dutifully bobbed her head in apology.

“Huh, so there’s other humans here too?” came a voice from behind. I turned to look.

The speaker was a black-haired human with blond highlights. He had pierced ears with hoop earrings and carried a massive sword on his back. I put him at about the same age as me. Behind him was a girl dragonkin with black wings who was practically clinging to him.

Raigan’s expression showed obvious disgust. Which reminded me that he’d mentioned another human visiting this place.

But with those facial features...

“Are you a traveler...?” I asked.

“And the surprises keep coming,” he replied with an aggressive grin that showed his canines. Next his eyes narrowed in a scrutinizing look. Just as I expected him to check my level, he shook his head. “Nah, I’m not gonna take a peek, it’s rude. Bad habit of mine, hah! Besides, there’s no point in looking. I bet an NPC type like you doesn’t even know my name. Sorry, but I’ve got no interest in weaklings, even if we’re from the same place.”

Apparently, he was famous. That was only natural, if he’d been in Locklore for a long time.

Even Kotone, who wasn't a fan of fighting, would act if Manaloch was in danger. She was an S-rank adventurer, after all, with a useful gift skill.

"For the future, remember this: I am *the* Mitsuru Ijuuin, an S-rank adventurer and the best traveler in Locklore."

Mitsuru Ijuuin... That was clearly a Japanese name.

"My name's Kanata Kan—"

"Don't care." He cut me off, then passed by me. "Even between travelers, someone's wits, level, and gift skill make all the difference... As a friendly gesture toward my countryman, lemme show you the difference I'm talking about." Mitsuru sucked in a deep breath and shouted, "Hey, lizards! Which of these is the heaviest?"

His words caused an uproar among the dragonkin there. Raigan scowled at Mitsuru with a vein throbbing in his temple as he fought to control his temper.

"M-Mitsuru... You can't, um, you shouldn't do that." The black-winged girl rushed to Mitsuru's side and tried to quieten him. "I t-told you before, didn't I? The people in the Garden of the Dragons are on a completely different level from human civilizations. You shouldn't say things that could make you enemies..."

"You say amusing things, boy!" said Raigan as he stepped forward.

"Aren't you the Raigan of the Twelve Gold Dragons or whatever who picked a fight with me and lost? Look at you stepping up, acting all high and mighty. Do all dragonkin possess short tempers and no pride? If I were you, I'd be so embarrassed I never showed my face again," said Mitsuru.

Raigan's face turned bright red. "I-I wasn't feeling well before! Besides, that's got nothing to do with this! If you're so raring to go, then let's see you pick up that one!"

He pointed at a particularly large dragon head stone. It had "500" engraved on it.

"Hmm...only 500? I heard the Dragon King got 2,200 points so I was hoping to find one that was at least 800..."

Mitsuru scratched his head, sounding bored.

He went over the 500-point dragon head stone and put his hands on it. “All right, I’ll show you what I’ve got. Double...Attack Mode!”

This must be his gift skill, I thought as red vapor began to rise from Mitsuru’s body.

“Take a good look, NPCs. This is the most powerful gift skill there is. Double temporarily decreases my other stats, and in exchange it doubles my target stat.”

Mitsuru lifted the dragon head stone in one smooth motion. The dragonkin stared at him with open mouths.

“I-impossible...” Raigan frowned, his face white as a sheet. It was kind of pathetic to behold.

“This is the biggest one in the first trial? I could go bigger!” said Mitsuru with a fearless grin.

“Oh...? Surprising to see a human lift that,” said Odio, the dragonkin sandwiched between two stones. His eyelids snapped open as he spoke. He looked impressed.

– 9 –

“**D**DOUBLE...?” I murmured.

It did seem like an incredible gift skill. If he did double his attack, then he’d be able to do huge damage, even to an enemy that was a far higher level than him.

I didn’t know how much of a lag there was in changing his skills, but used well, it could effectively double his level. It might even make the concept of “level” meaningless for him. It was a uniquely powerful gift skill, even compared to Kotone’s Aries’s Hand.

“Hate to say it, but looks like this Garden of the Dragons isn’t all it’s cracked

up to be, Yorna,” he said and dropped the stone to the ground.

Yorna was probably the one who invited him here—the black-winged dragonkin at his side. A lot of dragonkin might look on humans getting involved with the Trials

as a strange event, but several present let out gasps of admiration at Mitsuru’s herculean strength. Raigan, by contrast, continued to stare at him with disgust.

“That little... It can’t be, does that mean he’s at the level of a Holy Dragon? I never thought a beast like that existed among humans,” he said.

Just then, Odio set his 300-point dragon stone down and leapt over to Mitsuru. “Hrm, Mitsuru... Would you consider becoming my pupil? I have heard that the human world has seen particularly great monster-related disasters of late, and that schemes from evil-doers come one after another. Yet, it is the way of us dragonkin not to interfere recklessly in the affairs of the human world. However... That wouldn’t prevent me from training someone who came to the Garden of the Dragons.”

“S-Sir Odio would take on a student?! I asked so many times myself, but he never agreed!” cried Raigan.

“Pass,” said Mitsuru. “Is there any guarantee you’re stronger than me anyway, Grandpa Lizard? Most importantly, I’ve got no interest in the greater good of the world or whatever.” He brought his face close to Odio’s and stuck out his tongue.

“How rude of you to act like that to Sir Odio!” someone shouted.

Another cried, “Do you know how much of an honor it is to be able to study under a Holy Dragon?!”

The dragonkin, previously on the verge of adjusting their opinions of Mitsuru, shook their fists at him, enraged by his attitude.

“That’s right! Don’t get full of yourself, boy!” Raigan joined in. He blended into the crowd of dragonkin with surprising ease.

But Odio didn’t seem bothered at all. “Ha ha, there’s much to be gained from

cultivating an energetic youngster,” said Odio. “There are many skills here in the Garden of the Dragons that don’t exist in the human world. Besides, I spent hundreds of years traveling the world. I’m certain my skill and experience far outclass your own.”

He stroked his long beard and gave a good-natured smile. That took the venom out of Mitsuru, too; he pulled his tongue back into his mouth and his expression shifted.

“Whatever. I’m not interested in a pain in the ass like that,” he said. “Besides, it’s way better to raise your level than to work on cheap tricks. I’m not about to let someone weaker than me be my teacher.”

“I would say that my actual level of power is much greater than yours,” said Odio. His eyes grew narrow and his mouth curved into a smirk as he provoked Mitsuru.

“What’d you say? Are you making fun of me?”

“I only speak the truth. The remaining two trials are not quite so simple. This unique ability of yours...lacks finesse. You won’t be able to use it to its full potential in the other trials, which require a more authentic approach. I imagine your final score will be far below mine.”

“You’re just babbling, Gramps... You better remember those words, cause I’ll make you eat ’em later.”

“Oh? How confident you are in yourself. Well then, when you fail to defeat my score, I’ll expect you to man up and become my pupil,” said Odio, looking wicked as he did.

“Stubborn old geezer. Fine, if I don’t win, I’ll do whatever you say. But when I do, you’d better get on your hands and knees and beg for my forgiveness. C’mon, Yorna, let’s go!” shouted Mitsuru in annoyance, then he turned away from Odio and walked off. Yorna hurried after him in a panic.

“He’s still so young,” murmured Odio in satisfaction as he watched Mitsuru go.

He’d dropped the teasing tone he used to goad Mitsuru into becoming his pupil. He was quite the cunning old man.

While my status check gave me a good idea of how powerful Raigan was as a Gold Dragon, I couldn't be so sure of a Holy Dragon like Odio. It was the same for Mitsuru's Double skill. It turned out there were powerful people hidden throughout this world who I had no idea about.

"We should probably start the Trials soon, too. Maybe I'll start off with a 300 pointer..." I said to Pomera. As I did, there came another uproar from the trial grounds. Someone had lifted up the 500-point dragon head stone that Mitsuru dropped.

"It's pretty light," said Philia. I'd only taken my eyes off her for a second, which was all it took for her to indulge her curiosity in how heavy these stones were.

"Wh-what is with this child?!"

"She's a monster!"

"I bet she could lift even more!"

Philia clearly relished the cries from the dragonkin, because she swapped to using only one hand to hold the stone and put the other on her hip, beaming with pride the whole time. She was rewarded by another wave of excited cries.

Raigan's mouth gaped wide out of sheer shock as he stared in amazement at Philia holding the dragon head stone. I thought the stones would be heavier, myself. It looked like Philia and I would attain the Holy Dragon rank easily.

Philia set the stone on the ground and there was a round of applause. She looked smug as she put her hands on her hips and puffed her chest out.

Odio ran over to her, his eyes bloodshot, and skidded across the ground as he threw himself to his hands and knees in front of her.

"Huh...? What are you doing, Mister?" asked Philia.

"Your name! Please, I wish to know your name!" he cried.

"Ph-Philia..."

"My Lady Philia! Would you please take pity on this frail old man and allow me to become your student?"

Her shocked gape transformed into a grin that spread over her face. She held her hand out to Odio. “Okay! You can be Philia’s student!”

“Master Philia! I am filled with gratitude!”

Pomera grimaced and looked at me. “Kanata, what should we do about him?”

“I guess I’ll apologize and get him to turn down Philia’s mentorship.”

I suddenly caught a glimpse of Mitsuru a little ways off, watching the scene in shock. He frowned and rubbed his eyes several times, as though double-checking what he saw.

– 10 –

“**I**-I PICKED IT UP too! I did it!”

Pomera also succeeded in lifting the 500-point dragon head stone. Her level was only 1,032, but apparently that was plenty.

It seemed safe to assume that Mitsuru’s level was no higher than 1,000. I’d been wary of his dangerous gift skill, but once again, I didn’t need to worry that much.

“Pomera-san, do you think you can hold it up with one hand like Philia-chan did?” I asked.

“O-one hand?! It s-seems a bit dangerous, but... Oh, look! I can just about do it! It’d be hard to hold it up for a long time though.”

She went back to holding it with both hands then gently set it on the ground.

That gave me a pretty good idea of the standards for the dragon head stones. It seemed like the numbers on the stones were pretty close to the limit of your level. It was just a vague ballpark though, since people’s stats did lean one way or the other depending on the individual. There was also a good chance this rule didn’t apply to Mitsuru, since he used his Double skill.

“I-I’m dreaming. Three humans lifted a 500-point

dragon head stone...in one day..." Raigan muttered, his shoulders tensed.

"Raigan-san, this means that both Pomera-san and Philia-chan have 500 points, right?" I asked.

"Mm-hm...sure." His answer was straight. Surprising, considering his attitude in the beginning. His swagger, his confidence, all were gone.

"Um, you're the last one up, Kanata..." said Pomera. The stares from the dragonkin were making her self-conscious.

I nodded and stepped up to the dragon stone. I picked it up easily. Philia had picked it up after all, and it wasn't especially heavy. It wouldn't be a struggle to pick up several of these at once. The theory of mine about the dragon head stones' numbers being close to the person's level wasn't that far off.

"All three of you have such tremendous strength!" said Odio. "I would expect no less from the friends of my master!"

"Odio-san, I thought I made it clear that Philia-chan turned you down..."

Even if she hadn't, we didn't have time to take on students. And I doubted that we could teach him anything he could use. My skills came from Lunaère's power leveling—Odio probably had me beat in terms of detailed knowledge and finesse. I doubted Philia had anything to teach him at all.

Anyway, I could pick up more weights...but the first trial maxed out at 500, so there wasn't much point. The Holy Dragon rank was at 1,000 points, so I was already halfway there with two trials to go. We were well on track. We didn't know what the next trials were, however, so I wondered if I might manage to scam a few more points here.

"Say, Odio-san...could you throw that 300-point stone over here?" I asked.

"Master Kanata? What do you intend to do?" he replied, even though I wished he wouldn't call me "Master." He was the exact opposite of Raigan. How did such drastically different people co-exist in the same Garden?

Odio looked dubious, but he lifted the 300-point stone. "Y-you would like me to toss this? That seems a bit dangerous..." he said, but when I nodded for him to give it a shot, he lobbed the stone straight at me. "Here we go... Hiyah!"

I tilted the 500-point dragon head stone to catch the 300-point one on top of it, then deftly regained balance. “This makes 800 points, right?” I asked.

“Oh... O-ooh!” Odio let out a cry of admiration. “It *has* been done in the past! After all, it is agreed that the maximum number of points available in each trial is 1,000.”

“In that case, do you mind tossing me another?”

“Right away!”

Soon I had two 300-point dragon head stones atop the 500 one. That scored me enough points to already meet the Holy Dragon requirement...and more, technically.

The spectating dragonkin erupted in a furor greater than any so far.

“Wh-what in the... Is this an illusion...?”

“How can this be possible? And he looks like he could still handle more!”

I set each of the dragon heads back on the ground in turn.

“He has the potential to be the next Dragon King!” shouted Odio with arms waving. He dropped to his knees and tears of joy streamed from his eyes. “I am overwhelmed to be accepted as the pupil of the next Dragon King!”

“Nobody said anything about that!” I said.

“He said he’d be *Philia’s* pupil...” said Philia with a pout and glare in Odio’s direction.

“Looks like it’s fine to add them together. Pomera-san, do you want to give it another go?” I asked.

“I’m fine... I think it’ll be dangerous for me—I’m not sure my balance is good enough to manage catching them on top of one another.”

“Hey! I didn’t hear anything about being able to add them up! What’s this about, Yorna?!” screamed Mitsuru with a red face as he came back.

“I’m sorry... I-it’s just, normally no candidates can accomplish that... I didn’t even know that kind of thing had been done before...”

“Doubling what I had before’ll be a walk in the park!”

“I don’t think you should, i-it’s dangerous...”

“Shut up! I’m the strongest! I can’t stand them thinkin’ they won because of something as dumb as this.” Mitsuru shot me a sideways glare.

He was as prideful as any dragonkin. It probably felt like mockery when someone right after him got a higher score. He’d talked such a big game before that he couldn’t back down now.

Mitsuru waved off Yorna’s attempts to stop him and got ready to lift the 500-point dragon head stone again. “Double...Attack Mode! Okay, throw it here, Gramps!”

“I do feel like you shouldn’t do this... Would you at least start small with a 50 stone?” said Odio, looking troubled.

“Just do it already! Or are you just afraid I’m gonna beat *your* score?”

“Well, if you insist... I’ll do this gently. Gently.”

“Get on with it!”

At Mitsuru’s urging, Odio chucked a 300-point dragon head stone. It sailed through the air—then the two rocks collided.

“Uwaaah!” Mitsuru lost his footing and he disappeared beneath the dragon head stones. There was the sound of something snapping.

“Mitsuruuu!” Yorna’s shriek echoed off the crag.

Chapter 3:

Maw of the Colossal Dragon

– 1 –

HAVING FINISHED the first trial, we left the Dragon Head Crag. Raigan was leading us to the location of the second trial.

“...Is that Mitsuru person going to be all right?” asked Pomera with an uneasy look on her face. “He got squished in a rather unpleasant way.”

“He was alive, so, er...I’m sure he’ll be fine,” I said. “He seemed pretty energetic after all...”

When Mitsuru got squished below the dragon head stones, Odio rushed over to pull off the stones and save him. He was covered in blood, but he was conscious and screaming in pain. Since Mitsuru was a relatively high level, he should be way tougher than his appearance implied.

“We have many secret medicines here in the Garden that aren’t available in the human world. Wounds like his will heal in no time,” said Raigan, and then a shadow seemed to pass across his face. “Though personally, I think they should just toss him out without healing him as a punishment for insulting us.”

Mitsuru must have beaten him pretty mercilessly before we arrived. “Raigan-san, I already have 1,000 points, which means I should have the Holy Dragon rank, right?” I asked. “Could I just go see the Dragon King now?”

I mean, if I had the score, why not just cut to the chase?

“Of course not! You only receive the title once you’ve completed all three trials!” Raigan frowned. “You did all right at the Dragon Head Crag, I’ll admit that. You’ve got the muscle of a Holy Dragon. But the trials you’ve yet to face aren’t as simple as lifting a stone. It’s all about holistic strength here in the Garden, so don’t think the next trials will go as well as the last! Ha! Be prepared for a little humility!”

“We can rush through them, Kanata. I’m not too bothered about getting a high score anyway,” said Pomera.

She was right. No matter what Raigan said, I’d already achieved my goal. It didn’t matter at all if I got zero points on the other trials. If there was some custom that said we had to finish all three trials, then all I had to do was go through the motions and then emerge with my Holy Dragon ranking on the other side.

“Rush through them?!” said Raigan. “You have to give the Trials your all! Anything less is an insult to all dragonkin! I will not permit it!”

“O-okay, I understand! Please, calm down...” said Pomera. Her manner was calm and collected, a stark counter to the intensity stewing in Raigan. I was a bit taken aback by how fierce he was.

“If you finish the first trial like that without anything happening, then you’ll go away thinking the Dragon Trials are trifling things! B-but they aren’t! I swear it! The first trial is a measurement of brute strength, proof you can handle it! The real test starts at the second trial!”

“You can get more than enough points at the ‘proof’ stage, though. Seems sort of anticlimactic...” I said.

For all intents and purposes, Holy Dragon was the highest rank possible. The Royal Dragon rank had no more reason for being other than to showcase the current Dragon King’s score. Racking up more points at this point seemed sort of...*pointless*.

“I-it’s your fault for getting the high score right off the bat! Now you’re just making assumptions!”

“Kanata... Let’s go through with it. Okay?” said Philia as she tugged on my sleeve.

“Ah! Little girl, you agree with me? I misjudged your wisdom!”

“...Well, we are guests here. If Raigan-san—both our trial examiner and guide—insists, then we don’t really have a choice,” I said.

I thought I should put in enough effort that they didn’t think I was being lazy.

If I got results that showed I put in the minimum effort required, then Raigan wouldn't be able to say anything else. If he still made a fuss about it, then I would try saying something to Odio, who seemed to like us.

But I also felt like things were going too well so far.

I was glad that the Trials' challenges didn't seem that difficult, but we had other issues. There were followers of the Ruler of the Skies hiding in the Garden of the Dragons. I was on edge, wondering if they would figure out what we were up to and make some attempt to interfere. But not even Mitsuru seemed like he was in cahoots with the Ruler of the Skies. I'd thought at first there might be something going on with him; his being here at the same time as us was pretty fishy. Then again, he *did* seem to be a guy who liked power competitions.

It was also weird how Raigan first came at us, so I'd wondered if he'd been under orders from the Ruler of the Skies too, but everything I saw so far made me think he was honestly just someone who took a lot of pride in the Garden of the Dragons and didn't like human outsiders.

He didn't like us, but he was respecting the Garden's rules and treating us like guests. He was a rule follower, not a Ruler of the Skies follower. I doubted that he'd ever help in a plot to control the Dragon Vortex for evil purposes.

When I heard Odio was one of the three Holy Dragons, I was on guard because I thought it would be dangerous if he was one of the enemy, but he didn't seem suspicious either. In fact, he showed no caution toward us outsiders at all.

All three of those people were in the clear, as far as my hunches could tell. I couldn't be certain about their true nature, but I would have been very surprised to find out they were assisting anything truly evil. I'd come to understand the dragonkin more since coming here, but I hadn't learned anything new about the Ruler of the Skies.

For now, it was nice that there wasn't anything getting in our way, but all that meant was that our true enemy had yet to make a move.

“WE’RE HERE. This is the location of the second trial, the Maw of the Colossal Dragon.”

There was a huge hole in the face of a cliff. Peering inside, I could see sharp stalagmites jutting toward the ceiling. It must have taken a long time for drops of water to make mineral deposits like that. I guessed the name of this place came from how much they resembled teeth.

“The Maw is a dungeon filled with horrific monsters. We use these to determine how far you get into the dungeon,” said Raigan as he took a handful of white marbles from his breast pocket. “These are Dragon Eye Crystals. They react to the magic inside the Maw and slowly change to red. The further below ground you go, the redder they become. Their final shade will determine your score for the second trial.”

“A color? It’ll be hard to get a good grasp of what our score is while we’re in there,” I said. I was hoping to phone this one in, but not having a decent grasp of the grading system added some uncertainty to the equation. “So, about what color would you say 300 points is? Roughly.”

“Don’t be an asshole...” There was a deep furrow in Raigan’s brow. His nose twitched as he growled at me. “You’re trying to coast through. Have some respect.”

“N-no, that’s not what I’m doing...” I lied, forcing a smile. “I just wanted to know the standards for the trial.”

“Standards, pah! Do the Trials with everything you have so as to show your strength! Your attempt to game the system is an insult to the entire Garden of the Dragons!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll do my best... And, by the way, do we each take this trial separately?”

If the trial was to see how far you could get in the dungeon, then how many companions you had and their skill would greatly influence the outcome. With

that in mind, I figured we would each have to go in alone.

“No, there are no restrictions on that,” replied Raigan. “It’s impossible to restrict people from interfering with each other during the trial. Besides, while you might gain some advantage by having companions with you, you’re still risking death if you go too far.”

Great, so we were free to work together in there. I was worried that if we sent Philia in alone, she’d get lost and destroy the entire dungeon trying to get back out.

“I will say that there is an unspoken rule that you can’t go in with a party of more than five people, and those who go alone are respected regardless of their results. While it’s not impossible to go into the dungeon with the help of your friends, doing so would be an embarrassment to a dragonkin, since we revere those who show their own strength,” added Raigan.

It was shameful to take advantage of the rules in order to gain more points. That scanned with what I knew of the prideful dragonkin.

We didn’t have any reason to go out of our way to abuse the system. If things went normally, then we were essentially guaranteed to get Holy Dragon rank—meaning we could waltz over to meet with the Dragon King whenever we wanted. No need to be picky right now.

But we did have one other important goal beside fulfilling Ramiel’s request to inform the Dragon King about the threat of the Ruler of the Skies: we wanted to receive items from the stash. If we’d been really far from reaching our goal, I would have done anything I could to get points, regardless of how it looked.

“I’m worried about Philia-chan, so the three of us will go together,” I said and took the Dragon Eye Crystals from Raigan.

“Heh. This trial isn’t as easy as the first...particularly for outsiders. It’s a nature-made mankiller in the form of a dungeon. You’ll run into monster after monster, each one a death hazard for the unprepared. On top of that, it’s a vast and intricate labyrinth. It’s not the kind of place you can handle on your first time going inside. How far will you get into the Maw of the Colossal Dragon while suffering from hunger and fear? Yes, *this* is the true essence of the Dragon Trials, humans!”

Raigan's face was covered by a wicked smile as he ranted. He sounded happy, like this was the real deal.

...So, the assumption was that this trial would take several days, but I wouldn't be that bothered if we just walked into the Maw and back out and got zero points. Considering how much confidence he had that we couldn't handle the Maw, he might even be forgiving that we didn't get a high score. Then again, he might complain more about how we didn't have any drive or respect. Scratch that.

"...Well, we'll give it our best shot. Raigan-san, you should go home and take it easy. We'll go straight back there once we finish the trial," I suggested.

"Indeed. I await your safe return. Look, I'm not trying to intimidate you, but I will tell you this since you seem to take the Trials so lightly: it's not uncommon for people to lose their way inside the Maw and never return. Please understand that, unlike the first trial, this isn't something a halfwit who's all level and no substance can simply gallivant through!"

– 3 –

WE WALKED into the Maw of the Colossal Dragon, but in all honesty, I wasn't feeling massively motivated. I mean, I had my 1,000 points. Why not turn back right away and report to Raigan?

"...But if we blow this off, it'll put him in a bad mood," I muttered with a sigh.

Pomera smiled awkwardly and gripped her staff tighter. "Sh-should we just sort of try hard on the test? Raigan put a lot of emphasis on the Maw of the Colossal Dragon and...I'd rather things not be awkward later."

She was completely right. If Raigan threw too much of a fit and things didn't go over well, he might refuse to let us take the third trial or prevent us from meeting with the Dragon King. I didn't want to do something that might give us an unnecessary setback if it could be avoided.

"Hey, hey, Kanata, Pomera, let's try hard! Don't upset Mister Raigan. Philia

doesn't think he's a bad person," said Philia as she tugged on my sleeve and looked up at me with puppy dog eyes.

I didn't want to annoy Raigan. I didn't want to go into this Maw of the Colossal Dragon, either. There were probably agents of the Ruler of the Skies here in the Garden of the Dragons, and down there, no one could keep an eye on us. We had no idea what we were walking into.

The way Raigan talked about it made it sound like this trial would take a few days. Besides what might happen in the dungeon, that time might also give our enemies an opportunity to move against us on the surface. I'd hate to come back up to find ourselves branded as enemies of the dragonkin without even being able to speak a word in our defense.

"Besides, Philia wants to be a Holy Dragon!" Philia's eyes sparkled.

Philia and Pomera had only lifted the 500 dragon head stone in the previous trial. They still needed another 500 points to make it to Holy Dragon.

After I'd drawn a lot of attention and then Mitsuru got squashed, we hadn't stuck around the other Trial area. They never had a chance to get the high score and, to be fair, I sort of assumed there wasn't a need for them to get any more points...

"You don't have to be a Holy Dragon, Philia-chan. You're First Dragon material already..." I said.

Then again, if she wasn't a Holy Dragon then she couldn't have an audience with the Dragon King. Maybe it *was* a good idea for them to get 500 points in the second trial to make sure they could come with me when I went to see him. Especially since we had no idea what the third trial was going to be.

"It's a nature-made mankiller in the form of a dungeon. You'll run into monster after monster, each one a death hazard for the unprepared. On top of that, it's a vast and intricate labyrinth. It's not the kind of place you can handle on your first time going inside. How far will you get into the Maw of the Colossal Dragon while suffering from hunger and fear? Yes, this is the true essence of the Dragon Trials, humans!"

...Raigan might have been that enthusiastic about how dangerous this

dungeon was, but I doubted it was worse than Cocytus. And if there were dungeons that dangerous littering the world, we might have bigger problems.

I heard shuffling footsteps. Looking up, I saw a goblin-like creature with about ten eyes peeking around a corner to look at us.

Race: Scout Goblin

Lv: 33

HP: 99/99

MP: 82/82

This is the kind of monster appearing near the entrance...? We must have a long way to go.

The creature had an ugly face, but based on its appearance and name it was no more than a goblin meant for scouting. It could probably use some skill to send the information it saw with its eyes to its companions. I didn't think a monster with that level was going to pose a threat, whatever its skill was.

I held up the Dragon Eye Crystal I got from Raigan. It was still pure white. He'd said that the further we went into the dungeon the redder it would get. We'd see about that soon enough.

"...If we just have to get lower to make this work, then maybe we could punch through the floor?" I murmured.

Then we could drop down, the crystal would turn red, and we could go back up the tunnel we drilled before it changed back.

Pomera cringed when she heard me. "K-Kanata, won't that make Raigan angry...?"

"He insisted we give it our all. It's hardly 'our all' if we don't consider all the possibilities. And it's not really against the rules either. Can we honestly say we gave it a good try if we just wander around randomly instead of trying to get lower?"

I tapped the wall. It seemed breakable enough. The problem was how thick it was.

“Are you sure you’re not splitting hairs so you can end this trial sooner?”

“We made a promise to Ramiel-san and I don’t want to be here when I can’t see what’s happening in the Garden of the Dragons.”

By the same token, I didn’t want to sleep on a dungeon floor for the next few nights either. This wasn’t like Cocytus—there was no Lunaère or Noble to keep me company in a nice hut.

I didn’t think there’d be any reason for Raigan to get angry if we did break through the floors to go down and change the crystal red. And if it *was* a problem, we’d go back and do it the old-fashioned way.

“It’s just, well, I don’t agree with breaking it...” said Pomera.

“Okay! Leave it to Philia! Philia doesn’t want to get points by tagging after you!” cried Philia as she balled her fists. “Hiyah!”

She raised her fists and two huge arms grew from the ground. As usual there were large eyes on the hands, making them look like some disturbing artwork.

The scout goblin gaped and trembled.

“Um, Philia, wait please,” said Pomera. “This needs to be done *carefully* and I’m sure that there are plenty of other ways you can help—”

“Raaah!” Philia let out a cry and punched the air over and over with her frail little arms. Her two creepy creations moved along with her and showered the floor with blows from their clenched fists. The entire dungeon shook violently, opening cracks in the floor and in the walls.



“E-eeek!” Pomera clung desperately to me so she wouldn’t fall over. “S-s-sorry, Kanata! I’m sorry!”

Chunks of rock fell from the ceiling and crashed into the ground. The corpse of the scout goblin bounced across the ground with each tremor that shook the dungeon.

Then I saw the remains of other monsters. There was a chance that Philia might accidentally kill every monster in the place.

“Calm down! Philia-chan, calm down!” I rushed to grab Philia’s shoulder and stop her. “Raigan-san! The Garden of the Dragons! This dungeon is important to them and you’re going to destroy it!”

“Huh? But, Kanata, you said we’d be doing the trial wrong if we didn’t do everything we could...”

“I was wrong! Stop, Philia-chan! Please!”

– 4 –

BY THE TIME I managed to stop Philia’s rampage, the inside of the dungeon was a complete mess. The original path was blocked by fallen rocks. Jagged fissures formed across the walls and floor. And there were several squashed remains of monsters on the ground, now just red smears of ketchup.

At the very least, this floor was no longer capable of functioning as a dungeon for the trial. I could only hope the other floors were still intact...but I wouldn’t bet on it.

“Ph-Philia’s sorry, Kanata... Will Mister Raigan be mad?”

“I...I didn’t stop you, so I’ll apologize along with you.” I pressed a hand to my forehead and sighed.

Even so, I doubted Raigan could be angry at Philia when he learned what happened. He spoke so confidently about how difficult the Maw of the Colossal

Dragon was...it probably never occurred to him that Philia could destroy it with her bare hands. I doubted he'd even believe us.

"He probably wouldn't figure out the truth if we told him it was a normal earthquake..." I murmured, and Philia stared at me. I waved my hands vigorously and backpedaled weakly, "I-I'm joking, ah hah, hah hah."

To be honest though, a natural disaster was a better—and more believable—excuse than what actually happened.

I turned my eyes toward a fissure in the ground. "...Looks like we could get to the floor below if we went through there."

"W-we're still going to take the shortcut after all that?! You just said it was wrong!" cried Pomera.

"Well, the damage is already done, so..."

Besides, we wouldn't be able to figure out where the original path led at this point. The shortcut was the only real option.

The three of us peered into the crack in the floor. It did look like we could go further down than just a floor or two, but it'd be a tight squeeze. Philia would be able to pass through, but Pomera or I wouldn't make it.

I looked up, but Pomera was still squinting into the hole as she said, "What should we do, Kanata? I know we can't go the normal way anymore, but this looks...extreme."

"Pomera-san, step back please," I said.

"Huh...?" She moved away as I asked.

"Space-time Magic Level 10: Dimension Slash." I slid my pointer finger horizontally through the air. A piece of rock that had been in the way was cut cleanly off, left to tumble to the floor below. "Hmm, that seems just about right."

Dimension Slash didn't affect too much around it, and using it to cut off the rock in the way made a nice space for us to slip through. The spell wouldn't be reliable when the floor was still solid, so I thought I might have to use it in conjunction with Level 17: Fracture.

“You’re just making it worse,” said Pomera, her head hanging in disappointment.

“It doesn’t make a difference at this point...” I cleared my throat, then leapt off the floor and plunged into the opening.

As I did, I looked at the Dragon Eye Crystal in my hand. The slightest tint of red appeared on the white. As Raigan explained, it was apparently affected by the magic in the dungeon.

“Huh, seems like this could work. Pomera-san, Philia-chan, let’s go,” I said.

“...Sorry, Raigan,” whispered Pomera with her eyes closed. Then she gathered Philia in her arms and jumped down to the floor I was on.

This floor was equally filled with mountains of rubble and destroyed corpses of monsters.

“Wow! Philia’s crystal is red ‘n’ stripey now!” Philia danced around and frolicked with her Dragon Eye Crystal.

“Should we look for another crack in the floor? We’ll go further down that way,” I said.

“Yeah! Philia wants her crystal to be super red!”

Earlier, Philia had seemed upset because she was concerned about Raigan, but the simple fact that her crystal was changing colors had cheered her up. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

So...the three of us went down, and down. Each time we went down a floor, the crystals’ red glow intensified. Once we got to the fifth floor, I decided that was enough, but Philia wanted to see it turn an “even prettier shade of red,” so we kept going.

We didn’t find any large fissures on this floor of the dungeon, and the ground was so thick and sturdy that not even a Fracture would have done the job. In the end, I had to resort to drastic measures.

“Space-time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb.”

A sphere of black light gathered on the floor. The stone contracted slowly, then shattered and disappeared as it was drawn into the magic. A huge hole

opened up and the after-blast of the spell sent cracks running through the floor.

“Wow! It’s so pretty!” cried Philia with her crystal in hand. It was emitting a brilliant red light.

“I understand you saying it won’t make much difference since it’s already damaged, but... Kanata, I don’t think what you did there was the same as cutting off a piece of already damaged floor,” complained Pomera. Her face was a warzone of complex emotions.

“W-well, this is the last floor...” I smiled awkwardly and looked around us. There were large slabs of rubble that had punched into the ground, but I didn’t see any bodies of dead monsters.

Something seemed strange, though. I saw lots of old monster bones scattered messily across the floor. It looked like a long time had passed since they died.

I caught sight of something from the corner of my eye and spun around. There stood a three-headed giant. It was nearly twenty feet tall.

How could it have possibly snuck up on me? There’d been no indications it was there. This was the first time a monster had gotten this close to me without me realizing since the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm.

Its skin was red and it had thick, armorlike muscles running across its entire body. Each of the three demonic heads wore its own horrific expression. At once I knew this giant was the ruler of the Maw of the Colossal Dragon.

It stood stock still, looking down at us with all six eyes.

RED RAMPAGE

Race: Titan

Lv: 971

HP: 0/5826

MP: 2913/2913

It was already dead...

This titan had been struck by a jagged piece of rubble coming from above. It hit its back and pierced directly into its heart, ending its life. No wonder we hadn't sensed its presence.

"Well...let's go back," I said.

Pomera nodded while staring at the titan's dead faces. Her eyes were empty.

"...Yeah, let's go back."

— 5 —

WE MANAGED TO GET to the bottom of the Maw of the Colossal Dragon without any problem and turn our crystals bright red. When they couldn't possibly get any redder, I gathered Pomera's and Philia's, then put all three of the crystals into my magic bag for the time being.

Then I used the wind magic spell Fluegal to allow us to move through the air and get us back to the top floor. I held them with their backs to me as we flew up and up.

"Yaaay! We should fly more!" cried Philia, enjoying the feeling of the air as it rushed past us.

"I thought this trial would be more of a pain, compared to the first one, but it turned out pretty easy," I said.

"I think that's because we destroyed the Maw..." said Pomera. "Can we honestly say we completed this trial? If anyone finds out, we might be chased from the Garden..."

I bit my lip when she pointed out the painful truth. It was easy to imagine Raigan throwing a tantrum if we told him everything that happened.

"...Wouldn't you say it's the dungeon's fault for being so easily destroyed by humans taking the trial?" I said lamely.

"No, because you and Philia are the furthest things from normal humans!"

“It’ll be fine. The monsters will eventually come back on their own. And I think it makes a bad test if people know the path through the dungeon. It doesn’t matter that the path has changed a bit.”

“I-I suppose...but...”

“People should probably be careful of falling rocks for a while, but...well, Raigan-san said there were a lot of dangerous traps in the place anyway.”

“...Kanata, are you trying to convince me or yourself?” Pomera looked exasperated.

As we walked along the path, I heard footsteps coming from ahead. I jumped in surprise and instinctively drew closer to the wall by the bend in the path. The dragonkin had probably come to check on the dungeon.

“Kanata, what’s wrong?” asked Pomera.

“It’s just... This is going to be awkward,” I said after a cough to clear my throat.

Pomera stared at me blankly. I gently craned my neck around the corner and saw someone with flashy, two-toned hair.

“Oh, it’s Mitsuru...”

He should have been on death’s doorstep after those severe injuries from when the dragon head stone crushed him, but he’d already recovered enough to have a go at the second trial. Maybe I could learn something from his incredible energy? In truth, I was a little suspicious of how he bounced back so soon.

Raigan had said that the Garden of the Dragons had secret medicines that could heal his wounds, but Mitsuru shouldn’t be taking this risk.

“Mitsuru, we really should go back so you can rest. Something odd has happened here...” said Yorna, who was still accompanying him. She must be acting as a chaperone.

“Enough, Yorna! That other traveler just went in, didn’t he? I can’t let him get away with winning! I’m the strongest, and I’m gonna prove it to that scrawny dude! Then I’ll prove it to the Dragon King!” shouted Mitsuru.

Yorna let out a groan before saying, “But the dungeon doesn’t even make a proper trial right now. Look—the monsters are all dead, and the traps are broken...”

I felt so embarrassed that I clamped my hands over my ears. Then I covered my face with my hands. As I did, my elbow smacked against the wall, letting out a sound that echoed through the cave. “Ah...”

“Hey, is there someone there? A dragonkin? Oh...it’s you, the traveler from before!” shouted Mitsuru as he came over to investigate.

“H-hi...”

“Huh, guess you didn’t get as much of a head start on me as I thought. I’ll catch up to you right away if you’re dawdling like this. Guess you really did get this far using cheap tricks from your gift skill and now you’re having trouble with the second trial. I was right about you.”

Even though he was taking jabs at me, he looked somewhat relieved.

“Actually, we’re on our way back...” I said.

“Huh?!”

“Uh, well... There was some weird earthquake and we agreed we should go back early.”

“What a spineless coward you are. I don’t care what the situation is, I’m going to keep going and get 2,200 points.”

Seriously? That was the score for Royal Dragon.

Mitsuru got 500 points in the first trial, so it’d be pretty tough for him to get that many from the second trial onward. Holy Dragon was the true highest rank. I didn’t see the point in pushing yourself in an attempt to get Royal Dragon...

“Ha! Dragonkin principles are based totally on strength. The Dragon King only got his position because the rest of the dragonkin recognize how strong he is. I can’t wait to see his face when he finds out a ‘puny human’ tanked his score.”

Mitsuru laughed maniacally.

“But the Trials are just trials in the end, and the score doesn’t really matt—” I

started.

“It *does* matter. If you beat the Royal Dragon score, then you have the right to challenge the Dragon King. He has to accept your challenge. And if you beat him, you get to take his throne. I ain’t got any interest in that, but it does give you the right to rifle through his vault for treasure. Ain’t that great?”

I didn’t realize that rule existed. Neither Raigan nor Ramiel mentioned anything like that. Well, Ramiel did say that if your strength was acknowledged during your audience with the King, then you would be granted one of the items that he guards. Maybe that was what she meant.

“I didn’t think she meant it like that, though...” I muttered with a sigh. In the back of my mind, I saw Ramiel smiling and making a peace sign.

I wondered what would happen if someone with ill intent toward the Garden of the Dragons took the Trials, but then I remembered that only those who helped dragons or dragonkin were able to find the Garden in the first place.

Although...that did assume that there was no way for an evildoer to find out through other means or just stumble across it. The dragonkin mentality was that it wasn’t a problem so long as the Dragon King didn’t lose.

“Well, we’re going back now, so, good luck...” I said and tried to walk away, but Mitsuru grabbed my shoulder from behind.

“Hey, hold up. Your damn tricks drew me in on the first trial and nearly ended up killing me. Actually, I don’t care about the injuries. But you *did* seriously embarrass me in front of all the dragonkin, you know that? You think I’m just gonna let you walk away like that?”

“Hands off. You’re the one who decided to try lifting the stones. I’ll apologize for the bad timing on my part, but what else do you want?” I asked, glaring back at Mitsuru as I grabbed his wrist.

“It’s obvious, wuss. And meeting here moves things along that bit faster. Now I’m going to beat the crap out of you for setting me up! Lucky for your friends that we’re near the exit...it’ll be easy to carry your battered, bloodied corpse out when I’m done with you!”

Mitsuru swung his other fist at me.

I didn't think he was going to take a sucker punch at me. I twisted his other arm, the one that I was still holding, and twirled him into the air to fling him far away. He looked like he might crash back first into the cave wall, but he quickly spun in air and kicked away from it. Righting himself, he landed neatly on the floor.

"What's wrong with you?!" I shouted. I knew he was hot-headed, but it was hard to believe a person originally from Earth would be so hostile to me.

"Not too bad on the reaction speed and strength there. Looks like you might just be able to handle yourself in a fight after all. Wouldn't be any fun beating you if you couldn't!" He crossed his arms in front of him and tensed his body. His muscles bulged slightly, and vapor rose from him in a red cloud. "Double... Attack Mode! All right, let's see that gift skill of yours!"

The dungeon trembled slightly.

"...Wha—?" Mitsuru looked up at the ceiling just as a boulder fell on him. It seemed the spot on the wall he used as a kick-off point had been rather precarious.

"Mitsuruuu?!" Yorna shrieked.

I covered my face with my hands. I had just been talking to Pomera about how it would be dangerous for people to come in here for a while, and I was right.

— 6 —

YORNA GOT ON HER hands and knees and begged us to help her save Mitsuru. Once the boulder was rolled away, she slung his blood-soaked body over her shoulders and bobbed her head to us in thanks.

"I feel kind of bad for Yorna..." said Pomera once we'd left the Maw. "The Garden is so full of hard-headed people, and she has to walk around with that guy."

That seemed to be the end of the second trial. We had to report to Raigan and take the third trial, and then we could meet with the Dragon King at last.

But...my feet felt heavy. It would be wrong to lie to Raigan about destroying the dungeon. But when we did, it was likely he might toss us out on the spot. We couldn't keep our promise to Ramiel if that happened—our only choice would be to leave Raigan with the information Ramiel gave us and leave the Garden of the Dragons.

We went straight to Raigan's mansion. The servants led us to a guest room where we met with him.

"You came back pretty quickly! What happened to all that chatter and good cheer? I guess things don't always turn out the way we expect!" Raigan seemed mirthful as he insulted us. "Aha hah hah! I told you the second trial isn't as simple as the first, right?"

"Uh...well, we're sorry. About the dungeon..." I said vaguely, and Raigan waved a chunky finger.

"Tsk, ts, ts! Don't tell me. Something unexpected happened, didn't it? Hah! I already know! Of course unexpected things would happen! Life would be a breeze if things went exactly as expected. If you're in the middle of an important battle and something happens, are you gonna go 'oh well, so it goes, I guess we lose?' Strength is only worth anything if you can adapt and keep going!"

Raigan grinned while he lectured us about something he seemed to find very important, not letting me get a word in edgewise. He seemed way more eager to berate us for failing than to listen to my explanation that we'd ruined the dungeon.

"No matter what situation you find yourself in," continued Raigan, "you've gotta use everything in your power to reach your goal! *That* is the important thing here. A dragonkin trial isn't going to be as easy as a human version! Well... I can tell you had a hard time."

I stood up from my seat without thinking as Raigan talked, which made him jump a bit.

“Wh-wh-what?! Did you have a problem? I won’t let you retake the trial! If it bothers you that much, then train yourself up, wait the necessary time, then take the Trials again! Though, a second attempt won’t change the fact that you got scared the first time round and threw in the towel...”

“You’re right! Raigan-san, you’re completely right! I agree! There’s no point in the Trials if you don’t use every method at your disposal and give it your all!” I said.

“Uh...? Y-yeah. G-glad you understand that. Okay, well, you might’ve flopped on the second trail, but you can give your all on the third. Not that it’ll change the results of your second trial.”

Raigan closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief, content that we understood exactly how much we’d messed up. He then crossed his arms and nodded several times.

“Sorry...Mister Raigan. Philia broke the dungeon,” said Philia as she hung her head with guilt.

Raigan’s face turned white. “B-broke the dungeon...?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was the one who suggested it’d be easier to go down if we broke the floor...”

Raigan looked at me. Unable to parse his expression, I rushed to continue.

“B-but, uh, you did say we should do everything we could in the trial!” I continued.

“Th-that’s not what I meant! I-idiot! Wh-what in the world did you do to the Maw of the Colossal Dragon?!” Raigan’s voice was ragged.

“Sorry... Philia went to the floor and...” said Philia, utterly dejected. Her eyes welled with tears as she weakly punched the air with her fists.

Creases formed across Raigan’s face as he tried to make sense of what was going on.

In that uncomfortable silence, I took the three Dragon Eye Crystals out of my magic bag. “Um... We carried these to the bottom floor. If you could score them...”

The crystals rolled softly across the table toward Raigan. He hurriedly snatched them up and cradled them in his hands.

“I-I’ve never seen them turn so red! It can’t be...did you make it all the way to the final floor? A previous Dragon King trapped the Red Rampage there...”

“...We killed it by accident,” I said. “A rock fell. It died.”

“Oh, really...” Raigan’s shoulders slumped.

“Uh...this is bad, isn’t it?” I asked quietly.

“I can’t say anything if you destroyed it with your strength.” Raigan’s expression was pained, but he gently shook his head. “...Just, please, don’t ever go into the Maw of the Colossal Dragon again.”

“Thank you. We really are sorry.” The three of us bowed our heads.

– 7 –

RIDLER, THE DRAGON KING

THE DRAGON KING’S CASTLE stood in the center of the Garden.

It was both the King’s residence and a structure meant to protect the Garden’s reason for being. Below the castle was a place called the Dragon Vortex Chamber which connected directly to the anomaly. The magic from the Vortex had been used to erect a barrier, ensuring the Chamber was carefully guarded.

At the very top of the castle was a room called the Hall of the Dragon King, where a Holy Dragon was currently having an audience with the Dragon King. It was none other than Odio.

“Raise your head, Odio,” said the Dragon King, Ridler Radon Drafique. “Why have you come to me? Neither you nor I are so unoccupied as to allow for a friendly chat.”

Ridler was a beautiful man with long, pale green hair in gorgeous condition.

Branched horns sprouted from his head, golden wings from his back. He sat in a luxurious chair, his elbow on the armrest and head propped up on his fist. His snakelike, almond-shaped eyes settled upon Odio.

“Your Majesty... I have something I wish to inform you of. Four humans have come to visit the Garden of the Dragons. And...three of them scored 500 points on the first trial.”

“Oh? Interesting.” Ridler brought a hand to his chin and chuckled. “Are they famous outside the Garden? Humanoid dragons, perhaps? Those villains who walk a path of evil and achieve the strength of a dragon despite their human body... We shouldn’t be inviting them to the Garden of the Dragons, nor should any of our kind interact with them unless the situation is extreme.”

“I myself am not too familiar with the human world... But Yorna is fond of human civilization and says that none of them are humanoid dragons. One of them is known as ‘Double’ and revered as a hero for being an S-rank adventurer.”

“And the other two have managed to avoid fame, despite their strength? Interesting. It is one of our duties as dragonkin to guide such abnormally powerful humans to ensure they do not stray from the correct path. Keep your eyes on them, Odio.”

“Ah, of course, I intend to.”

“And it may be time to act. Since ancient times, whenever the forces of darkness grow powerful, extraordinary heroes rise up to defeat them. This has played out over and over throughout human history. But the reverse is also true. When powerful people gather—the kind you see once in a hundred years—that is an omen of great gravity, and one that speaks of a coming darkness.”

“Indeed. It is as you say.” Odio nodded deeply.

“We will not lend a hand directly to the humans in their time of danger. We will simply watch over them...and we will remember. That is what we have pledged to the dragons. The humans must overcome the world’s trials themselves, as cruel as it may seem,” murmured Ridler, his face turned slightly away.

Then he opened his mouth wide in a fang-filled smile. “I look forward to it in its own way, ha ha. Three of them received 500 points on the first trial? One of them might pose a challenge to my own score, after all this time! And a mere human at that! Ah, yes, this is exactly what makes humans so interesting, but I will show everyone that my fangs have not dulled.”

“Your Majesty... I have not yet informed you of something important.”

“Oh...? Something is even more important than this, Odio? Speak.” Ridler’s brow furrowed.

“Three people received 500 points on the first trial...but one received 1,000! I am certain your wish will come true—in fact, I greatly anticipate your clash with this competitor!”

“One thousand points on the first trial... The simplest trial, but also the one on which tricks are the least effective?” Ridler grimaced slightly.

“It is above the 900 points you scored on the same trial!”

“I-I see... This human is quite physically strong, then.”

“Indeed! There was a child as well, and she easily lifted the 500-point dragon head stone! And I assure you, she looked capable of lifting even more!”

“...Th-this must be some sort of deception on their part.” Ridler wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. “I fear you have been lied to, Odio. It is a serious insult to sully the purity of our Trials, but no matter the era, humans fail to understand this. I find it quite upsetting.”

“No, Your Majesty! I saw it with my own eyes! I am certain there was no such deception! My teacher is not the sort of person who would do that!”

“Your...t-teacher? Odio, please reconsider whether this person is worthy of your trust.”

“Your Majesty, you look a little pale. Are you feeling unwell...?”

Ridler shook his head and looked up. “I’m fine. All is well. The truth will become clear in the second trial. We will see if this person is someone with true power...or a simple fraud.”

Just then, the door to the Chamber of the Dragon King opened and a tall

dragonkin walked in. He had purple hair and a pronounced chin. He was one of the other Holy Dragons, Zuul.

“Your Majesty! News!” he cried in a high-pitched voice.

“Zuul, don’t interrupt so rudely! You’re in the King’s presence!” roared Odio.

Zuul made several fawning bows and looked up at Ridler with appeasing eyes. “Three of the humans took the second trial... They have defeated Red Rampage and traversed the entire dungeon! One of the humans has now scored 2,000 points and the other two have scored 1,500! They could far surpass your own record, Your Majesty! This could destroy the honor of the dragonkin! I cannot stand by and let this happen!”

Zuul’s face was bright red, and he waved his arms.

Ridler grimaced and asked, “There was one other, was there not? He won 500 points in the first trial. What happened to him?”

“He had to turn back after he was caught under a falling rock. He only received 20 points on the second trial—but he doesn’t matter! Your Majesty, allow me to speak on behalf of the dragonkin! Creatures as lowly as humans have no business in the Garden of the Dragons! Please give the order to remove their right to the Trials, at once! Send them out of the Garden! We must decree that no humans should ever be allowed to enter again!” cried Zuul hysterically, and Ridler lowered his head.

“Nonsense, Zuul!” shouted Odio in anger. “The greatest embarrassment would be for the dragonkin to chase these humans out because we’re afraid that they’re stronger than us! All people of strength are welcome, regardless of their race! *That* is the pride of the dragonkin!”

“Be quiet, you old fool! Humans are nothing more than sub-centennial vermin chasing their primal desires through muck! They can, at best, aspire to rival us as honorary dragonkin—all dragonkin other than you look at it this way! Just imagine what would happen if they exceeded our king’s score! This is a matter of our dignity!”

As the argument flew back and forth, Zuul gestured angrily with exaggerated sweeps of his arms.

“You be quiet!” said Odio. “Don’t mistake your own prejudices for those of everyone in the Garden of the Dragons!”

“It is a real problem! The people will lose trust in our king, which will throw the Garden of the Dragons into chaos! Our duty is *predicated* upon our superior strength over humans. This isn’t about simple ideals! Don’t push your high-minded weakness down my throat!”

“No, it is *your* thoughts that show weakness! You may be able to defeat the majority of dragonkin, but you clearly need to retrain your spirit! You would turn tail and run if you were faced against a powerful enemy? And yet you managed to become a Holy Dragon! I’m embarrassed to be the same rank as you. Your mind is filled with nothing but petty arrogance. His Majesty is not as small a man as you! Stand down!”

“Wh-wh-what did you say to me?! You hard-headed fossil... Maybe I’ll just take you out myself!”

“Come at me whenever you’re ready! I’m actually somewhat rusty when it comes to real battles and your blood will make the perfect polish for my fangs! I only hope your rotten cowardice won’t infect me!”

Odio and Zuul glared directly at one another. Their disagreement had been simmering for years, and now it was boiling over.

As the two argued, Ridler’s handsome features twisted up, and sweat ran down his temples in rivulets. “Two thousand points by the second trial...2,000! A person would have to be higher than level 1,000 to accomplish that. What do I do if he challenges me? Perhaps, it would be best to have him leave without meeting me...” he muttered to himself in a quiet voice, his face turned down.

It was against Ridler’s ethics to snub powerful humans. In fact, he agreed with Odio over Zuul, albeit with far less zeal. But something clearly abnormal was happening, and Ridler had his position as king to consider. If he was bested by a human and gossip of it spread through the Garden, then his authority would plummet.

There was logic in Zuul’s argument. The Dragon King losing his authority wasn’t just a problem for Ridler—it would imply that the dragonkin lacked the power to guard the Dragon Vortex. Would the other dragonkin revolt? And how

would the dragons react?

Honestly, it would be best if they could just chase these humans away. But what if they resisted...? That would turn into a different, and even worse, ordeal! And by banning humans even this once, there would be a huge effect on the Garden in the future.

“Your Majesty!” called Odio. “I implore you to rebuke Zuul! We will not live in such a shameless and fickle manner!”

Ridler bit his lip and looked at Odio unhappily. He hesitated for a long moment. Just when his eyes opened wide as if he had reached a decision, he clutched in an exaggerated fashion at his stomach and doubled over.

“Ow! Ow ow ow ow! It hurts!” he suddenly cried loudly. Odio and Zuul stopped arguing and looked at Ridler in disbelief. “Ow! Oh! M-my...my stomach aches! I have suddenly become unwell! Leave my chamber, immediately!”

Both Odio and Zuul stood in nonplussed silence as they stared at Ridler, their mouths agape.

“No one other than my servants shall enter the castle until those humans leave—I mean, until my stomach no longer pains me! Now, leave my chamber! This is an order from your king!”

To preserve the everlasting dignity of dragonkin, the Dragon King Ridler Radon Drafique would fake being sick.

Chapter 4:

Zuul, the Third Great Holy Dragon

— 1 —

AFTER THE SECOND TRIAL, we rested that evening in Raigan's mansion. Once we finished breakfast the next morning, Raigan—who was looking somewhat haggard—told us about our scores for the second trial.

“...I reported what happened to the Holy Dragons to double-check, but what you did isn't *officially* a problem. Be grateful we dragonkin are so forgiving.”

We bowed our heads and I let out a big sigh after hearing that. “Thank you...”

I was utterly relieved. If this had turned into some big thing, then we couldn't have kept our promise to Ramiel. Not to mention, I was afraid we'd have to compensate them for the damage.

Pomera looked relieved too. Surprisingly, Philia also realized this had become a big issue and looked particularly remorseful.

“We compared the color of your Dragon Eye Crystals to the standard and...the three of you scored 1,000 points. Kanata now has 2,000 points, and the two ladies have 1,500 each. Be glad,” continued Raigan.

“R-really?! Yay! Philia did it! She's gonna be a Royal Dragon!” cried Philia as she beamed, but Raigan looked stricken. To my surprise, Philia successfully read his reaction and went silent, her face turned down.

“Um...sorry to ask this now, but it would be bad if we accidentally got the score for Royal Dragon, wouldn't it?” I asked. “Could we just say I got 2,000 points total and let me go see the Dragon King?”

The treasure that the Dragon King had would surely be helpful in the fight against Naiarotop. But I didn't really want to cause unnecessary drama with the dragonkin. The simple solution would be to just take the Holy Dragon title, meet

with the Dragon King, and try negotiating with him.

“B-but that would be an insult to our sacred Trials!” said Raigan.

“To be honest, it seems as if the outcome is already clear. Or is the third trial that much different from the first and second?” I asked.

Raigan went quiet. The third trial must not be all that different from the first and second. He had believed we’d fail the second and now didn’t seem to expect too much from the third.

“It’s okay... I’ll, uh, try not to get over 100 points...” I said.

“...The Trials are *sacred*. I can’t let you hold back. I’ll go with you and make sure you try. If I think you’re not giving it your all, then I’ll make you do it over again. Ten times. A hundred times. As many as it takes.” Raigan frowned as he spoke.

“Y-you don’t have to pout like that...”

“I am not pouting!” he shouted, striking the table.

I knew this before, but this guy...was a pain to deal with. The only thing he disliked more than outsiders getting a high score was if they held back at all in the Trials.

“Okay...” I said. “Could we leave now, then? I want to meet with the Dragon King as soon as possible.”

“Fine... It’s on the fringes of the Garden, so follow me. Just get it over quickly with 1,000 points, or 2,000 points, or whatever,” Raigan said weakly. I regretted all the stress we were causing him.

Soon enough, he led us to a long set of stone stairs with a bright red gate at the top that looked a bit like a *torii* gate.

“We’re here. Beyond the Dragon Gate is the Dragon Gate Temple...the location of the third trial.”

“Dragon Gate Temple...” I said, feeling as if I was in the presence of something familiar.

The dragonkin wore clothes that were similar to kimonos. And all their

architecture looked a bit like open-plan Heian palaces. It was like their culture had been borrowed from the Japan I knew from Earth.

Once we passed through the Dragon Gate, we saw rows of hundreds of dragon statues of all sizes. Stone corpses were also scattered across the ground. The small ones were only about three feet long, while the larger ones were over sixty. Similar to the first trial, these dragons had numbers carved into their foreheads, like “50” or “500.”

The largest statue there was 130 feet tall and sat cross-legged apart from the others. It had “1,000” carved into its forehead. Beyond that was a large two-story temple that I assumed was the Dragon Gate Temple, judging by its dragon-shaped roof tiles.

“These are the Magic Dragon Statues. They’re golems you activate by providing them with magic. You’ve probably already figured it out, but you activate a golem you think you can defeat and earn the number of points carved on it if you do. That becomes your score for the third trial,” explained Raigan, patting one of the statues.

That made sense. So, the first trial tested simple physical strength, the second tested survival skills, and the third tested general combat ability.

Except...a human who got a good score on the first and second trials wasn’t about to get a low score on the third trial. I knew that, Raigan knew that. No wonder he was so glum.

I decided to get it over with quickly—why drag out the inevitable?—and I didn’t expect to have a hard time here.

“Yo... I was hoping to run into you, NPC. Figured you’d show up here eventually,” came a voice I recognized. I turned and saw Mitsuru giving me a death glare. Behind him was Yorna, looking fearful.

Th-this guy’s tenacious...

“You again...” I said.

“Don’t look so disappointed, dimwit,” he said. “I’m not happy with how our last thing got cut off. This time for sure I’m going to beat the crap out of you.”

“Y-you’ve been squished by rocks twice and still haven’t learned...?” murmured Pomera. She was beyond exasperation at this point, merely full of pity.

“Haven’t *learned*? Why, I oughta...” Mitsuru bit his lower lip and gave a big wave of his right hand. “What you really mean is he’s tricked me twice! You’re all trying

to make me look like an idiot! You guys didn’t beat me. Not last time, and not the time before that!”

“Then why are you so obsessed with me...?” I said.

“Shut up! You didn’t beat me, but it’s still your fault!”

Maybe the second time, but definitely not the first...

– 2 –

“**I**T’S YOUR FAULT I was laid up in the dragonkin hospital getting sniggered at! I’m not gonna be happy until I send you there a hundred times!” shouted Mitsuru. He drew the large sword from his back, then came at me.

I leaned to the side to avoid the slash of his blade. It slid through the air and struck into the ground.

“...I don’t know what you’re talking about. The dragonkin we’ve met are pretty nice,” I said.

“Are you making fun of me? This is a fight, not a conversation! Come at me already, I’ll kill you!” Mitsuru shouted at me.

I wasn’t sure what to do, in all honesty.

Mitsuru couldn’t be that high a level. My rough guess placed him somewhere between 300 and 400. And while he wanted to hurt me, I didn’t think he *really* wanted to kill me, which made the situation difficult. I needed to calm him down and hope I never encountered him again.

“Stop acting all cocky! Draw your sword! How about this? Double...Attack Mode!” Muscles bulged all over Mitsuru’s body as red vapor rose off it.

He came at me with a forceful swing, which I stopped with my bare hands. Surely if I stopped an all-out attack with my bare hands, he’d have to see it was a dumb idea to fight. Right?

I heard Raigan murmur, “He caught that guy’s blow? Impossible.” He’d fought against Mitsuru once...and lost.

Mitsuru squinted at my hands in surprise.

“...Will you stop now?” I asked. It was a reasonable request, but Mitsuru’s expression changed to a brave smile.

“Ah...so that’s your gift skill,” he said.

“What?”

“You don’t fool me with the unnatural way you stopped my sword. It wasn’t stopped by human hands...it was stopped by some kind of natural law. I bet you used that gift skill of yours to hold up the stones for the girls. Pretty boring trick once you figure out how it works.”

I had absolutely no idea what Mitsuru was talking about. That must have shown on my face, because Mitsuru looked at me and let out a snort of laughter.

“Looks like I’m spot on,” he said. “I’ve beat all sorts of people, humanoid dragons who can use ridiculously powerful spells and even other humans with gift skills like you. Your gift skill is to manipulate the direction of the force applied to something, right? You’re waiting to use your skill effectively. That’s why you intentionally focus on evading until you can spot an opening.”

I wish he would look at my level and give up, but that would make more problems that I didn’t want to deal with.

Kotone also never acted like she’d used Status Check on me. And though Mitsuru was about to use it, he stopped himself. Was it some sort of taboo to use it on another traveler, even if they were an enemy?

I could kind of understand that. I did, but part of me wanted to tell him to

look at my level if this was the alternative.

“If that’s your skill, then my strategy is simple! Double...Defense Mode!” This time, a pale blue vapor rose from Mitsuru. *Blue for defense, huh?*

“You focus on watching for an opening, yeah? Can’t beat these sharp eyes. The solution’s simple. I can fight a reactive battle too! I’ll see through the conditions for activating your skill and find an opening of my own! Unfortunately for you, I have no openings when using Double!”

As Mitsuru charged, I gave him a half-hearted punch in the face. His nose made a crunching noise and he crumpled to the ground, crashing into a nearby dragon statue and kicking up a cloud of dust.

“...Will you stop now?” I asked. I’d only punched him lightly, so he wasn’t dead. But there was no way he’d want to keep going.

“Huh...I see... You can use it like that,” said Mitsuru, using his great sword like a crutch to prop himself up.

What did he mean by “use it like that”? And why was he being so stubborn about this? I had no idea, but I did know that Mitsuru was way more tenacious than I thought. It was really annoying.

“But this means you’ve shown your entire hand!” he said. “Not a bad gift skill after all, but there’s one obvious weakness! Double...Magic Mode!”

A purple vapor rose from him. He held a hand to his broken nose, steadied his breathing, then pointed at me.

“In a simple physical fight, you can use your skill to increase your attack speed, improving your strength. But because of the way your skill is, it has to be head-on attacks! You had to hold onto that ability until you were sure you could land the hit! Bad luck for you that you didn’t manage to finish me off! You underestimated my Defense Mode!”

“I... Look... I don’t *have* a gift skill...”

“This is the end! Fire Magic Level 6: Power Flame!”

Mitsuru fired off a huge ball of fire in my direction... Apparently, he thought magic would work on me.

“Fire Magic Level 9: Dragon Ray,” I said, creating two magic circles. From the point where they overlapped came a pure red beam of light. It destroyed Mitsuru’s ball of fire and the blowback grazed his cheek. Gouging a red welt into his face, the force of the spell sent him flying backwards. He tumbled across the ground again, his sword sinking tip-first into the ground.

“Gah! Aaargh! It burns!”

Mitsuru pressed a hand over his face and writhed on the ground. With the one hand still on his face, the other slithered across the floor to a nearby dragon statue. He pulled himself up, nearly hugging the statue in order to stand.

“Ddammit...the hell was that spell! You got me... But now I know you only have that to compensate for your weakness in mid-range fighting!”

“Uh...”

“Fine...I admit it. You aren’t some average pathetic weakling. Doubt there’s a simple strategy for taking you out. I underestimated you cause you’re not famous, but you’re not half bad. This is where the real battle begins.”

He pointed a finger at me, still wanting to fight.

What the hell was this guy thinking? I was starting to think about taking a fall just so he’d go somewhere else.

“M-Mitsuru!” said Yorna. “Please, stop now! As far as I’ve seen, nothing you do will work! Let’s go back so you can rest a while, okay? Yeah? You’re already all beaten up! Mitsuru!” She touched his shoulder to stop him.

“Be quiet, woman!”

“He shut you down in every way, even when you were using Double. There’s nothing you can do! Stop fighting and leave! You tried hard enough! You should be satisfied with that!”

At least Yorna seemed intent on stopping him.

Unfortunately, he seemed as intent as ever on attacking.

It was a shame. I had started to like the beauty of the Garden of the Dragons, as well as the simple yet distinct food. I’d been hoping we could stay here for a

bit and relax. But now, I decided we should leave as soon as the Trials were over and we met the Dragon King.

Besides, we'd left Ramiel with Rosemonde. We ought to get back as soon as possible. If we left her with Rosemonde for too long, then tempers were sure to flare up.

Just then, an annoyingly high-pitched man's voice echoed over us. "Aaha ha ha ha! How convenient for me that the humans' relationships would break down and they'd eliminate each other for me! Only humans would be foolish enough to visit this sacred land and still fight among themselves!"

I looked in the direction of its source and saw a dragonkin with purple hair standing on top of the 1,000-point dragon statue. He was holding a spear that was longer than he was tall. And I think he was wearing makeup because his face was pure white, and his lips were bright red. He had purple eyeliner drawn below his eyes.

He looked more than a bit like a clown as he spread his batlike wings and smirked at us.

"Th-that's Sir Zuul, one of the Three Great Holy Dragons! Why are you here at the Dragon Gate Temple?" asked Raigan in shock.

— 3 —

"SIR ZUUL, one of the Three Great Holy Dragons..."

Holy Dragon...that was the title given to someone who scored over 1,000 points on the Dragon Trials. Only the Royal Dragon title outranked the Holy Dragon stage. This Zuul was the same rank as Odio, who we met at the Dragon Head Crag, making him one of the most powerful people in the Garden of the Dragons. Since strength equaled status for dragonkin, Zuul was about as high as it got below the Dragon King.

And now he was looking at us like we were his enemies.

“Why have I come to the Dragon Gate Temple, you ask, Raigan? Isn’t it obvious? I have come to eliminate the filthy humans, since the King and that fossilized meathead Odio won’t,” said Zuul with a shrill laugh.

I fell into a fighting stance facing Zuul.

I could tell before that he thought of us as enemies...but I didn’t think he’d be so up front about it. He might be working for the Ruler of the Skies, but somehow, I doubted it.

Neither Raigan nor Yorna looked like they understood what was happening. Their shock was evident, and they kept glancing between us and Zuul.

“Mm hm hm, the Dragon Gate Temple is under my jurisdiction, and dragonkin rarely visit here. I hoped to do this without witnesses. But it’s good that you’re the one accompanying the humans, Raigan...at least you understand things. Help me.”

“Wh-what are you saying, Sir?! I don’t understand why you’d eliminate them! It was decided that the incident in the Maw wasn’t an issue! Even if it was about that, they shouldn’t be *killed* for it!” said Raigan, desperately trying to persuade Zuul.

“It’s because I cannot allow the humans to sully our Dragon Trials with their deceit and tricks. Raigan, this is for the Garden. Yorna is young—she doesn’t fully understand our duty. Bind her. We may even have to imprison her for a spell to ensure she stays quiet.”

Zuul looked frustrated as he gave the orders, but made it sound like it was all perfectly logical.

“S-stays quiet...? Sir, you only say that because you know this is wrong. I agree that these humans are infuriating, but they were invited as people who have helped dragonkin or dragons. To secretly assassinate them just because they’re inconvenient is cowardice! Please, rethink what you’re doing!”

Raigan knelt on the ground and bowed to Zuul.

“Raigan-san...” I said. I’d underestimated him.

He was violent, arrogant, and oddly full of himself...and his sycophancy

toward stronger dragons was hard to stomach. But all that was motivated by love and pride toward the Garden. I understood that now.

Zuul's eyes narrowed sharply, and a vein throbbed angrily in his temple.

"Every last one of you is a simple-minded fool!" he shrieked in his high-pitched voice, his batlike wings spreading in agitation. "Governing is all about leadership and priorities, and sometimes it involves unsavory work that must be done from the shadows. For one thing to stand, another must fall. Raigan, you are not worthy of being one of the Twelve Gold Dragons. Fine, then you can *all* die!"

"Raigan-san," I said.

"Don't thank me. I chose the path I thought was right. And...this is a failure for the dragonkin," Raigan said back, looking agonized. I could tell he wasn't entirely certain about his choice either. From how he interacted with Odio, it was clear that the Holy Dragons were that absolute.

"...Maybe Raigan sided with us because he decided it'd be safer on Kanata's side," said Pomera, absently. It seemed to just slip out, and she immediately clamped her hand over her mouth.

"That's not true! You're still insulting me!" said Raigan.

"P-Pomera-san!" I said, disappointment clear in my voice.

"I'm s-s-sorry! It slipped out!" Pomera bobbed her head in apology.

"Besides...I don't think we'll survive," said Raigan. "Zuul is strong...but he is also cunning and cruel. He's not the kind to start a fight he can't win."

Is Zuul really that powerful...?

Raigan could see that if things went normally for us, we would be on track to getting the Royal Dragon rank. And yet he still seemed to think that Zuul had the upper hand.

"I can deal with this dumbass lizard on my own," said Mitsuru. "I don't know about the Dragon King, but a Holy Dragon isn't all that different from that Raigan over there. I'm still pissed off about how that wrinkly old lizard made fun of me, so this is perfect. I can prove that I'm better than a Holy Dragon. I'll be

back for you later, NPC.”

He stepped forward, covered in blood... It would serve him better if he just stayed quiet.

“Oh ho... So confident,” said Zuul. “Let me tell you something important... While the Magic Dragon Statues are used for combat training, they’re also supplementary guardians used to repel evildoers who might attack the Dragon Vortex.”

He raised his left hand to the sky and the golden bracelet on it sparkled. “Hear me, Dragon Statues! Do as I command and devour these villains who would do harm to the Garden of the Dragons! Aha ha ha!”

When the light from the bracelet shined on the dragon statues, their eyes glowed red. More than a hundred dragon statues at the Dragon Gate Temple began to move at once, even the 1,000-point statue Zuul was standing on. It raised its head and roared.

“Okay...this might be a bit dangerous,” I said.

Based on the standards from the other trials, I guessed that the 1,000-point statue was equivalent to someone who was level 1,000...and Zuul had activated every one of them.

It was going to be annoying fighting these things while protecting Raigan and Mitsuru.

– 4 –

THE DRAGON STATUES roared like living dragons then came at us.

There had to be over a hundred... But the majority of them were below level 300. I shouldn’t have to pull out the big guns, but I desperately needed to reduce their numbers.

“I’ll buy you time. Take Yorna and run...the Garden has failed,” said Raigan quietly.

“Raigan-san, you don’t have to risk your life...” I said, and Raigan gave a snort of laughter.

“Don’t worry. I’m almost certain this is all Zuul’s doing alone. I really doubt all of the Three Great Holy Dragons agreed to kill you. You must tell Odio about Zuul’s evil deeds.”

“What I’m trying to say is—”

Raigan shook his head slowly. “Hmph, you’re trying to say you can’t rely on me. I am Thunder Fang Raigan... I don’t go down that easily. Besides, I still have an ace up my sleeve. And I’m not doing this for you. I will stop Zuul for my and the Garden’s dignity. There’s nothing more and nothing less to it.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but really, you don’t have to be so ready to risk your life...”

He wasn’t listening to me at all by now. This was now a matter of honor to him.

“Spirit Magic Level 8: Laelaps’s Fang!” said Pamera.

A mass of lightning in the shape of a beast appeared in front of her. It rushed across the ground, leaving a gouge in the earth in its wake; its jaws barreled through the dragon statues, shattering them. In the blink of an eye, eight statues had been turned to rubble.

“G-girl...you’re *that* powerful?!” cried Raigan in surprise.

“Kanata, things will be difficult if we don’t cut down their numbers immediately!” she said, turning back to look at me.

I nodded, drew the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, and cut horizontally in the direction of the dragon statues. “Space-time Magic Level 10: Dimension Slash.”

All the statues I could see were split apart at the same height and crumbled. Raigan stood frozen, his mouth gaping wide at the wreckage.

“Uh, I really think we’ll manage somehow,” I said. “Raigan-san, take Yorna-san and Mitsuru-san and get out of here.”

“I can’t believe you can do that much...you’re monsters! But I couldn’t care less about the puny ones!” shouted Zuul. The 1,000-point statue he was riding

flew straight for us.

“Boom!”

A massive white arm grew from the ground and punched straight through the huge dragon’s stomach in a colossal uppercut. The statue was crushed into a tumbling pile of shattered stone.

“Th-that’s absurd!” shrieked Zuul.

“Way to go, Philia-chan!”

The rest of the battle would be just cleaning up the stragglers. At this rate, the hundred statues would be destroyed in no time.

I was on the verge of feeling relieved when two 30-foot statues, foreheads carved with the number “500,” flanked me. I swung my sword wide, slashing the two statues in their abdomens. The wounds seemed to do nothing until they grew larger and the golems crumbled to the ground.

There weren’t too many high-level statues, maybe around five. Our enemy’s power was being steadily cut down.

Amid the pandemonium, I saw Zuul from the corner of my eye. The tip of his spear, set with a shining purple stone, pointed in my direction. He was clinging to the bottom of a broken chunk of the crumbled 1000-point dragon statue, and glaring at me with evil intent.

Then I understood why the 500-point statues had tried to pin me in. Zuul was targeting me. He was planning to have the two statues flank me, then use the falling stones to hide and come at me from a blind spot.

“You’re open! I can tell you’re the leader! It doesn’t matter how high a level you are when you’re at the tip of my spear! Aha ha ha! It’s carved from a sharpened bezoar from the Evil Poison Dragon, Vergif!”

Zuul leapt off the rubble and came arcing through the air at me. He used his wings expertly to zig-zag in an odd path that made it difficult to read his trajectory. Right when I thought he was changing speed, his form phased out to the sides and split into three Zuuls.

“Dragon Technique: Mirrored Gale!”

I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Zuul wasn't the only one attacking me: more dragon statues were zooming in from different directions. I gulped.

Raigan was right. Zuul wasn't someone to be underestimated. Somehow a single glance had told him that I was the highest-level person amid all this chaos. Now he was pulling out all the stops to put the pressure on me.

Once my attention was split between other places, he came from my blind spot, and used a technique that would ensure his poison spear landed a strike despite me being a higher level. It wasn't the sort of tactic you'd be proud of, but Zuul completely outclassed me when it came to fighting to win. This wasn't about level—this was about a difference in practical battle experience.

“Die, human!”

I grabbed Zuul's spearpoint in my hand and felt a slight heat run across my palm. Poison this weak probably wouldn't have been a problem, no matter where he hit me. Then I reached out my foot and kicked each of the three Zuuls in the stomach once. When they stopped moving, the mirrored Zuuls disappeared. His eyes rolled back in his head, his tongue hung out of his mouth, and he collapsed weakly to the ground.

“I-impossible... How...? There's no way...he could have...”

Zuul's tactic had me exactly where he wanted me, but there was too big a difference in our levels. He wasn't that difficult to deal with; I guessed he was around level 500. He wasn't all that different in physical ability from one of the 500-point statues, even if he had experience they lacked.

But...if Zolophilia or the Red King had pulled off a surprise attack like that, and I went the easy route and relied on my stats to counter...I would have probably died.

Naiarotop was after me. I needed to be better.

I KNOCKED OUT ZUUL, the main culprit, without any issue. All that was left was to destroy the remaining dragon statues, and a quick glance told me that only about thirty were still moving. It was only a matter of time until the rest of the statues were destroyed. I had to guard Raigan and the others while I cut down the rest of the statues with Dimension Slash.

I started with the highest-point statues I could. I sliced apart the distant ones with Dimension Slash and cut down the ones nearby with my sword. Pomera and Philia were attacking too, and the statues' numbers fell quickly to twenty, then ten.

"Right, nearly—"

"G-goddammit, I'll take care of this!"

I thought we were nearly done cleaning up when I saw a badly injured Mitsuru leap forward. He brushed off Raigan and Yorna's attempts to stop him and slashed at a nearby large statue.

"Hey, don't be an idiot!" called Raigan. "Those three make it look easy, but they're seriously strong!"

"D-don't go too far from Raigan, Mitsuru! You're injured!" added Yorna.

They both rushed after him.

He's at it again, I thought, but then I noticed that the statue he was racing toward was only worth 250 points.

He'd lifted a 500-point dragon head stone. This statue was half that. Mitsuru should be able to handle it without issue, even if he was injured. I took my eyes off Mitsuru and turned my attention back to the dragon statues in front of me.

"Double...Attack Mode!"

I heard that and jumped. Mitsuru's Double skill didn't just multiply the stat he was targeting. It slightly reduced his other stats to make up for the increase in the multiplied stat. He might take out the statue in one hit, but if he missed he'd be open to counterattacks while his defense was decreased. And he was injured.

I looked back and watched as Mitsuru's sword cut through the statue's left shoulder. Its arm shattered to pieces when it struck the ground, but the golem survived.

"Tsk...I was off the mark!" groaned Mitsuru, sweat running down his face.

The dragon statue had pulled back at the last second, reducing the impact it took. It had time to react because Mitsuru didn't have the speed to prevent it.

Mitsuru hurriedly pulled his sword back up into a stance, but the dragon statue's claws were faster.

"D-damn, stay away!" he cried.

I was right. He shouldn't have put his Double into his attack. He had plenty of attack power to handle the statue without Double. But considering Mitsuru's personality, it was probably standard tactic for him to increase his attack in any fight.

I tried to cast a spell to save him, but a 300-point statue flew into my vision, blocking it. I switched to holding the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh with both hands and leapt into the air.

"This is my first serious swing since the Mirror," I realized, as I put everything I had into my slash.

My attack hit the 300-point statue, continued into the ground, then all the way to the statue attacking Mitsuru. It continued in a straight line, striking every statue in its way, until it eventually made its way to the Dragon Gate Temple, where it opened a huge gash in the building.

"Urk..." I groaned, nauseated.

I'd had to act fast and not hold back, but that ended up damaging another sacred dragonkin site.

I-I hope no one was inside... I thought, which was silly. If there had been other dragonkin there, they would have come out to see what was going on by now. Zuul himself said that people rarely came here.

"Wow! Kanata, amazing!" Philia giggled and bounced up and down, the picture of innocence.

Even more statue remains lay at her feet. It looked like the fight was over.

“U-um... Are you okay, Mitsuru?” I asked.

He sat on the ground, frozen in shock, his mouth open. When my eyes met his, he jumped, then scrambled backward on the ground.

“Y-you’re a monster...!” he whimpered and stood near Yorna like she would save him.

“I told you to get 1,000 or 2,000 points, but I didn’t think you could do this much. Though I guess you *did* save us...” said Raigan wearily.

“Raigan-san... Uh, is the Dragon Gate Temple okay?” I asked.

“...Does it look okay?! You split it in two.”

“Th-that’s not what I mean... Uh...I mean like, how much will it cost to repair it...?”

“Oh, right. Well, it’s a sacred building our ancestors built using 1,000-year-old trees, so it’s sort of hard to get an estimate...” He pinched the spot where I assumed the bridge of his nose went, and let out a sigh. Pomera and I both covered our faces with our hands. “Well... At least I don’t blame you for this. You had no choice in order to defeat the Magic Dragon Statues, which were Zuul’s fault. Thankfully, he’s unconscious right now.”

He glanced at Zuul, who was lying on the ground, as he spoke.

“Thank you...Raigan-san. You’re very kind,” I said.

“And I’m very tired after all this... Y’know what, I just don’t care anymore,” he said, then suddenly turned toward Mitsuru. “Speaking of...you said you’d continue your duel with Kanata after you handled Zuul.”

Mitsuru turned white and looked startled. He glanced rapidly between me and the gash in the ground that went all the way to the Temple.

“Really...? Still?” I asked.

If Raigan was tired of dealing with us, then I was exhausted from dealing with Mitsuru. If he wanted to keep fighting, I’d hit him right in the solar plexus so he lost consciousness, and then run. I didn’t want to hurt him. I just wanted him to

be somewhere else.

I moved my hand so I could put the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh back in its sheath and Mitsuru shook like he was on the verge of something drastic.

“Double...Speed Mode!”

Yellow vapor rose from him. He picked up Yorna under his arm and sped away down the stairs.

I stared in surprise, then looked down at my hand and realized Mitsuru might have thought I was about to swing my sword at him.

“Should we grab Zuul and go down as well?” asked Raigan with another heavy sigh.

— 6 —

WITH THE THIRD TRIAL COMPLETE, we followed Raigan back to the dragonkin town. We passed Zuul off to Odio without any problem and even managed to convince him that Zuul was to blame for the destruction of the Dragon Gate Temple.

Zuul was wrapped in strong rope, and Odio threw him over his shoulder like a sack of rice.

“This should never have happened,” said Odio. “I am mortified that a dragonkin—one of the Holy Dragons no less!—would do something like this. He must have caused you so much trouble, Master. I will punish this criminal and imprison him in the underground cells myself!”

“Thank you, Odio... And I’m not your master,” I said.

...This guy was one persistent pupil.

Pomera looked up at Zuul with an uncertain frown. “Um, isn’t Zuul a pretty high level? I was worried about this when tying him up too, but is there really a prison that can hold him?”

“Dragonkin are, on average, stronger than humans,” said Odio. “We use special materials for our cells and prisoners are kept in manacles that prevent them from using their full power. There are curses woven into the prison’s construction which physically weaken those inside.”

That answered that.

Even a top adventurer in a human city was only around level 100, but there were plenty of dragonkin who were over level 200. The Three Great Holy Dragons were probably over level 300. It made sense to build the prison to suit the prisoners.

“Also... Congratulations on scoring 3,000 points on the Dragon Trials, Master. I never thought I would live to see the day someone got a perfect score! Not even past Dragon Kings accomplished such a feat!” said Odio with excitement.

All three of us were to receive 1,000 points for the final trial. Unlike the first trial, it didn’t matter how many statues you defeated at the same time. The rules made it so you were only scored on the highest-valued statue you beat. Philia would have been the only one to score 1,000 points with that scoring standard.

However, considering the fact that Zuul activated all of the Magic Dragon Statues at once, it was decided that we all showed 1,000 points worth of combat ability. This put Pomera and Philia at 2,500 points each and me at 3,000 points. We all achieved the Royal Dragon rank.

We also learned that Mitsuru only managed to completely defeat one 50-point statue. He got 500 points on the first trial, 20 on the second, and 50 on the third, bringing him to a total of 570 points—just short of becoming a Gold Dragon.

Raigan seemed pleased that his score was still higher than Mitsuru’s. I wasn’t sure if that grudge of his was a good thing or not.

“Absolutely incredible,” said Odio. “A perfect score is almost unheard of! The only other case of a perfect score is a legendary dragonkin from nearly a thousand years ago!”

Pomera blinked at that. “There was someone else as absurdly powerful as

Kanata?”

Odio bit his lower lip out of discomfort. “Ah, yes, well...perhaps. It’s only a legend and I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’d rather not say their name.”

For some reason, that was enough to make the connection in my mind. “Was it...the Ruler of the Skies?”

The moment I said that name, both Raigan’s and Odio’s expressions changed to surprise.

I made a mistake. If word got around I was investigating the Ruler of the Skies before I met the Dragon King, things could go badly.

“You’ve heard of the name...” said Odio with a pained expression.

“Y-yes...just in some rumors though. I thought the Ruler was a dragon though, not a dragonkin.”

“To be expected. The Ruler is now masquerading as a dragon. This isn’t something I should be talking about...but the Ruler of the Skies was one of the original dragonkin...one of the first. They say that generation—born from dragons—could still transform into dragons due to their high level.”

“Huh...”

So, the Ruler was from here, the Garden. I didn’t know that.

I had heard that dragonkin were born so they could watch over humanity without creating strife between dragons and humans. Knowing that the Ruler was a dragonkin meant that they had to come from the Garden or a settlement like it.

“A thousand years ago, the Ruler committed an atrocity in the Garden of the Dragons,” explained Odio. “As dragonkin, we are meant to protect the Dragon Vortex and its magic... But they used it for their own purposes and were driven from this land for that crime. Though, I doubt there was someone powerful enough to drive them out, even back in those days. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say they left of their own accord and we and the Dragons have given up on catching them. It seems they’ve been working in the shadows for the past thousand years, or so I’ve heard. They are the greatest stain on the

history of the Garden of the Dragons.”

That was new. Ramiel’s summary cast the Ruler as an evil dragon that broke some dragon taboo. She hadn’t said anything about the Dragon Vortex.

I checked how Raigan reacted and saw his expression was somewhat pained. It remained unclear whether or not Odio really saw the Ruler as an enemy or a shameful pariah.

“...It’s not a particularly happy story. Hearing the name is enough to put many dragonkin in a bad mood. It’s best not to bring it up,” said Odio with a weak smile.

“Anyway, you said you wanted to meet with the Dragon King, yeah? Since you got the Royal Dragon rank, you will be given the right to challenge him, but...are you really going to?” asked Raigan.

“I don’t want to cause any problems in the Garden for no reason. But...there are a few items I really want to borrow from him. So, I think I might have to...” I said.

“I see...” Raigan’s shoulders slumped.

I didn’t want to rock the boat if I didn’t have to. I was hoping that we could get the items through negotiation, but I had a feeling the Dragon King might take it as an insult and get upset.

“That was something I wished to speak with you about,” said Odio with a troubled look on his face. I looked up at him. He wiped his brow and averted his gaze. “...The Dragon King has been suffering from a stomach ache. He’s ordered that no one besides his servants may enter the castle.”

“Stomach...pain?”

Chapter 5:

An Audience with the Dragon King

– 1 –

“SO THIS IS IT?” I asked, looking up at the large castle in front of me.

It had white walls and a dark-colored roof. Golden dragon decorations dotted the exterior. It was a massive, elegant structure in a Japanese style.

“Um... Master, perhaps you might consider coming back later?” asked Odio.

He’d led us this far but made stammering attempts to stop us the whole time.

“I came to the Garden specifically because I wanted to meet with the Dragon King. There’s no turning back now. I’m sorry.”

This might leave the dragonkin with a bad impression of me, but it was the truth.

I could put off getting items from the Dragon King’s castle, but he needed to know about the Ruler of the Skies’s plans as soon as possible. And if the Dragon King’s health wasn’t well, the Ruler or the Skies’s followers might hasten their plans.

“You said his stomach hurts. Does he normally have poor health?” I asked.

He was the leader who kept control over the dragonkin, a people who typically had high levels. There was no way his own level was low. I had a hard time imagining he’d get a tummy ache. Something odd was going on.

“Much as it vexed me for the Dragon King to do something as cowardly as fake an illness, if he decided this was what was best for the Garden...” Odio muttered something in a low voice. Then his head snapped up and he shook it violently. “A-ahem! N-no, the Dragon King *truly* is unwell at the moment!”

“Don’t worry, Odio-san. I have elixirs and potions that are effective on a wide variety of diseases and curses.”

“N-no...well...the Garden also has such medicines. Besides, His Majesty is not the kind of person to fall victim to your average illness or curse. Th-that’s it...! It’s not impossible that, um, he is the victim of some mysterious jinx by an enemy of the Garden...”

“Mysterious jinx by an enemy...?”

The dots began to connect in my mind. If someone was cursing the Dragon King with this timing, there was no way the Ruler of the Skies wasn’t involved. If not the Ruler themselves, it could be the work of a loyal assassin.

“Y-yes, exactly, a jinx!” Odio continued. “Which is why you should wait for a little bit... I will find a way to contact the Dragon King and convince him to deal with you in a peaceful and appropriate way... Or, I mean, I will ask about his health. Please, Master, take some time to rest in the Garden.”

“If there’s a chance this is the work of some enemy, then we have even more reason to hurry,” I said. “My master is very skilled at alchemy; she is one of the most knowledgeable people about potions in the world. I’m sure I can help.”

When I left Cocytus, Lunaère had stuffed my magic bag with every elixir and potion imaginable. They should be helpful for undoing whatever was done to the Dragon King. Even if they had no effect, we absolutely had to talk with him considering the urgent situation.

“O-oh... N-no, b-b-but, uh...” Odio groaned in agitation.

He was acting strange. Something had seemed weird about him ever since we met back up after finishing all the trials. Almost like he was hiding something.

“...Pomera-san, do you think Odio-san is acting a little odd?” I asked in a low whisper. I didn’t want to suspect him, but I was starting to wonder if he had some connection to the Ruler of the Skies.

I found it unlikely he would betray the Garden, but maybe it was exactly because of who he was. Maybe someone he loved was taken hostage and he was being forced to act against the Dragon King. Everything I’d heard about the Ruler so far seemed to imply they’d be fine doing something underhanded like that.

“...I doubt it’s what you suspect it is, Kanata... Maybe we should do what Odio

says and wait a few days?” she replied.

“But why? I don’t think this is something we should be putting off. If something happens, we can’t undo it afterward.”

“Hmmm... I guess you are right about that...” Pomera frowned.

When we came up to the Dragon King’s castle, we saw one guard on duty. She had peach-colored hair and an aura of abject indifference. Fairly slim and nearly six and a half feet tall, she had large fangs, fierce claws, and sharp, reptilian eyes which seemed to be taking stock of us.

Odio had already told us about her. She was one of the Twelve Gold Dragons and had almost achieved Holy Dragon rank: Flaus, the Wicked Claw. She had a deep respect for the Dragon King and was normally seen guarding his castle.

“Th-that’s right!” said Odio. “His Majesty said none may pass. If you try to force your way past Flaus, people will talk. I’ll try and convince him once more... but really, you should give up for today...”

“...Sir Odio and the humans,” said Flaus. “I’ve been hearing rumors about you for some time now. Congratulations on receiving the Royal Dragon rank.” Her tone was flat, but she bowed her head to us. Pomera, Philia, and I returned the gesture. “However, the Dragon King has ordered that no one may enter. Unfortunately, I must refuse your visit.”

I gulped. The words she said were polite, but she had an overwhelming presence. “...About that—I have potions that are effective against diseases and curses. I’d like to offer them as a gift to the king. And I’d rather keep this quiet, but...I might have an idea of who laid the curse on him in the first place. We need to act on this situation quickly. Please let us see him!”

I bowed to Flaus. She stared at me in silence, but then eventually made her decision and said, “Hmm, I see... If that’s the case, then my decision is to let you pass. Please help His Majesty.” She bowed quietly.

I’d thought there was no chance she’d agree, but maybe I expressed our urgency well. “Thank you!”

“F-Flaus, don’t you think you should check with the king before letting them pass?!” said Odio in a panic.

“His Majesty seems *odd* at the moment and there are some things that bother me. I have a faint suspicion—as insulting as it is—that this may be some repulsive attempt to fake an illness to avoid being challenged by the visitors. But it makes sense if there has been some attack by an enemy,” said Flaus.

Then she continued, “This person is here because he helped a dragon. You, Sir Odio, have vouched for his character. If he says this is the situation, then I feel comfortable letting him pass. There’s no reason for me to stubbornly stick to my orders and keep these three here doing nothing.”

“F-Flaus, I think you should reconsider...”

“Do you *not* trust them?”

“With my life! My master is a wonderful person! After all these years, I have confidence in my ability to judge a person’s character!”

“Then there shouldn’t be a problem,” said Flaus simply as Odio was getting worked up. She looked at us and signaled for us to follow, then she walked through the door into the castle.

“Flaus, I don’t think you understand what the problem is,” said Odio quietly, but then he let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. He closed his eyes and pressed his hands together, as though in prayer. Then he weakly murmured “Good luck in battle, Your Majesty... You’ll need it.”

– 2 –

AFTER FLAUS APPROVED our meeting with the Dragon King, she and Odio waited at the entrance while the three of us walked down the castle hall and toward the Chamber of the Dragon King.

“It took a lot of running around, but we’re finally here,” I said with a sigh of relief. Now we could deliver Ramiel’s message to the king.

Even though she said the Dragon King would trust us and come up with a solution, I was worried about whether or not we could rely on him. I hoped he

wasn't as stubborn as Raigan...

"Kanata, you said you were interested in the items the Dragon King has, but I think in this meeting we should deal with telling him the situation and treating his illness," suggested Pomeria. "You can challenge him after he recovers."

That seemed fair. Even though the rules said I could challenge the Dragon King and win to get access to a piece of his treasure, that was the type of thing that would only make problems if I did it while he was still sick. Besides, we needed to resolve the Ruler of the Skies problem first, and to do that I needed his cooperation. I couldn't be too careful, as a human trying to win a Dragon King's aid.

"...Speaking of which, I'm not the only one. The two of you are Royal Dragons too," I said. "If we each take turns challenging him, then we can get three items from his collection."

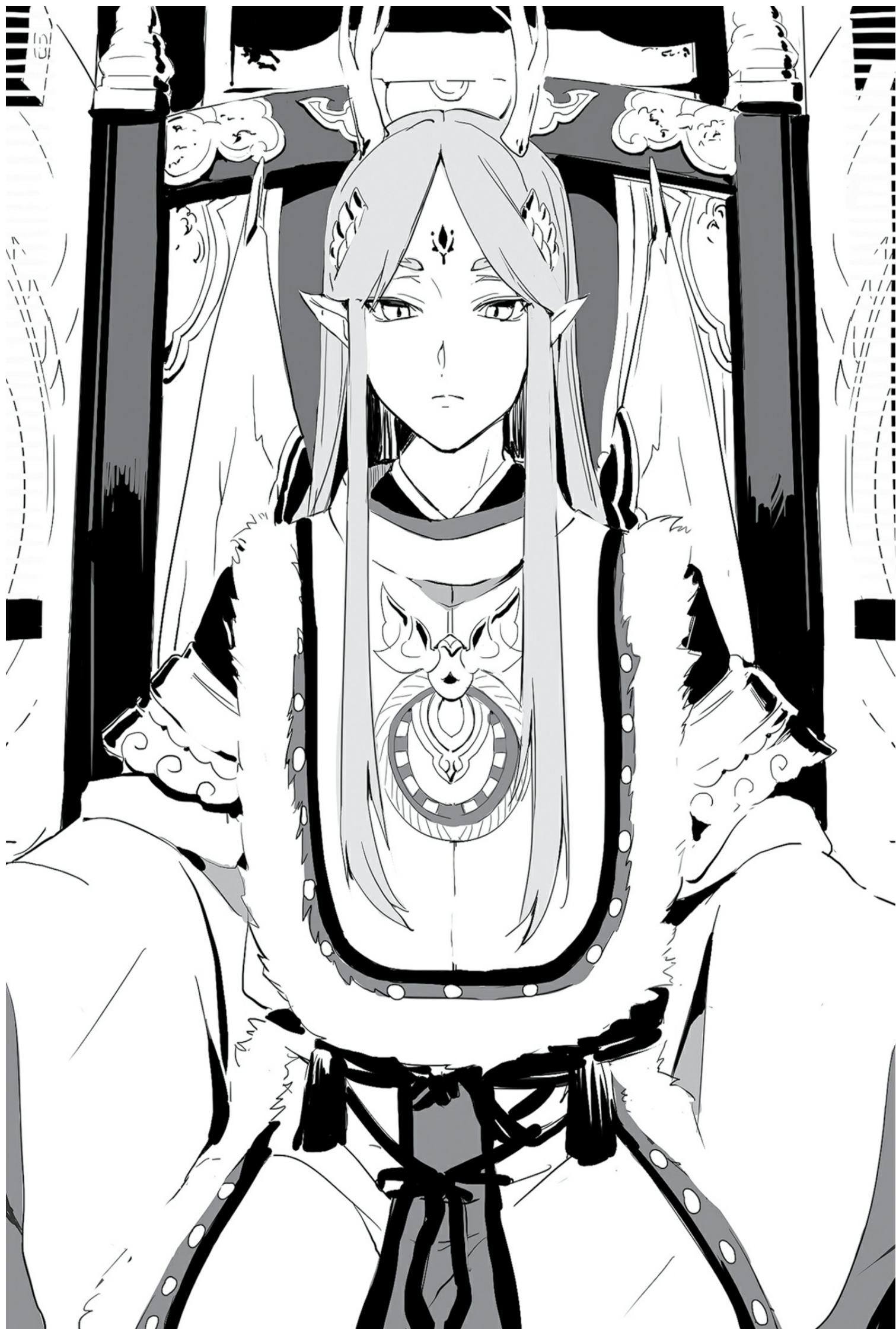
"K-Kanata, don't you think that'll make the dragonkin hate us...?" said Pomeria.

Obviously, I didn't want the dragonkin to hate us. But if there were some items among their treasure that seemed useful for keeping Naiarotop in check, then I wanted to get them as soon as possible. Even if I had to use a bit of force. When they had sales on at the grocery store that limited you to one item, we'd split up the family and get one each...but maybe that wasn't the approach to take in the Dragon King's castle.

"Philia too! Philia wants to challenge the Dragon King!" said Philia. She seemed to view the idea of challenging the Dragon King as if she was waiting her turn to play a video game.

I smiled and tried to move away from the topic, secretly praying to myself that nothing weird would happen.

We arrived at the Chamber of the Dragon King after climbing the stairs. There was a man with long, pale green hair sitting in an opulent chair. Golden wings spread out from his back.



“Are you King Ridler...?” I asked.

“Kanata, the one I have heard so much about. Indeed, I am Ridler, the Dragon King.”

“Um, I apologize for doing this while you’re not feeling well, but—” I tried to explain, but Ridler held a hand up to silence me.

“It matters not. I already know everything, and there is no need to explain,” he said and held out the pointer finger on his left hand. On it was a ring set with a huge rainbow gem. “This is the Dragon Vortex Ring. The Dragon King’s duty is to lead the dragonkin and protect the Dragon Vortex that lies beneath this castle. In addition to allowing me to control the anomaly, this ring gives me the ability to sense magic moving near the castle. I knew you were here the moment you approached the castle with Odio.”

Ridler’s tone was calm as he spoke.

I wasn’t sure what I would’ve done if the Dragon King was slow to understand things, but this seemed like a good start. There was a particular dignity to him befitting his title. This was my first time meeting him, but I felt like he already knew everything I was thinking.

“So, you passed by Odio and Flaus? Well, considering how they have been acting, I suspected it might turn out this way. They were skeptical of my decision. I believed it to be the best option for protecting the Garden. In the end, it served only to fuel doubt among the Holy and Gold Dragons.”

He seemed rather forlorn.

“Er...excuse me?” I asked.

Odio had been acting weird, causing me to think he was hiding something from us. But it seemed Ridler was the one with secrets.

I was confused. Was Ridler actually the one with connections to the Ruler of the Skies and Odio had known all along? No, I didn’t think that was possible...

Ridler kept on going. “Kanata. You have come to me, the Dragon King, with a firm goal in mind.”

“Y-yes, that’s right. Though, it looks like you’ve already guessed what it is...”

For now, it was fine to leave the items to another day. But I absolutely had to tell Ridler about what Ramiel told me. The Ruler of the Skies was targeting the Garden of the Dragons. Once that was done, then Ramiel could come back to the Garden.

“...Would you perhaps be willing to set aside that goal for now? There are things at play here. I will ensure you are compensated for the trouble it causes,” said Ridler, and my eyes opened wide in surprise.

So, Ridler *did* know that the Ruler of the Skies was targeting the Dragon Vortex from the beginning. He knew, and chose to ignore it. Then why did Ramiel send me to talk to him? Her flight from the guardian after everyone dismissed her reports no longer made a lick of sense.

“Y-you see...” he continued. “I hesitate to say this directly considering my position, but you have no real stake in the honor and customs of this land. What I hope you will trust me on is that this is not simply to protect myself. Put simply—and I hate to say this—it was never believed beings as powerful as yourselves would visit the Garden of the Dragons. I would be happy to invite you on a later date into the treasury as my personal friends, but until then—”

“Stop with this nonsense!” I shouted. “Don’t hide this behind a smoke screen, saying you have your reasons or your standing to consider! Ridler-san, you knew everything but lied and hid in your castle as you waited to see how things would play out! Is that the role of the Dragon King?! I came here for a reason and I won’t give up!”

I’d made a promise to Ramiel, after all. And the Ruler of the Skies had already decided on their own that I was their enemy. I wasn’t going to leave this place until I got an explanation about what was happening here in the Garden. No more hiding information, no more deceit.

“I thought this may be the case...” said Ridler. “My request was nothing more than the desire of a king who doesn’t know how to give in. Please, forget I ever said it. My resolve is firm.” He let out a pained sigh and leapt from his chair to the floor. He landed in a battle stance, claws extended. “I, Ridler Radon Drafique, will not run, and I will not hide! I accept Kanata’s challenge with dignity!”

“Hang on... What?” A clueless squeak slipped out in my confusion.

“Hmm? What is the matter, Kanata? Did you not want to challenge me?”

“No, I’m not really in any rush for that...” We certainly weren’t on the same page—we weren’t even reading the same book.

“Wait... The reason you’re angry *isn’t* because I faked an illness to postpone our fight in a vain attempt to make you go away?” he said.

“What?! The Dragon King did something that dumb?!” I was so surprised I couldn’t keep myself from shouting my honest thoughts.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a while.

The odds that Ridler had some connection to the Ruler of the Skies were dropping fast.

“Uh, sorry... That just sort of came out.” I said. “From the shock, I guess. If that’s the case though, uh, I think we can work someth—”

“C-come at me, human! I shall show you the power of the protector of the world!” shouted Ridler before I could finish. Whether from shame or possibly anger, his face was bright red.

– 3 –

“FIRE MAGIC LEVEL 9: Dragon Ray!” shouted Ridler. Two overlapping magic circles appeared in front of him, and a massive beam of red light shot from the center.

I was still utterly lost, but I really doubted he’d fire off an area-of-effect spell like that to shut me up. I wasn’t expecting us to fight here, either; using heavy-hitting attacks like that in the throne room would likely leave the Chamber of the Dragon King in shambles.

I leapt far to the side, evading the beam of light. I looked back and saw it burn a hole through the castle’s wall.

I-is this really okay?

I heard something slicing through the air and turned to look. Ridler had flanked me while I was distracted and swung his claws at me. He must have fired off the Dragon Ray and then chased after it, using the beam of light to hide him from my eyes and ears as he approached.

“I knew you would be able to handle such a spell! Unfortunately for you, I fight with the authority of the Garden on my shoulders! I will not easily lose! Dragon Technique: Raging Dragon Dance!”

I leaned to avoid Ridler’s claws. He used the force of his swing and his wings to twirl gracefully in the air, then came at me again with two kicks. I blocked them both with my left arm. Ridler flowed into a new stance, connecting seamlessly with a slash from the talons on both his hands.

“Um... Ridler-san, uh, if it’s okay with you, we can do this later...” I said as I ward off his blows.

“You can even find time to talk while defending against my skill?!” Ridler gritted his teeth and glared at me. “I am the Dragon King! You think I’ll stop after a surprise attack simply because you show some consideration?!”

Ridler drew on his magic again. As before, two overlapping magic circles appeared.

“It is true that you are abnormally powerful. However, you cannot evade a close-range Dragon Ray while dealing with my attacks!” he cried.

I slapped Ridler’s cheek with the back of my hand. The magic circles shattered. Ridler held his face as he tumbled across the ground, eventually crashing into the throne.

It was true that if I had been entirely focused on dealing with the Raging Dragon Dance, I wouldn’t have been able to handle a close-range Dragon Ray too. But it wasn’t like that Dance had left me with no way out of the series of attacks.

Ridler also didn’t activate his Dragon Ray all that fast. If he was against a low-level opponent, that would have worked, and he probably could have managed by fighting normally.

He was right to think that an early win would be easier to pull off than a long fight, but he shouldn't have chosen that strategy after determining I was a higher level. Maybe he was trying to hurry a finish to the fight and panicked.

"Um... Are we done now? There's something else I want to talk to you about..." I said, but Ridler didn't get up.

"K-Kanata...did you just kill him...?" asked Pomera in a quiet voice. She'd retreated to a corner of the room along with Philia.

"What?! N-no! I only tapped him! And it was a *light* tap!"

"A tap from you isn't a tap!"

Sweat ran down my face.

N-no way, that's impossible. Ridler was supposed to be a fairly high level, and that series of attacks from before had some threat to them. He should definitely be able to handle me flinging him away lightly.

But, just to be certain, I used Status Check to see.

RIDLER RADON DRAFIQUE

Race: Dragonkin

Lv: 875

HP: 2764/4900

MP: 3857/4725

...Good, he still has plenty of HP left.

"It's okay, he still has about half his health," I said.

"...Don't you think that's cutting it a bit close? Taking half his health when you were only meaning to lightly tap him?" pressed Pomera.

D-did I hit him in a bad place...?

Seeing that Ridler wasn't getting up, I thought maybe I'd knocked him unconscious by hitting his jaw. Perhaps it was best to end the fight here and

treat his wounds.

As I was thinking that, a strange sound came from the floor ahead of me. I took several steps back at the same time the surface of the floor exploded, sending out a shock wave that punched a hole in the ceiling.

Ridler slowly got to his feet. “Open Palm Blast... It is one of the complete Dragon Techniques in which a palm strike is cloaked in magic to transfer it to an object. I have never before seen someone evade it on their first time seeing it.”

“Why...” I started to say, but I swallowed back my words.

I was wondering why he had played dead, made a surprise attack, and was now acting like some tough guy. Worse still, he’d actually looked cool to me for a second before I thought it through. I chose not to mention it, since I wanted this fight to end sooner rather than later.

“Open Palm Blast!” Ridler struck his palm against the wall. I moved from where I was, and the floor behind me erupted. “Dragon Technique: Thousand Feathers of Nirvana!”

He spread his wings wide, launching out a spray of golden feathers directly toward me. I snatched the foremost feather out of the air and used it to hit away the others. “Uh... Ridler-san, can we say we’re done here?”

“I am the king of the proud dragonkin! We do not simply allow one to admit defeat once a battle has begun! Did I not make it clear? I will not run, and I will not hide!”

He leapt far backwards, increasing the distance between us, and struck the wall to send another Open Palm Blast at me. As I stepped forward to evade it, he unleashed another wave of Feathers of Nirvana, then leapt in a different direction to keep the distance between us.

“As a dragonkin, battle is sacred to us. I long ago forgot what it feels like to give my all in battle... I am grateful that you have reminded me! Kanata, let us dance together until a conclusion is reached!”

He kicked off a wall, soaring through the air to a corner of the Chamber of the Dragon King.

“Ridler-san...”

This guy...was saying things that sounded cool, but making no attempt to get closer. Not since I hit him in the face. He was constantly using all his energy to move, to keep me away while he launched his one long-range Dragon Technique, which left him with few openings.

Perhaps due to how badly his last attempt went, he wasn't even casting Dragon Ray at me anymore—even though it was basically his biggest spell. He claimed he wouldn't run or hide, but he was doing his best to avoid me.

“Open Palm Blast!” Ridler crouched and hit his palm against the floor. The section of floor I was standing on erupted, but I didn't try to dodge. I just took the hit.

“G-good, a hit! This should help me maintain my image...” He let out a sigh of relief.

I threw the golden feather I was still holding from inside the dust cloud. This way, I could hide the wind up for the throw. Ridler was especially vulnerable, since he thought he'd landed a good strike.

The feather pierced into his throat.

“Gah!”

He tried to flee to another corner of the Chamber while pulling out the feather, wary that another attack was coming.

The thing was, the Chamber of the Dragon King wasn't that large of a battleground and Ridler was bouncing between the corners. It was incredibly easy to predict his movements.

I cut him off the instant he landed in the corner and he turned and tried to fly away again.

“...I'm sorry, Ridler-san,” I said as I kicked him in the butt.

“Agh!” He collapsed to the floor.

Tremors ran through his body. His eyes were rolled up in his head and foam spilled from his mouth.

I'd put a bit of force into that kick, since Ridler was fairly tough and unlikely to give in. It was hard to judge how hard I should hit him, but I decided in the end that a kick to the rear wouldn't end up doing serious damage. At least I wouldn't have to worry about accidentally breaking his neck or giving him a concussion.

— 4 —

POST-BATTLE, Ridler and I walked down the stairs of the castle, him leaning against me the whole time.

"Incredible... Kanata," he said. "I never imagined I would lose to a human. This world is full of surprises. Ha ha, perhaps that is what makes it so beautiful, and so interesting. Don't you agree?"

"Well..."

"And say nothing of the damage to the castle. It is a small price to pay for the sweet taste of battle. I, the Dragon King Ridler Radon Drafique, respect you as my greatest friend. You are only a human, yet you achieved the highest honor imaginable here in the Garden of the Dragons. I swear on my title of Dragon King, I will say nothing negative. However, as a human who achieved such great deeds, you may find yourself the target of unwanted resentment. If there are any dragonkin to show you rudeness, simply inform me."

"Okay, but you're the one who damaged the castle...?"

Now that our fight was over, he was showing me to the treasury where he would bestow a gift.

Apparently, the treasure room was in the basement of the castle and heavily secured. The damage I did to Ridler's rear meant he was still a little wobbly on his legs.

I wasn't in that big of a rush to get my prize, but Ridler was quite insistent that he give me my item right away. I hadn't asked him why, but I imagined it had to do with Garden customs.

Strength was directly related to status here in the Garden of the Dragons. A challenge against the Dragon King was a battle where the throne hung in the balance. The winner either got a piece of treasure, or they got to be the new Dragon King.

But the rules in the Garden weren't made with the consideration that anyone other than a dragonkin would ever win against the Dragon King. If an outsider who wasn't even a dragonkin said they wanted to be the king, well, that could cause serious problems. Ridler probably wouldn't relax until he gave me my gift.

"...With that much destruction, no one will suspect I was defeated easily," murmured Ridler as he looked upwards. He had his position to worry about, so I didn't blame him for saying it. It did sound a bit suspect, all the same.

"Kanata, on behalf of the dragons—those who regulate the world—let me give you a friendly warning. This world is like a set of scales. If a heavy weight is placed on one side, a similar weight will be placed on the other. The more powerful you are, the more likely you will encounter others of power. I cannot begin to imagine what is unfolding, but there is one thing I do know: someday, you will find yourself in a great battle that will influence the fate of this world."

He looked grave as he spoke.

I gulped. I understood what he was getting at.

I'd already received other predictions like that. Corpse Doll Alice had mentioned the overall path of the world, and the evil dragon Dis had mentioned the Unseen Hand of the Gods... Naiarotop had already made moves against me.

"You have chosen to come to the Garden of the Dragons because you realized this already," continued Ridler. "You may do as you wish. We dragons cannot help humans directly, but I do pray for your, and humanity's, peace."

"Ridler-san...thank you." I bowed.

Ridler was a native to this world, and he had a comprehensive view of it. Maybe that was a characteristic of the dragons.

What he said seemed so significant to me that it was hard to imagine he was the same person from our fight a few minutes earlier, dashing away and hurling long-range attacks. Even I was starting to feel like the fight had been more of a

close one than in reality.

Below the castle of the Dragon King was a large stone door with images of dragons carved into it.

“Open,” said Ridler. The ring he wore glowed in response. The door split down the middle and opened. Ridler frowned slightly and said, “Hmm. I suppose it was unavoidable considering I fell unconscious, but the barrier on the treasure room has weakened slightly.”

“I-is that a problem?”

“I explained to you that this ring allows me to control the Dragon Vortex, yes? A barrier is in place using the magic from the Vortex to prevent people easily approaching the castle. The treasure stores are inside that barrier as well. Since the ring allows me to manipulate that magic, there will be a slight variation if something happens to me.”

Ridler showed me his hand with the Dragon Vortex Ring on it.

Umm...okay.

The Dragon King was more involved with the control and protection of the Dragon Vortex than I thought. At least this explained why the dragonkin were so obsessed with strength and why they were quick to replace the Dragon King with someone more powerful. The Dragon King *must* be the most powerful of the dragonkin.

“Does that mean...there’s a chance someone could have gotten in here?” I asked.

“No, the barrier is only slightly weaker. I did not remove the ring and the barrier is not easily breached. If someone managed to sneak in, the barrier would have to be completely broken.” Ridler let go of my arm and walked toward the treasure room. “My thanks. I am feeling more myself now. I trust that this goes without saying, but please do avoid doing anything untoward while inside the treasure room.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Your legs are shaking a lot...” I asked.

Before Ridler could reply, Philia crouched down and prodded his thigh. His

knee buckled and he slumped to the ground, clutching his thigh.

“Agh! Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“S-s-sorry! Sorry! Philia just...” she said.

He might have been putting on a brave face, but I still had to take anything he said with a pinch of salt.



Chapter 6:

The Ruler of the Skies

– 1 –

WE WALKED THROUGH the doorway and into a massive cavern. The floors and walls shimmered faintly with a rainbow glow from the magic from the Dragon Vortex.

“What do you think? This is the most beautiful sight in the entire Garden,” said Ridler, and I nodded.

“It’s incredible. But wouldn’t it be bad if things got messed up down here? Is it all right letting us down here?” I asked.

“What are you saying? We became brethren the moment you were invited here to the Garden and you are our valued guests. Besides, you have earned the right to visit this place in combat. Look. What you see in the distance is the Dragon Vortex.”

Far away was a gap in the walls, a tear in the world...the Dragon Vortex. Vivid rainbow light flowed from the rift.

Around the hole were trees, despite there being no sunlight. Their trunks were a bright, translucent azure and their leaves were of every color imaginable.

“They grow from the life essence overflowing from the magic of the Vortex,” explained Ridler. “Their roots are linked to the anomaly... Touching them without care can throw the magic in the Vortex out of balance, which could lead to disasters throughout the world. If the three of you did try something, I would give my life trying to stop you...even though I would likely fail.”

I’d known this location was important for the world but seeing it in front of me drove that meaning home.

“...Which is why I ask you not to try anything,” he said, a pleading smile on his face. He was being way too frank. “If an enemy did go after the Vortex, I would use the magic of the Vortex to fight them off, but that would end with the magic in disarray. And I am under no false impression that using the Vortex would allow me to defeat you.”

...Way too frank.

Is it really okay for a place like this that can affect the whole world to be left in a single person's care?

It's true that he was far more powerful than anyone I met in the human world. At the moment, however, he was a bit of a mess.

Ridler's stats suddenly came back to mind.

RIDLER RADON DRAFIQUE

Race: Dragonkin

Lv: 875

HP: 2764/4900

MP: 3857/4725

...Ridler Radon Drafique.

Something was weird about that. For some reason, I'd been under the assumption that the dragonkin of the Garden didn't have surnames. Thinking back though, Raigan had a surname too.

“Ah...”

Then I remembered something that Raigan had explained early on.

“If someone doesn't get even a hundred points for their total score from the three trials, then they're considered an Infant Dragon regardless of their age, and they're put under several restrictions. The easiest one to explain is that they're not allowed out of the Garden. For outsiders, this would mean not getting a title and not being treated equally while they're in the Garden.”

That's right, Ramiel didn't have a surname. Maybe she scored so low on the Dragon Trials that she wasn't allowed to take one...or it was stripped from her.

My original impression of the Garden of the Dragons hadn't been that positive, but I'd come to think of it as a nice enough place. Realizing this about the surnames made me feel like their restrictive obsession with strength cast a shadow over the beauty. Then again, the dragonkin were a race born to bear a heavy burden and it wasn't my place as an outsider to judge.

I just didn't like to think that someone I liked was being scorned.

"Is something the matter, Kanata?" asked Ridler.

"Uh...well, there're some dragonkin in the Garden who aren't even allowed to have surnames, aren't there?"

"I beg your pardon...?" Ridler frowned.

"Uh, no, sorry for the random question, it's just—"

"No... I mean, there are no such dragonkin," replied Ridler abruptly.

For a moment, I didn't understand what he'd said. Part of me wondered if he said that because he didn't even see these people as fellow dragonkin, but the expression on Ridler's face assured me that wasn't the case.

I'd only seen Ramiel's stats for a few seconds. Maybe I misread something? Surely not.

"Though that may not have been true a long time ago...or perhaps in other regions the dragonkin protect, but... There are not many of our race. As far as I am aware, there are no other dragonkin settlements in this country," continued Ridler.

I put a hand over my mouth. Was Ramiel not from the Garden of the Dragons, then?

Thinking back, she'd asked us not to mention her name since she was treated as a traitor, which meant we couldn't even confirm she was from the Garden.

I never had any suspicions about that. But I should have suspected something the moment I saw Raigan's stats.

I think I've made a huge mistake.

"Agh, it burns!" cried Ridler, clutching at his finger as he doubled over.

"R-Ridler-san?"

"The Dragon Vortex Ring is burning hot! Has it gone mad? Nothing like this has ever happened before!"

I looked at Ridler's hand and saw his ring had literally turned red from the heat. Smoke hissed from his finger as it burned his flesh. "Ridler-san, take off the ring!"

He clutched at his arm, an expression of agony on his face as he endured the pain. "I cannot! We dragonkin have controlled the Vortex for generations with this ring. If something is happening to the ring, it means something strange is happening to the Vortex. I cannot remove the ring, even if it should burn my finger off!"

Just then, a wall made of rainbow light appeared, surrounding the entire underground area. Ridler's eyes opened wide as he looked around.

"Th-this is a barrier that uses the magic of the Vortex...a past Dragon King installed it for emergencies! I always keep the barrier in place, but I have never seen it this powerful! Why is it activating now?!"

It was possible that it activated accidentally because the ring was going wild, but something about this felt intentional.

"Maybe someone's trying to control the Vortex..." I said.

"Impossible! Nothing beside this ring allows someone to freely control the Vortex!"

Then there was a rumbling from the Dragon Vortex itself.

A massive black dragon, its wings spread wide, came out of the gash in the wall. Its split tail whipped through the air. The surface of its body was coated in the same rainbow light as the area around us.

"Th-the Ruler of the Skies?! Here?!" said Ridler as he glared at the dragon.

I had come face to face with my true enemy.

But how could the Ruler of the Skies get here? And why? What was Ramiel after? What was Ramiel?!

There was only one thing I knew for certain. This was an emergency.

“Philia-chan, protect Pomera-san!” I shouted.

“Okay! Philia will take care of her!”

I put an arm around Ridler’s waist and leapt away from that spot. Philia grabbed Pomera’s hand and pulled her far away—columns of black flame swept behind us as the Ruler of the Skies used their breath weapon.

Once I’d moved to a safe location, I set Ridler down.

“V-villain! There is no telling what will happen to the world if this area is ravaged!” Ridler gritted his teeth and glared at the Ruler.

“The Ruler of the Skies took over the Dragon Vortex...? Ridler-san, I’m sorry, I think I was lied to and used to allow them inside,” I said.

Ramiel was the one who asked me to meet with the Dragon King in the first place. She also used the items as a lure. She must be behind this. Most likely, she wanted me to fight with Ridler and make a gap in the defenses of the Vortex. The Dragon King almost never left his castle. He was always there, protecting and controlling the Dragon Vortex. The only time his oversight of it became lax was when someone achieved Royal Dragon rank and challenged him.

“Hee hee hee... You are only slightly off the mark,” came a telepathic message from the Ruler of the Skies. *“It is true that the Dragon King is always aware of the magic moving around the castle, and he could strengthen the barriers if he sensed danger. But, while that is a little annoying, I would have plenty of ways of clawing my way in here with just a little preparation and planning. The only reason I didn’t do it before is because there was no reason to. My body was long ago filled with the magic of the Dragon Vortex. Returning here gained me nothing!”*

The dragon’s massive form was encapsulated in light. It shrank smaller and smaller.

“Until now. The thing I am after, Kanata, is you. I have lured you in here, I have trapped you here, and I will use the infinite magic of the Vortex to attack you here!”

The dragon’s form turned into that of a girl. I recognized that wavy, velvet-blue hair, those round golden eyes. She wore a necklace with a bright red crystal set in it.

Her large horns, her split tail that was longer than she was tall, and her huge wings were new. But most striking of all were her arms: they were covered in thick black scales and wicked-looking claws tipped her fingers.

“I can’t say I hate kind fools. They’re so easy to manipulate, hee hee. You were on another level though, I must say! Sorry about this, but I have an important order to fulfill, Kanata,” she said, saying it in an affected, shamelessly cooing voice.

“Ramiel?!”

I had learned by now that the Ruler of the Skies was a dragonkin, but there was no way Ramiel could be the Ruler. She was only level 10.

“I never expected to need something like this back when Veranta pushed this on me, but it did turn out to be useful. I am glad I sent the Twin Abyssal Dragons to scout you out beforehand,” she said. She wrapped her claws around the crystal on her necklace, crushing it. The moment she did, the force of her presence changed.

RAMIEL

Race: Dragonkin

Lv: 1780

HP: 9078/9078

MP: 9256/9256

A level disguise...?

That was entirely for use against travelers. So...the Unseen Hand of the Gods had that sort of thing at its disposal?

At this point, I was beginning to see everything that had drawn me in. I had thought the Ruler of the Skies was incredibly cold-hearted when she killed the Twin Abyssal Dragons, but there was a reason she did that: she learned how powerful I was through them. She determined that she couldn't win against me if we were fighting on equal footing, so she decided to manipulate me instead. Killing them both ensured I couldn't pick up on info about her that way.

"I was surprised how much higher your stats were than I thought. But I stole my magic from the Dragon Vortex in the first place. The Vortex has decided that I, too, am a part of it. I can manipulate the Vortex as much as I want as long as I'm here, even without that tacky ring."

...That's right, Odio said the Ruler of the Skies was a criminal who broke dragonkin rules and stole the Vortex's magic.

Which would allow her to increase the power of the barrier around the Vortex. And she managed to make it inside even though the barrier was still in place because she entered while Ridler was unconscious, then put the barrier back up from the inside to make it look like no one got in. All the pieces to the puzzle were falling into place.

"Do you get it now? As long as I'm near the Dragon Vortex, I am immortal and all-powerful. Your level is meaningless!" she said with a cackle.

– 2 –

"HEE HEE HEE... Sorry, but if you fight me now, I will not die," said Ramiel. She held up one of the fingers on her huge, scaled arms and smiled at us, challenging us.

"W-wait! What about Rosemonde? She was watching over you!" shouted Pomera.

My eyes grew wide. That was right. Rosemonde talked about going back to

Ploroque with Ramiel and protecting her from the servants of the Ruler of the Skies.

“Ah, Rosemonde...” said Ramiel. “That weak human woman. Well, I was planning on just shaking her off at some point, but she was far more tenacious and annoying than I expected.”

“Y-you! What did you do?!”

Ramiel stuck her tongue out at our horrified faces. “Hee hee, I hope she’s okay.”

Something snapped inside my mind.

Rosemonde had a big attitude but she had an even bigger heart. She must have been worried about Ramiel, who had been masquerading as a weak person.

Even at a low level, Ramiel could have simply slipped away from Rosemonde instead of killing her. I couldn’t be completely certain Ramiel *had* killed Rosemonde at this point...but I was certain that I needed to go find out.

“...If I’m your target, don’t drag others into it,” I said, drawing the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and rushing toward her.

“K-Kanata, do not be drawn in by her taunts!” shouted Ridler. “The Ruler of the Skies drew upon the magic of the Vortex and gained near-eternal life! She is both one of the founding dragonkin, and our sworn enemy! You can’t win! And now, she is connected directly to the Vortex! If you fight her now, you will be utterly destroyed!”

His clutch on the burning ring never wavered.

“Our only option is to break the barrier, abandon the Garden, and flee! Surely, she will not ravage the world without reason! We cannot allow our emotions to get the best of us if we are to retake this place!”

He tried to convince me, but I couldn’t bring myself to run away without doing anything here.

“Hee hee, I got you with such a simple taunt. How foolish you humans are. Your level might be high, but you’re still a rube who falls for obvious traps.”

Ramiel used her wings to fly freely through the air, then dropped rapidly to take a swipe at me with a massive arm. “It’s been a thousand years since I’ve bathed in the magic of the Vortex. It feels so good! The power of the magic that shapes the world... I’ll show that power to you arrogant and ignorant humans!”

She swung both arms, delivering a series of slashes from her claws. I blocked them with my blade.

“Let me tell you your mistakes,” she continued. “Number one: leaping into battle when you should have fled. Two: challenging me to a physical fight when I’m wearing armor formed from the magic of the Vortex!”

There came a great swing from her left arm.



I slipped inside its range, evading her claws, and swung my sword with everything I had. It was blocked by the rainbow magic that covered her body. She hadn't been lying. I realized that the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh wouldn't even be able to scratch her.

That wasn't entirely true...the armor *had* taken damage, but the magic that was lost to my strike was quickly replaced by more magic drawn from the Vortex.

"...Ugh, I'm weaker than you in sheer physical capabilities even in this state," she said. "Now I see why we near-gods were directly asked to eliminate you. It seems the Twin Abyssal Dragons weren't a true measure of your strength. Regardless, close combat was another foolish decision on your part!"

Ramiel came at me again with her left arm. My sword was down because it had been blocked by the magic armor.

So long as she had that magic armor, I couldn't even inflict a single flesh wound on her. She could use that to great advantage in close combat...but that was all it was, a great advantage.

I shifted my sword and blocked Ramiel's claws.

"H-heh...not bad," Ramiel scowled.

I kicked her in the face. As expected, the kick was blocked by the magic armor. She attacked me again with her claws in a flash, but I evaded and slashed at her chest with all my strength.

My blade wasn't repelled this time, but it was completely stopped by the magic armor, leaving Ramiel uninjured.

"Tsk! Don't you get it's pointless! Even if you hit me ten times, I only have to hit you once to win!" she said, then lashed out with a furiously fast series of strikes.

I bent out of the way to evade and knocked aside one of her attacks that had her weight behind it. She lost her balance.

"Argh!"

I stabbed her abdomen. The magic armor protected her again, but the force

sent her sprawling backwards to the ground. Before she could get back to her feet, I rushed around her, laying into her with three strikes.

The magic armor flickered.

“I won’t take this from a human!” she shrieked, and her massive tail whipped at me.

I blocked it with my sword, but Ramiel used the counterforce to leap backwards, putting distance between us. She spread her wings and took to the sky, glaring at me.

“I-impossible... He can fight on equal footing with the Ruler of the Skies even when she’s in that state,” said Ridler. He watched the battle with bated breath.

“You don’t give up, do you?!” shrieked Ramiel in a rasping voice. “This magic armor won’t break as long as I have the magic of the Dragon Vortex!”

It was a real problem... That magic armor was pretty tough. It was like I hadn’t dealt a lick of damage, no matter how many times I cut her. She might be correct in saying that it would be impossible to destroy that armor while magic dwelled in the Dragon Vortex.

Unfortunately, I’d heard the Vortex was an energy source for the *whole world*. Not only was it unlikely that I could keep attacking until it ran out of magic, but forcing it to run dry was a terrible idea in itself.

“It was a mistake to fight where you could reach,” said Ramiel. “I’m not going to trade blows with a fool anymore.” She raised her right hand toward the ceiling and a bright red magic circle appeared. “Hee hee... I can’t use this normally because the magic draw is too great, but now I can fire it off as much as I want. I look forward to seeing how many shots you can withstand.”

A deep-red ring appeared near the ceiling, easily over 150 feet across. The tremendous heat rolling off it made the air shimmer. I could still feel the radiation even at this great distance.

“It’s said that one of the ancient kings of the dragons could manipulate the sun at will! Let’s see those Sun God’s wings outstretched!” shrieked Ramiel. “Fire Magic Level 18: Agneyastra!”

The huge ring of flame fell toward me.

“Never seen such a large-scale spell before...” I muttered.

It was a high level, but it likely consumed more magic than other similarly leveled spells considering the large area of effect. It had to have burned through a lot of magic in the Vortex.

“Of course not. I’d be in grave trouble if you were used to seeing spells like this,” said Ramiel. “An 18th level spell is on par with the magic of the gods—something that you’ll never achieve!”

“Well... What I meant was that I’d never seen anything like this outside of Cocytus and the Cursed Mirror,” I said.

“...What?”

I pointed the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh toward Ramiel. “Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse.”

A massive, flaming dragon burst from the tip of my sword and flew straight toward Ramiel. It crashed through the ring of fire, shattering it in a flurry of sparks as it lunged at the Ruler of the Skies.

“Level 20?! I-impossible!” she cried.

The flaming dragon collided with her and exploded. The area was cast under a red glow from the two high-level magic spells and the shock waves of destruction from them.

The concussive force was more powerful than I’d expected. I looked back at Pomera and the others out of concern, but there were two huge white hands extending up from the ground, their fingers interlocked around her to create a shield.

Philia looked at me proudly and flashed a peace sign. Ridler was crawling on the ground, his face white as a sheet as he curled himself around the ring to protect it.

“Th-that surprised me a bit, but it makes no difference so long as the magic armor is fine!” shouted Ramiel from the destruction. “Shall we have a shootout? Who has more magic: you or the world?!”

I caught the hint of panic in her expression. That Agneyastra was likely her biggest move.

...With things as they are right now though, I'm as backed into a corner as she is.

I couldn't fire off Apocalypse that many times. Even if I switched to a spell that used up less of my magic, I would most likely burn out before Ramiel did in a magical shootout. Even if I made efficient use of all the magic-restoring elixirs that I had on me, we could spend over twenty-four hours taking pot shots at each other...and I'd still run out of magic first in the end.

I could maybe push through and pull off a win, but only after the Dragon Vortex ran out of magic. It was going to be near impossible to hit Ramiel hard enough to shatter that magic armor and defeat her.

"Hmm...the heat from the ring. It's lessened, slightly..." murmured Ridler as he stood, leaning against Pomera for support. He looked at the ring with confusion for a while, then his expression brightened. "K-Kanata! Her control over the Dragon Vortex weakened just now! The ring is only hot because she has overtaken it, but it cooled right when she cast the spell. And it got significantly cooler when the dragon of fire struck her! The heat is returning, but...I am certain of it! Her control over the Dragon Vortex becomes unstable when she consumes large volumes of magic!"

"How nice of the Dragon King to suggest draining the Vortex," said Ramiel. "Are you sure you want to do that? You don't know what'll happen. The dragons will be angry with you if they hear about this. I'm not scared of them... but you should be. They might evict you all and destroy the Garden."

Hearing that, I wasn't sure what to do.

The Dragon Vortex was like the world's heart. I didn't know where the negative effects would manifest if I put too much strain on it. And the dragons would put the blame for that on Ridler and the other dragonkin.

"I'll take that chance! Do it, Kanata! There would always be a time when the Garden of the Dragons must end things with the Ruler of the Skies. The Vortex will always be in danger if we let her escape! I will not allow any harm to come from this! I have a plan!" shouted Ridler loudly.

Ramiel's eyes opened wide with anger. "Not only are you weak, but you have no intention of fulfilling your duty! In the past, a Dragon King had to be above level 1,000, but apparently the standards have slipped. The Garden of the Dragons has become so weak. Fine, then, show me what you have in mind!"

"Are strength and duty really all that important?" I asked.

"That's exactly the kind of thing a human would say! A small race that lives a small life, with no concept of true duty—humans are nothing more than insects."

"It's kinda gauche to talk about other people's values, but...weren't you weak before that you betrayed the dragonkin duty, stole magic from the Dragon Vortex, and ran away?"

Ramiel was a dragonkin of the Garden of the Dragons a thousand years ago. When I'd asked Ridler about dragonkin surnames, he said there weren't any dragonkin whose surnames were taken from them for being too weak, though that may not have been true in the past.

Which meant it *was* true in the past.

Even now, someone who received a low score on the Dragon Trials was seen as less than a complete person in the Garden of the Dragons. They weren't treated equally, and the difference in status based on difference in level was apparent. If this was what it was like after the rules had been loosened, then it must have been that much worse in Ramiel's time. That was enough to give me an idea of why she went after the Dragon Vortex.

"D-don't act like you know what you're talking about...you worm," said Ramiel in a low voice, a vein throbbing in her temple. She was clearly worked up.

At this stage, the most dangerous thing would be if I let Ramiel remain calm and go on the defensive. I needed her to cast a big spell so I could cast a bigger spell right back.

I needed her to be as hot and angry as Agneyastra.

RAMIEL RAISED both arms toward the ceiling and a magic circle appeared. It looked like she was planning on casting another Agneyastra. She was serious about having a high-level magic shootout.

“It’s true that I broke dragonkin rules,” she said, “But that’s what gave me my power, and why the higher beings have acknowledged me. Now, even the dragons show me respect. The fate of the dragonkin king, the dragonkin duty, they are *nothing* to me now! I have been given a new duty suited to my strength! I am *important*!”

I used the Twin Minds Method to form two magic circles at once. “Space-time Magic Level 8: Dimension Slash.” I extended my pointer finger and slashed with it. A cut ran across Ramiel’s body, jolting her backwards.

“Tsk! Wh-what’s this? Hee hee, feinting with a small attack at this point in the game? You might have tried to make yourself look strong before, but it seems you’re not ready to fight against me with anything greater.”

I immediately cast the other spell I’d already prepared. “Space-time Magic Level 19: Gravity Bomb.”

Black light spread out around Ramiel. “Parallel casting of advanced magic?! Absolutely impossible! Humans shouldn’t be capable of this! Who...no, *what* taught you magic?!”

The darkness compressed into one point, imploding the space around it as it did. Ramiel’s wings and body were crushed into the spherical singularity.

“Gah, aaaaaargh!”

The magic armor was still in place. It was rare even in the Cursed Mirror to meet something that could survive this spell.

But Ramiel’s freedom of movement was taken away as the force pushed on the armor. It might not be a direct hit, but it was an effective hit.

Despite the fact that Ramiel was no longer able to move, I sensed that she wasn’t being pushed to use as much magic as before. Unless I needed to bind her in place for a short time, it would be better to play safe and get Ramiel to

cast spells so I could fire back with Apocalypse and cut down her magic.

Ramiel broke free of the gravity restraint and spread her previously crushed wings. “Damn, damn! This...should not...be!” She glared at me, her breathing ragged.

I thought she would come at me the moment she broke free of the restraint, but she floated in the air, glaring at me.

“What’s wrong? Weren’t you just throwing a tantrum about how you can do whatever you want because you are so strong now?” I said, pointing my sword at her.

Her fangs and claws grew slightly larger and her body shook with rage, but she let out a heavy sigh, tapped her forehead with her claws, and huffed. “I got a little too worked up there, hee hee... Sorry, but I’m not falling for any more of your taunts. I’m gonna split you apart with flames.” She pointed her arms at me and created a magic circle. “Fire Magic Level 9: Sharanga.”

A level 9 spell at this point...?

Just after the question crossed my mind, the corners of Ramiel’s mouth curled up and her fingers moved from pointing at me to pointing at Pomera and the others.

“Hee hee... There’s no reason for me to be prim and proper and fight you directly! If I send that pathetic Dragon King to his grave first, you won’t be able to cut me off from the Dragon Vortex! It doesn’t matter what methods I use so long as I win in the end! That’s what makes someone strong!”

Ten fiery bullets shot from the tips of Ramiel’s fingers toward the others.

“Spirit Magic Level 7: Undine’s Wall!”

Water burst out around Pomera, creating a wall that shielded them. Philia saw this and her form changed to that of Pomera.

“Spirit Magic Level 7: Undine’s Wall!”

Another wall of water layered over the first. The ten fire bullets were fended off by the two walls.

“Tsk, I may have underestimated the rest of you and cast that too quickly...”

said Ramiel.

“Don’t think that you can take potshots at Pomera-san and the others and expect them to hit,” I said. Without the power of the Dragon Vortex, Philia was a higher level than Ramiel.

“My turn!” Philia, still in Pomera form, swung her arm wildly. A huge arm descended from the ceiling and smashed into Ramiel. Ramiel rushed to guard with her wings, but it threw her badly off balance even so.

“Gah! That little girl can do that?!”

I took advantage of the moment to create the magic circle for Apocalypse. Ramiel saw me and rushed to make her own magic circle.

“Apocalypse!”

“Ack! Agneyastra!”

Her massive flaming ring appeared a split-second after my fiery dragon. The two spells collided and, as expected, the fiery dragon snapped the ring to bits. But that impact slowed the dragon down momentarily, which gave Ramiel a chance to spread her wings and flee perpendicular to the dragon’s path.

“I know your tricks now. Do you really think I’d let that absurd spell hit me again?!” she shouted.

But I expected her to run away. From her current position, there were only so many directions she could go and moves she could make in order to flee the rapidly rising dragon.

“Wind Magic Level 3: Fluegel!”

I pushed myself up into the sky using the wind. This entire time, I’d had a Gravity Bomb casting prepared so I could use it at any point, as well as a casting of Fluegel, so I could change to moving through the air.

“You think you can fight me in the air?! I’m literally the Ruler of the Skies!” said Ramiel.

She snapped her long tail out like a whip. I blocked it with my sword, but her claws followed immediately after.

I was unstable in the air and always had to focus part of my attention on the magic circle for Fluegel, which meant that I reacted too slowly to Ramiel's attack. One of the claw attacks hit me.

"You're out of luck!" she said.

With me unbalanced, she struck out with her tail again. I crossed my arms in front of me and blocked the attack, but I was sent hurtling straight down at the ground.

Ramiel used the recoil from her tail to spring even higher up toward the ceiling and move away from me. She certainly had the upper hand in the air. Fluegel was just too unstable.

I should have moved away and regrouped myself. But the longer this dragged on, the greater the strain on the Dragon Vortex. There weren't that many opportunities to lock Ramiel down with a Gravity Bomb up close after she cast a spell. I might be at a disadvantage in an aerial fight, but I couldn't run away.

I used my remaining casting of Fluegel to immediately fly up to Ramiel again.

"Hee hee, thanks for flying up here like an idiot. Don't think you'll ever get back to the ground now. You're *mine*," she said as she twirled in the air and extended her long tail toward the ceiling. It struck the stone, apparently part of an attempt to control an aerial maneuver of her own. "Let me show you the true terror of the Ruler of the Skies. Forbidden Dragon Technique: Bird Cage."

She wove her fingers together and fixed her eyes on me.

Dragon Technique... That was a skill that utilized the physical abilities of a dragon or dragonkin. I'd overpowered her in close combat before, but it seemed there were skills specifically for use in the air. The emotions showing in Ramiel's eyes weren't the anger and scorn from before. All I saw was cruelty.

Something was coming.

As Ramiel was about to spike her tail to the ceiling to change her direction, an unexpected blast burst at that exact point. With the stone gone, Ramiel's tail missed its mark, and she spiraled out of control through the air.

"What?!" she cried.

In the distance, I saw Ridler with his palm against the wall.

It was his Open Palm Blast, the skill that transferred force through an object. He'd used that to blow away Ramiel's footing...er, tailing?

Normally, Ramiel would have easily dealt with him doing that, but she'd been entirely focused on me. Ridler saw that opening and hit out with the best, most precise interference he could muster.

"That weak little Dragon King!" cried Ramiel, her eyes bloodshot with rage.

"Gravity Bomb!" I launched the Gravity Bomb I'd had saved up at Ramiel.

She struggled to shift her center of gravity and spread her wings to flee, but she didn't make it and was pulled back into the shimmering darkness.

"No! How could I... I am nearly a god! How could this keep happening!" She desperately resisted, but the black light constricted. She was refusing to curl up, which only resulted in her wings bending in horrific angles. "No, no! I've become so powerful! I won't accept this, I *don't* accept it!"

She screamed and tore herself from the restraints of gravity. In the following instant, I brought the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh down on her.

A crack appeared in the rainbow-colored magic covering her body. The magic supply from the Vortex to Ramiel couldn't keep up.

"I-impossible..." Ramiel looked down at herself, dumbstruck.

For just a moment, Ramiel's magic had been completely drained. But in that small moment, her control over the Vortex had weakened enough to let me strike.

"Kanata! W-we did it! I have taken back control of the Dragon Vortex! She should no longer be able to sustain the regeneration of her magic armor!" shouted Ridler, holding his hand with the Dragon Vortex Ring aloft.

The film of rainbow magic that covered Ramiel's body completely crumbled away as she tried to flee, and I struck her again with the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh.

She plummeted to the ground.

ONCE WE'D SAFELY TAKEN CONTROL of the Dragon Vortex back from Ramiel, we temporarily bound her with sturdy manacles created using alchemy.

"I'm sorry, Ridler-san," I said. "Ramiel deceived me, and that's why I came to the Garden of the Dragons. It looks like her target was me all along...and I dragged the Garden into it."

Ramiel was neutralized, but the magic from the Dragon Vortex had gone down. Ridler had said that using the magic of the Vortex improperly could lead to disasters throughout the world. On top of that, Ramiel had said the dragons would be angry at the people of the Garden if anything happened to the Vortex.

"It was the failing of the dragonkin that first allowed the Ruler of the Skies to run free," said Ridler. "And it is our duty as dragonkin to defend the Dragon Vortex...a duty I was not strong enough to uphold. We knew that something would happen to the Dragon Vortex again if we left her to her own devices. And the dragons seem content to ignore her, for some reason. This was bound to happen someday... I am actually grateful that I had your assistance when it did."

The dragons ignored her... Since she joined the Unseen Hand of the Gods, I bet.

The dragons were creatures who protected the natural order of this world and didn't interfere with humanity directly. In other words, they worked for Naiarotop. Though I didn't know how much the dragons really realized it.

The higher beings probably used the dragons to adjust the world when something inconvenient happened. Maybe dragon society was a lower-ranking organization within the Unseen Hand of the Gods. That would explain why they turned a blind eye to Ramiel even though she broke the rules.

"However, I would like to ask that you allow the Garden of the Dragons to handle the Ruler of the Skies," said Ridler.

"I don't have any problem with that, I guess..." I glanced back at Ramiel. She was still bound and behaving. She must realize that we'd incapacitate her if she

struggled.

“I understand your concern, considering our failures, but the Garden of the Dragons has several items for sealing the power of criminals. Please do not worry.”

“It’s just...I’m a bit concerned she might run away when you go to seal her powers again...” I muttered. I scratched my head and smiled uncomfortably.

Ridler looked a bit uncomfortable as well and asked, “Speaking of that... C-could you actually, um, stay with us until the Ruler of the Skies’s powers are entirely sealed...?”

“Oh, yeah... I can do that...”

Undignified as it was for him to ask, at least it showed he knew the potential risks of letting the Ruler of the Skies escape.

Ridler looked around us and let out a deep, sorrowful sigh. The plants in the area were sickly, and the extreme drain on the Vortex’s magic had left the glow of magic along the walls and floor a pale imitation.

“Ridler-san, you said you had a plan for recovering the Dragon Vortex’s magic. What was it?” I asked.

Ramiel had used quite a lot of magic from the Vortex. The spells she cast were part of it, but her magic armor had incredible durability. There was no doubt that it needed an equivalent amount of magic to resist my attacks. I didn’t imagine it was easy to balance that.

“We will drop the Ruler of the Skies into the Dragon Vortex. People who fall into the Vortex are converted to magic. We must completely bind her so she is unable to resist when we do it,” he explained.

“Oh...” I was shocked.

Ramiel was my enemy. She’d tried to kill me.

But she was also someone I shared a meal with, even if it was under false pretenses, and we were only enemies in this situation because the higher beings had ordered her to attack. I was honestly a bit relieved when Ridler said he’d bind her; I thought it meant we wouldn’t have to kill her.

Apparently not.

“Hee hee, so you start to take pity on your enemy when you think you can afford to? How like a traveler to be that soft. Every single traveler has got that soft spot. But... it’s a little too soon to count your chicks, isn’t it?” Ramiel’s lips curled into a monstrous sneer.

“What do you—”

“Hee hee, it’s fine. I’ll go without trouble into the Dragon Vortex, even without any fancy bindings on me. But I went all out—do you really think I’ll be enough of a sacrifice on my own? The Dragon King here looks pretty uncertain. He doesn’t know if I will be enough to make up for the strain. You don’t have to bother with all the complicated calculations, I’ll just tell you: in order to get enough magic back to prevent disaster, you’ll need about two of me. That’s a pretty small price to pay compared to the amount of magic I burned from the Vortex.”

“What!” I felt the blood drain from my face. I looked at Ridler, but he didn’t look particularly panicked. This wasn’t news to him.

“As I thought...” he murmured.

“Hee hee, ha ha ha! Dragon King, as one of the founders of this Garden, I can give you a good way to solve it. Gather up all the pathetic, mediocre-level morons with no prospects for their future and throw them into the Vortex. That will give the Vortex plenty of magic and let you weed out the weaklings. But there’s no point if the sacrifices are *too* low a level. Around level 200 should be perfect.”

Ramiel laughed, and I suddenly felt homicidal. I placed my hand on the hilt of the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and glared at her.

“Hee hee, a long time ago in the Garden of the Dragons, untalented weaklings weren’t even considered dragonkin. Their surnames were taken from them, and they were sacrificed to the Vortex to support it,” muttered Ramiel weakly with a shrug.

I was left instantly speechless.

Ramiel didn’t have a surname. I didn’t know the details, but it was possible

that she hadn't originally aimed to steal the Dragon Vortex's magic. She was labeled a sacrifice and thrown into the Vortex.

She gave another acidic giggle. "Kanata, don't think you'll be able to defeat the Unseen Hand of the Gods with that soft heart of yours. There are people as high level as you in the Unseen Hand. The other four members are far more cunning and cruel than me. This isn't a warning; it's a promise. The sacrifices you'll make when you encounter them will make the sacrifices now pale in comparison. My one consolation prize is that I'll get to watch you struggle from the world beyond."

"...I will go into the Dragon Vortex along with the Ruler of the Skies. Any remaining magic needed will be made up with items from the treasure room," said Ridler.

Ramiel stared at him in shock. "The Dragon King will sacrifice himself? Is that how soft the Garden is now?!"

"I was prepared for such an event. It is the Dragon King's duty to take responsibility when something happens."

"You're clearly not thinking of future dragonkin—you'll just be leaving the weak behind to fend for themselves. How could you drop the Garden's most powerful fighter into the Vortex?"

"Things are not the same as they were in your time. Protecting the Garden is another of my duties. I may not be as powerful as my predecessors, but I did not become Dragon King with only half-hearted resolution. If the leader of the dragonkin failed to put their life on the line when faced with danger, that would be the true downfall of the Garden of the Dragons. I have heard legends of the abominable practices of the Garden in the past, and I will not let you bring your twisted ideals back to my generation." Ridler regained his composure. "And... besides, even a hundred of the dragonkin would be unable to equal my magic. My method is far more efficient and will likely result in less devastation to the Garden."

"Maybe it's not just your standards that have gone soft, but your brains as well. Positively *human*, I tell you!" Ramiel let out a sigh and shook her head, her eyes closed. "...But, ah, I wish I was born in this era."

My mind caught on something. If all we needed was a living creature with a lot of magic...

“Um...Ridler-san,” I said and prodded Ridler’s shoulder.

“Do not try to stop me, Kanata,” he said. “I have made my decision. It heartens me to know that you regret my death even though we have only known each other for a short time.”

“Actually...that’s not it. I have a suggestion...”

“Oh...?”

I left Philia to keep an eye on Ramiel as Pomera and I went into the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm. It took us about two hours to weaken three demons, each of a level around 2,000, and bring them back: a mass of moving organs, an eel with two human faces, and a monster made of three blue human heads stacked on top of one another.

Their bodies were slashed, leaking bodily fluids, but each of their faces was split open in a massive grin as they howled in laughter. I smashed the three-headed creature into the ground while desperately wrestling with the mysterious writhing mass of organs to keep it in my arms. Pomera firmly held onto the human-faced eel as it lashed back and forth, her face a picture of disgust.

“Kanata...what in the... What are these *unpleasant* creatures?” asked Ridler.



“Demons on the brink of death. They’re pretty high level, so I think they will work as a replacement.”

“Uh...they’re nearly dead? But they keep screaming.”

“They do that. If they weren’t close to death, they’d have already killed everyone here besides me.”

A doubtful Ridler followed me right up to the Dragon Vortex, where I lobbed the three demons in. The Vortex emitted a bright rainbow glow and the magical luster from before immediately returned to the walls and floor.

“Yeah! We did it, Ridler-san! Now you won’t have to sacrifice yourself!”

“Y-yes... I am grateful... I *should* be grateful...” said Ridler and his shoulders slumped in disappointment. “But...”

“Wh-what?! Isn’t this great? We solved it without you having to die!”

“Well, perhaps it is simply because I was ready to sacrifice myself... Truly, my apologies. I had thought yours would be an even more dramatic solution. But you resolved the problem simply by throwing in some broken...*things*.”

He sighed. “Not that you have done anything wrong, Kanata...”

Ramiel remained silent as she stared into the now shining Dragon Vortex with dead eyes.

– 5 –

IT WAS THE DAY after the Ruler of the Skies incident and Ridler was formally bestowing upon me my prize for defeating the Dragon King.

We went with Ridler back into the area below his castle. Before heading to the treasure room, we stopped by another location that was also below the castle: Ramiel’s cell.

She was bound by chains, her arms spread apart and her body wrapped in strips of cloth with symbols written on them. That was apparently the

technique for binding the physical capabilities of a high-level dragonkin.

There were two reasons that Ramiel was being held below the Dragon King's castle. The first was that her restraints were special ones that used the magic from the Dragon Vortex. The second was to prevent other dragonkin from interacting with her and potentially helping her escape. Apparently, this was a sacred place that not even those with the rank of Holy Dragon could enter without significant reason. So long as this system was kept in place, no dragonkin could ever meet Ramiel without the Dragon King knowing about it.

"...Oh, the Dragon King and Kanata?" she said sullenly. "I'm seeing you two again pretty quickly. Were you after more info about the Unseen Hand of the Gods? Well, too bad. I don't plan on saying anything more than I've already told you. You could try torture and threats, if you like."

She smiled fearlessly. I had a feeling that she was telling the truth.

She'd originally been prepared to fall into the Dragon Vortex. No threat would work against her. It'd be best to give up on getting any information out of her that she didn't want to give.

"I want to ask about Rosemonde," I said. "Is she okay?"

"...Rosemonde? Yes, yes, I lost that weak little adventurer somewhere in Ploroque. I'd bet she's still there if she hasn't given up hunting for me," answered Ramiel straightforwardly. Apparently, her refusal to tell me if she was safe earlier was a taunt and nothing more. "I decided she was harmless...and I didn't actually dislike her. I'm not some callous mass murderer that goes around killing every single person I meet."

I let out a sigh of relief. Ramiel wasn't a source of information that I could trust entirely, but her attitude felt honest.

Pomera was staring at Ramiel somewhat fearfully. Ramiel noticed, her eyes narrowed as she glared back. "What? You think it's that funny to see me in this situation, half elf?"

"N-no... I just don't think the way you acted—like a child who doesn't know anything about the world—was an act to make us let our guard down..." said Pomera, quickly trying to explain herself.

I was surprised by that observation.

Ramiel was arrogant, but her performance as a dragonborn child was perfect. I still vividly remembered her innocently asking “I-I have to pay...money? But I’m a dragonkin, born to protect the world and humans.”

Her absurd lack of common sense at the time actually made her story more plausible, but thinking back to it now, it must have been a trap. Ramiel might hate humans, but she’d been alive for about a thousand years. There was no way she knew that little about the world. Or was there?

“Huh...? I don’t know anything about the world? Are you making fun of me?” said Ramiel.

Pomera’s expression turned icy. I probably looked the same.

N-no way. Was everything except her tone the same as her true self, then...?

There weren’t any dragonkin in the Garden of the Dragons who were so strongly and naturally condescending. Even Raigan and Zuul had far more tact. She acted far more insulting than other dragonkin despite being so low level—too bad I never questioned her story.

“...I think we should end this conversation here,” I said.

Ramiel frowned. “Hey, what are you trying to imply?”

“Ridler-san, could we go to the treasure room now?” I said, ignoring her.

“Mmm, of course. Leave loosening her tongue to me. Kanata, you stand against this Unseen Hand of the Gods that Ramiel is a member of, correct? If I manage to draw any further information about them from her, then I will contact you by messenger.”

Ridler nodded and turned away from Ramiel to leave. I followed him.

“H-hey, you’re leaving already?! And here I could have just stayed silent the whole time, but I talked to you! Me, talking to you!” Ramiel’s ragged voice rang out behind us. Pomera and I stopped and turned back to her.

“She has quite a lot of time on her hands now. She has been saying similar things since yesterday,” said Ridler curtly before moving off again. I went to follow him again, but Philia grabbed my sleeve.

“H-hey, Kanata...she seems lonely.”

“Hee hee! So, you’re going to go up against the Unseen Hand of the Gods without any intel?! Humans are *such* fools! They’ll already know about your fight with me through Sophia, the World’s Recordkeeper. Don’t think you can get away with simply overpowering them like you did me. I only failed because I didn’t have enough information. The Unseen Hand of the Gods is the ultimate law in Locklore! They’ll bury you!” Ramiel babbled rapidly.

Pomera looked at her with pity and murmured, “She’s too desperate...”

“...The day is still young so I cannot say for certain, but that one’s lips are sealed. Firmly. She talks without saying anything at all,” said Ridler with a sigh. “Nothing more than a waste of our time. I imagine she had drawn the line for herself on what she can say.”

Ramiel appeared to take things lightly, but she was oddly obsessed with her mission and position. Perhaps that was a characteristic of ancient dragonkin. I imagined being sacrificed to the Vortex distorted her goals, leading her to betray her original duty in the name of seizing power.

“Oh, how about we make a deal, Kanata,” she said. “You bring that adventurer, Rosemonde, for a visit and I’ll tell you everything I know about Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. There’s no way you can handle what he’s got up his sleeve if you don’t know about it beforehand. He’s not suited to being a part of the Unseen Hand anyway, he’s just a battle-crazed, morally bankrupt maniac. Might not be a bad thing for you to take him out... Hey, are you listening to me?!”

Philia was the only one standing still and looking at Ramiel, but Pomera said, “Let’s go, Philia,” and tugged on her hand. She nodded hesitantly, then started to walk away.

...Why does Ramiel seem to like Rosemonde so much?

Ramiel was an attention seeker at heart... Maybe a born caretaker like Rosemonde easily attracted that kind of person.

RIDLER LED US to the treasure room. The massive room was done up in gold with engravings of dragons, monsters, and dragonkin on the walls. All manner of weapons were used as decoration.

“This is the treasure room, huh...” I said, my breath taken away. There was gold and gems as far as I could see.

Ever since coming to the Garden of the Dragons I’d been treated to sights I’d never seen in Locklore before, from the overwhelming beauty of the nature in the Garden to the sparkling Dragon Vortex. And now I beheld the gold of the treasure room. It was all as striking as the inside of the Cursed Mirror...but in a *good* way.

“You already have the right to select an item because you were victorious in your challenge against the Dragon King, but you also defeated the Ruler of the Skies, the Garden’s longtime enemy, and prevented disaster within the Dragon Vortex, meaning we owe you two debts of gratitude. Choose whatever item you so wish,” explained Ridler.

I considered how useful these items might prove against Naiarotop. “...Would it maybe be possible for us to pick three items since there are three of us?” When Ridler grimaced, I backpedaled. “No, no, never mind...”

“...W-well, I was already prepared to sacrifice the items in the treasure room to the Vortex in order to prevent disaster. S-so I do not mind. We owe all of you.” Ridler’s voice squeaked with strain.

“S-sorry for asking for the items, even though Philia and I haven’t challenged you. E-even though we have the right to...” said Pomera.

“I would be in trouble if I were to be challenged two more times,” said Ridler, looking at Pomera with sad, severe eyes. “It reflects much better on me if I say I gifted you three items because we were in your debt, rather than if I had been challenged three times and lost three times. Please, consider my reputation. I dislike saying this, but I am trying to accept the situation as it is. All would be well and good if the challenges ended with only me losing face, but it could end up putting the entire Garden in danger. Do...do you understand?”

Ridler looked gravely serious.

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t think it through...” she said.

“Philia wants to challenge you!” chimed in Philia, whose eyes were sparkling with excitement. The discussion about the honor of the Garden of the Dragons was a little over her head.

Ridler’s expression soured and he glanced at me, his eyes pleading.

“Philia, that’ll cause trouble for the Dragon King, so don’t be selfish. Okay?” said Pomera, hurriedly trying to reason with Philia.

After that, I scoured the treasure room, the Acacia Memoirs in one hand. But...most things were only A-rank or S-rank.

A couple of Legendary items were tucked away in there, too, but in a battle against Naiarotop nothing less than a Godly item would do. There weren’t even many Godly items that proved effective against a god of their level.

I picked up a black sword that was hung on the wall.

“Ah...Kanata, does that sword interest you? It is a valuable item, but I would have no issue giving it to you,” said Ridler as he walked over.

“Actually, something about it...seems a bit off,” I said and flipped through the Memoirs.

DEMON TALON (FAKE)

Value Class: C

Attack: +24

Magic: +11

A sword forged from the claw of a legendary demon.

...Or rather, one modeled on said sword.

The greatest work of the legendary master counterfeiter, Haddon, from a century ago. Because it is said that only one with great amounts of magic can utilize its full power, no one has realized it is in fact a fake. It has been traded

to prominent merchants and even the king of a country. While it is a fake, those facts alone are enough to say it has historical value.

It is currently decorating the wall of the Dragon King's treasure room.

Hmm...

“That is the Demon Talon,” explained Ridler. “Long ago, a human hero defeated the demon Forneus. The king then ordered this sword made from one of the demon's talons. However, Forneus is a capricious demon. No one has ever been able to use that magic sword to its full potential. Ha ha, though I believe that you would manage it somehow.”

Trust a Dragon King to be well informed, even if he had been duped by the legendary counterfeiter, Haddon.

I debated on whether or not I should say something but decided to keep the information to myself and returned the sword to its original spot. I had a feeling no one would be happy if I said something now.

“...Actually, I'll pass on this one,” I said.

“Oh? If you wish.”

Pomera was looking with curiosity into a large chest. I moved beside her and peered in too. Inside was a large white staff, decorated richly with gold and gems.

“Are you interested in that staff?” I asked.

“I just thought it was pretty...”

I flipped through the pages of the Memoirs.

ALVERENAROD

Value Class: Legendary

Attack: +385

Magic: +840

A scepter that is a symbol of authority, passed down through the generations of the queens of the ancient high elf nation, Alve.

The first queen of Alve was a spirit magic user and visited Yggdrasil, where she made a contract with the spirit king and received one of Yggdrasil's branches to make this scepter.

Alve has long disappeared from existence, but the spirit king has a strong sense of duty. He likely still remembers that ancient country and its queen, and may even aid someone wielding this staff.

Huh...so this staff belonged to elves originally. That might explain why it drew Pomera's attention.

The Acacia Memoirs guaranteed that this was the most powerful staff in this place. Pomera's own staff had broken during the incident in Manaloch—we'd been taping it back together since then. This was a perfect opportunity to trade it out for something new.

With the Unseen Hand of the Gods on the move, I couldn't say that Pomera was safe even at her current level. Merely swapping out her staff for this one would increase her magic significantly, so it would be a good idea to take it.

"Let's make this our first item then," I said as I grabbed the Alverenarod and handed it to Pomera.

"Kanata, you're not being careful enough!" said Pomera in a panic, trying to push it back into my hands.

"That is a treasure handed down by our ancestors, please treat it with respect!" said Ridler, his fingers twitching nervously.

"S-sorry."

Lunaère had had no problem abusing Godly items until they broke, so I guess my attitude toward them was still a bit messed up from that. I'd even assumed there wouldn't be any problem taking something as measly as a Legendary item.

"Is there anything...sweet?" asked Philia, casting her disappointed eyes

around the treasure.

“If you want something sweet, I’ll buy you plenty of things later. We’ll go get some cake when we get back to Ploroque,” I suggested.

“Really?!” Philia’s face beamed.

From Philia’s perspective, sweets from the city were more valuable than any ranked relic.

Ridler looked at us, lost for words.

– 7 –

TIME PASSED. I focused entirely on going around evaluating items with the Memoirs to see if there were any Godly items, or at least more Legendary items. Nothing stood out, so I shifted to checking every single book on the bookshelves.

There were all sorts of books. There were A-rank books that should have some value—though I had no idea what they were about, or their real nature, even after checking the Memoirs—as well as blatant fictions that were believed to be real stories of adventures and E-rank dictionaries. There were even various novels without any clear purpose.

“I feel like I’m walking around a pawn shop, researching on my phone to find something valuable...”

The sense of awe I should feel while searching through the Dragon King’s treasure was growing weaker.

Just then, my eyes fell on a book bound in black. I nearly threw it aside without thinking, but Ridler looked at me like he was about to scream. I managed to hold myself back.

NECRONOMICON

Value Class: Legendary

A grimoire containing the advanced death magic that was taught to the ancient lich, Grave Break Norn, through messages sent by an angel. It is said that Norn was insane when she penned this work, making it incredibly difficult to decipher. Additionally, past academics have decided that the second half of the text is nothing but meaningless symbols.

Megistus, a royal alchemist, was enclosed in an underground cell by his king to study the undead and ordered to read this book. After spending fifty years deciphering the book, he suddenly escaped from the underground cell and appeared before the king. He shouted, "I have learned the truth of the world!" and began slaughtering those in the court. Both his and this book's whereabouts have been unknown since that day.

Why was there a book here that went missing along with Megistus after he went insane?

I flipped through the pages and my eyes landed on the second half of the book, where the words "I know everything! Serves you right!" were scrawled all over it in haphazard, Old Locklorian letters. They'd been written in dried blood.

I quickly snapped the book shut.

"K-Kanata...that is a valuable book, please..." said Ridler.

I felt like I'd accidentally damaged something in a shop. "I-I'm sorry! I'm actually...I'll take it!"

It was an unsettling book, but it was one of the rare Legendary books here. It probably had something useful inside. I'd wanted to learn more death magic from Lunaère, but she didn't approve.

What I really wanted was to know more about her, and I'd decided researching death magic was a sensible way to do that. Maybe she'd worked out my motive, which was why she was reluctant.

I'd skim this book more when I had time. If it was a book about advanced death magic, then it wouldn't be a waste. Not that I wanted to end up like Norn

or Megistus.

But what I need most isn't here. Something that I can use to fight back against Naiarotop—

A black stone slab caught my eye.

Ramiel had bragged about some stone tablet that contained a record of some high-level magic used by the gods in ancient times. Was that it...?

I brought my face close and saw images engraved into it. They were simplistic, but one depicted a man with oddly tiny fingers. I felt like I'd seen this guy before...

"Naiarotop...?"

I flipped through the pages of the Memoirs.

THE RAVIA TABLET

Value Class: Legendary

A traveler capable of parsing the true nature of magic analyzed a spell used by a higher being. The sage Ravia recorded that information on this tablet.

However, the sage was unable to fully comprehend that spell, nor was he able to correctly record all the information he did understand. A human's lifetime is not long enough for such a task.

It did look like a record of some magic Naiarotop used. This could be a significant weapon for defeating him...except I couldn't even tell what kind of spell this recorded. It was just row upon row of complex magic formulas. It would take time to decipher it.

It seemed to be some sort of barrier magic, but I couldn't be certain. All I knew was that this was bound to be useful.

"Ridler-san...can I take this tablet?"

"Hmm...are you certain? No one even knows who wrote it or for what purpose."

I put the Ravia Stone into another dimension by using Dimension Pocket.

“That means I’ll be taking Philia-chan’s gift, though...” I said.

“If Kanata’s happy, Philia’s happy! There’s not anything cute in here anyway,” she said cheerfully. I patted her head.

“Let’s go shopping when we’re back in the city then.”

“Okay!”

With that, my goals in the Garden of the Dragons were complete. That we also managed to defeat Ramiel, one of the members of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, was icing on the cake.

...We have to go back to Ploroque and apologize to Rosemonde for what happened.

If I knew Rosemonde, she was still out there looking for Ramiel.

— 8 —

SOPIA, THE WORLD’S RECORDKEEPER

IN THE ROYAL CAPITAL of Royaberck stood the headquarters of a merchant company called the Sophia Trading Company. It was one of the five largest merchant companies in the kingdom.

Sopia was the name of a legendary bard. She was a high elf—living far longer than a human could imagine—and was said to be involved in various major events throughout history, leaving her mark as a legend.

The head of the company was an elven woman named Nilmayne. She was so good at reading the flow of markets and economies that she was nicknamed the Future Seer. As an elf with strong high-elven blood running through her veins, she still looked like a little girl though she was nearly a century old. Despite her cute appearance, she was shrewd and stern. Her pride and haughtiness made her feared by those who knew her.

Right now, she was in a meeting and her normal prideful attitude was nowhere to be seen. She was kneeling on the floor, with her head bowed. The person she was meeting with sat imperiously in Nilmayne's chair.

A woman with long aqua hair and features so perfectly arranged upon her icy, pale face, she passed for a porcelain doll, looked at Nilmayne with cold eyes. She held a shining gold crystal.

"Lady Sophia, you grace me with your presence! My heart has longed for you to visit again," said Nilmayne.

The Sophia Trading Company was established by Nilmayne, Sophia's disciple, so that the high elf could control the economy of the kingdom in this era.

The day-to-day operation of the company was generally left to Nilmayne, while Sophia remained the advisor in the shadows. Nilmayne's supposed ability to see the future was simply the result of following Sophia's advice.

Sophia had her fingers in a variety of important institutions and organizations across various countries throughout the world. Such work was befitting a member of the Unseen Hand of the Gods.

"Lady Sophia, does your visit here mean there is going to be a change in the flow of the economy? Lately, Grede & Co. in Ploroque has been making some extreme moves, quite inexcusable in fact," asked Nilmayne.

"Actually, the Unseen Hand of the Gods has been ordered to assassinate Kanata Kanbara, a traveler."

"The Unseen Hand of the Gods has been tasked to...kill a single traveler?" Nilmayne's eyebrows knit together in disbelief.

"Yes, I was surprised as well. But... I've been observing him with this crystal, Tiamat's Eye. The Ruler of the Skies went to kill him, and he defeated her instead. Now the Five Fingers are Four."

Tiamat's Eye was the name given to the gold crystal Sophia held. It was the eye of Tiamat the Insightful, a dragon residing in another dimension. So long as she had that crystal, she could check on whatever location she wanted, whenever she wanted. Right now, it showed an image of Kanata. He was talking to an imprisoned Ruler of the Skies.

“Th-the Ruler of the Skies?!”

“Yes. Kanata Kanbara is quite a high level. I don’t think I would be able to stand against him in a direct conflict. I’ll report what I saw to Veranta...and Nobunaga will likely be sent. Surely his demon blade will be able to cut Kanata Kanbara down.”

“That is a serious issue... But it sounds like the situation will be taken care of soon?”

“One thing bothers me. How did Kanata Kanbara become such a high level? Not even I have an idea why. If some powerful person in the world *has* evaded even my network, and they strengthened Kanata Kanbara, then he is not our only enemy. Messages from the gods are always vague, and never provide enough information,” Sophia grumbled. “Though I’m sure it’s a restriction necessary for protecting Locklore.”

“You believe there is another enemy? You would like to prepare insurance against that person... Correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. I have at my disposal what magical knowledge I gathered over a long time, as well as several items. I am confident in my ability to put up a decent fight, but my strength is in my organizations. I want you to make preparations so you’re ready to move, should something happen. If this incident drags on for much longer, I will use this entire world to chase down Kanata Kanbara and kill him.”

“Understood, My Lady. I will ensure everything is ready to go the moment we receive word from you.”

“Thank you, Nilmayne. To be honest, I have narrowed down the list of who could be the person behind Kanata Kanbara. It has to be someone significant enough that their name was left in history, either a high elf or a lich. And someone whose location I don’t currently know. A millennium ago, there was a master death magic user who stood against the demon king Morax. They killed each other. But I suspect she actually became a lich, then hid, and has lived ever since.”

Sophia’s delicate lips curled into an evil smile.

“Ha ha, Kanata Kanbara, you should hope that Nobunaga grants you a swift death. If you manage to survive somehow, you’ll seriously regret it. I only need to speak a word to drag this entire kingdom into war while pinning it on you and whoever stands behind you. Betrayed by all, you will lose everything and will ultimately rot away in a grave of your own despair.”

Just when Sophia finished saying that, the office wall exploded inwards.

As the dust cloud settled, they could see a girl in a black robe on the other side. Her white hair was red at the tips, as if it had been dipped in blood. Her right eye was emerald colored, her left crimson.

“Wh-who are you? How dare you attack the headquarters of the Sophia Trading Company! You’ll never get away with this!” Nilmayne stood and shouted at the white-haired girl.

Lunaère’s eyes shifted from Nilmayne to Sophia. “I apologize for the violent entry. I heard you were in the trading company’s headquarters and I really needed to meet with you...Sophia, the high elf who’s lived ten thousand years.”

Sophia held up a hand as she stepped in front of her seething follower.

“Nilmayne, stand back,” said Sophia.

“B-but My Lady! You—”

“I’m saying you don’t have to act as my shield. Darling, you understand so little,” said Sophia with a sigh as her eyes locked onto Lunaère. “Congratulations on hunting me down, Lunaère. And what are you trying to do with this attack? If you think you can win here, then you’ve terribly underestimated me.”

“You’re as knowledgeable as the rumors say, Sophia,” said Lunaère. “You seem quite the busy person, and I wasn’t in the position to be picky about my methods. I didn’t think they would say ‘yes, of course’ if I asked the secretary to meet with you. Besides, while I wasted time asking, you would have moved somewhere else.”

“Amusing. But...your actions were nearly perfect, considering you were dealing with me.”

Sophia alone was almost entirely responsible for the majority of the Unseen

Hand's political power for manipulating the world from the shadows, as well as its ability to gather important information.

So long as Sophia was alive, she could use her influence to undermine Kanata even if she didn't engage in direct combat with him, and she was always spying on him for information. In turn, it would be necessary in Kanata's fight against the Unseen Hand for Lunaère to get information on Sophia and attack her directly, since she'd slipped beneath Sophia's radar.

"But that's only if you can actually win against me!" said Sophia. She pressed her fingers below her eyes, which glowed red.

She was invoking the Ideal Eyes: the mind's eyes of the demon of truth. Sophia's eyes were swapped with that of a high-level demon, then white magic was used to force her body to accept the transplant.

Those eyes could see through any falsification, revealing the truth. They could see into their target's personality, a simple representation of their thoughts, and even their level. And though Lunaère was using the Impurity Sealing Robe to hide her unholy impurity, those eyes could see through even that.

There was a snapping sound, like something broke. Sophia's eyes rolled upward until only the whites showed, stained by tears of blood leaking from the broken veins.

"Uaaagh!"

Sophia crumpled to the ground on all fours, then vomited, bile spattering her own clothes. Tiamat's Eye flew out of her hand and bounced across the floor.

"L-Lady Sophia?! What did she do to you?!" Nilmayne wrapped her arms around Sophia and helped her up.

Lunaère hadn't done a thing. Her level was simply so far outside the range that Sophia's Ideal Eyes were capable of measuring that it caused the skill to overload. Her eyes had overheated nearly to the melting point, and Sophia was struck with the primal terror of realizing her life was in danger.

It didn't help that using the Ideal Eyes removed any filter against Lunaère's unholy impurity that her cloak provided. Having all that hit Sophia's mind at once was like having it smashed with a blunt instrument.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lunaère as she looked at Sophia in confusion.

“L-Lady Sophia, run! She will kill you as you are! I will slow her down! Take the chance to use an item and teleport away!” said Nilmayne. She gently laid Sophia on the ground and leapt in front of her.

Lunaère looked even more confused. “Um...what are you talking about?”

“Huh?” Nilmayne frowned, having no idea what Lunaère was up to.

“Oh... I’m sorry. You seem to think I’m some sort of assassin who’s broken into the Sophia Trading Company. That’s not why I came here. I’m sorry for forcing this meeting to happen, but there was no other way to meet you, Sophia.”

As Lunaère spoke, she took a ring from her inside pocket and set it on a nearby table. The gem set into the ring emitted a rainbow sparkle, and Lunaère continued. “Take this as an apology. I don’t really want to give it up, but I would really like you to make time for me. This crystal has the densest magic I’ve ever seen.”

“Y-you...didn’t come to kill me?” asked Sophia fearfully as she stood, her hands pressed to her eyes.

“No. I don’t have any reason to fight you, or to have anything against you.”

“S-so then why did you come here...?”

“I’m looking for some people. I’ve been going around the entire kingdom, but I can’t find any clues on them. Just as I was wondering if I should change tactics and head to a different country, I heard a story about a knowledgeable, long-lived high elf. I came here to ask if I could get some information from you.”

What Lunaère said left Sophia baffled.

It was true that Sophia was so busy that she rarely stayed in one place long, and if Lunaère really did want to talk to her, her only option was to launch this kind of sneak attack. It was a hard story to believe...but it meant that Lunaère hadn’t come after Sophia for being an enemy of Kanata Kanbara’s.

“O-oh...so you’re not after Lady Sophia...?” said Nilmayne with relief.

Sophia was relieved too, but she had an odd feeling still. The timing was

suspicious. Just as she'd almost wondered aloud if Lunaère was an ally of Kanata Kanbara, she shows up claiming to want information from her? This didn't seem like a coincidence.

But Sophia also didn't think Lunaère was lying, considering how she was acting. She regained her calm and wiped the vomit from her clothes.

She pressed a hand to her head as she tried to fight off a headache, then looked at Lunaère. "I'm glad you're not an assassin targeting the company. Just to check...who are these people you'd like to know about?"

"Of course, I'm sure someone like you has heard of them. They're a force that controls the world from behind the scenes... Do you know anything about the Unseen Hand of the Gods?"

The color drained from Sophia's face again.

Lunaère continued. "I thought they might actually be involved with things here in the kingdom too, so I forced, uh...I *peacefully negotiated* for information and the cooperation of the royals and nobles of the various regions, as well as prominent merchants. The Unseen Hand must have hidden themselves very well, because I didn't find any clues... Instead, I learned about you. Thank you for listening— What's wrong? You look pale."

Sophia wavered on her feet, nearly falling over, but Nilmayne supported her.

"H-hold in there, Lady Sophia!" Nilmayne whispered.

At the heart of those who controlled and manipulated the goings on of Locklore wasn't the Unseen Hand of the Gods. It was Sophia. It was only natural that her name would come up before the organization's if someone was looking into it.

"U-um, Lunaère... As you can see, I'm not feeling too well," said Sophia, still leaning on Nilmayne.

"You're right, you aren't. I'm sorry for pushing this on you at such an inconvenient time," said Lunaère with a slight bow.

"Y-yes! So, I apologize, but right now isn't the best—"

"Space-time Magic Level 23: Retrograde."

A white magic circle appeared. It emitted a white light that encapsulated Sophia's body, returning the life back to her face.

"There, you should be fine now."

Sophia and Nilmayne were frozen in shock, staring at Lunaère, who'd used a level 23 spell with as much ease as they drew breath.

Sophia knew there was nothing she could do against such a power. Even if she managed a surprise attack, she still wouldn't win. Even if, by some miracle, Sophia dealt damage to Lunaère, she now knew that Lunaère could recover her health instantly.

"I'll die here if I slip up and say the wrong thing, no matter how small..." murmured Sophia quietly with her head down.

"Let's get down to business. Do you know anything about the Unseen Hand of the Gods?" asked Lunaère.

"I-I don't... Th-that's right, I don't know anything about that organization. I really am sorry you came all this way for nothing..."

"You don't know...*anything*? You, the oldest person in the world? Odd. The royal family said they received information of the utmost secrecy via oral reports about the intervention of the gods, and several nobles knew of the Unseen Hand of the Gods, if only through rumors. Am I overlooking something?" Lunaère placed a hand over her mouth in thought.

"O-oh, I do know of them! *Th-them*! That's who you were talking about! I'm sorry, I misheard you!" said Sophia loudly, her voice cracking.

Nilmayne looked at her with uncertainty. "Lady Sophia! You can't do that! If you betray the Unseen Hand of the Gods, your place in the world—"

"Please do be quiet, Nilmayne. What do you mean, 'betray'? I have nothing to do with them!"

"Lady Sophia?!" Nilmayne sounded taken aback, Her eyes widened like saucers.

The primary responsibility of the Unseen Hand was adjusting the world. This covered various fields, such as recovering dangerous items, eliminating heretical elements, and even maintaining strong control over the policies and

military might of every country. This work obviously also included killing anyone who was too powerful to be controlled. The only way to escape the Unseen Hand was to *become* a Finger upon that Hand.

Corpse Doll Alice had noticed the existence of the higher beings. She believed someday she would inevitably encounter a situation engineered to kill her, and so tried not to do anything that would draw their attention...like ruining the world's balance. At the same time, she sought the power to become one of the Five Fingers.

Betraying the Unseen Hand basically meant making enemies of the entire world of Locklore and the higher beings. The Unseen Hand would not allow someone to leave the organization, and Sophia didn't want to do something as idiotic as that. But did she have a choice?

"...Fine, Lunaère. I will tell you everything I know about the Unseen Hand of the Gods," said Sophia.

The situation changed when her life was in imminent danger. Sophia had first joined the Unseen Hand to prevent them from killing her, after all. She felt no obligation to risk her own life for the higher beings. Instead of being killed here and now, she chose to become a target later down the line.

"L-Lady Sophia...that path is a dangerous one..." said Nilmayne, looking between Sophia and Lunaère in a fluster.

"The Unseen Hand of the Gods is a small but powerful organization that receives divine messages from the higher beings and makes adjustments to the world. They are the most dangerous people within it," said Sophia, talking about them as though she were completely unaffiliated.

"The first member is the Ruler of the Skies, one who controls dragon society and those who protect the natural order of the world. If you wish to know more about the Ruler, your only options are to go to the hidden settlements of the dragonkin, a race that watches over the humans, or to the continent where the dragons live, a place unexplored by humanity."

"Hmm, the continent where the dragons live and humans don't go..." said Lunaère with a nod.

“The second member is Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. He was an ancient king of the Yamato Kingdom. In the past, he tried to take over the entire world. If it weren’t for the higher beings interfering, he likely would have succeeded. The public story is that he was betrayed by his subordinates and killed. You can likely learn more about him if you go to the Yamato Kingdom.”

“Really? I haven’t visited that country yet.” Lunaère nodded again.

Sopia knew that the Ruler of the Skies had already been captured. She also knew that it wasn’t very efficient to go all the way to the Yamato Kingdom to gather information on Nobunaga. This was her passive tactic to limit how much ire she would earn from the other Fingers in future, since she was giving away information about the Unseen Hand of the Gods in order to protect herself.

The entire time, Nilmayne was glancing uneasily at Sopia. Sopia was desperately avoiding those glances, because she was worried that Nilmayne’s behavior would make Lunaère suspicious.

“The third member is the Silent Void... Even I know precious little about them. They are a small-framed humanoid figure covered in a black cloth. I don’t know if they’re a man or a woman...or even if they’re human. It’s said that they are the most dangerous member of the Unseen Hand. I have no idea how you could go about meeting them.”

“...You know far more details than I imagined, Sopia. It’s almost like you’ve spoken with them several times,” said Lunaère.

“M-m-m-my purpose is to know things, so of course I would know this much! I’ve lived ten thousand years. Ten *thousand*! Please don’t underestimate me!” Sopia smacked the table, impressing her point with desperation.

“I didn’t mean to imply that...” Lunaère frowned.

“W-we high elves are a very proud people. Please be careful with your words, Lunaère.” Sopia cleared her throat.

Nilmayne looked at the two, unsettled. *Sopia* was the one who needed to be most careful. Though she was acting haughty, she was also racking her brain to think of a believable way of getting out of the situation as soon as possible.

“The fourth member is King Veranta, Ruler of the World... He directly receives messages from the higher beings and is the true leader of the Unseen Hand of the Gods... And I have heard some rumors whispered about him—I’ve never met the man personally, so these really are rumors, you understand—rumors that he wears a mask and his true identity is unknown, but he has a gift skill. What that skill is or what having it means, I honestly do not know. He’s a careful man who rarely takes action himself, but you’ll be sure to clash with him eventually if you’re after the Unseen Hand.”

“It seems like this Silent Void and King Veranta are going to be the most difficult to keep track of.”

“Most likely. There you have it, the core of the Unseen Hand of the Gods...the members of the Four Fingers you are after,” said Sophia with a serious expression and a nod.

“Four Fingers?! Lady Sophia, d-don’t you think that li—” Nilmayne began.

“What is strange about Four Fingers?! There could be as many digits on one hand as they wanted! There are people who lose a finger or two in battle!” Sophia swiftly wrapped a hand around Nilmayne’s neck to stop her speaking.

“I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Lunaère tilted her head in confusion as she watched the two.

“A-anyway, that is all I know about the Unseen Hand of the Gods,” said Sophia. “Was that helpful, Lunaère?”

Lunaère nodded. “Thank you. You’ve given me some clues to work with. Looks like there really was a limit to what I could dig up in the kingdom.”

“Yes...right. Good luck with that. I’ve got some very important matters to take care of now.”

If Sophia didn’t quickly get away from any populated city to somewhere far away from civilization, she wouldn’t survive. If Lunaère discovered who she truly was, she would be killed. ...And now she’d made an enemy of the Unseen Hand. There was no doubt that assassins would be sent for her—probably Nobunaga or the Silent Void.

No one would argue Nobunaga's status as one of the most powerful people with supernatural abilities in the world. Sophia already knew the sort of techniques he had available to him, but even if she planned thoroughly and laid traps in advance there was only about a 10 percent chance she would win against him.

The Silent Void, on the other hand, was a total mystery. All she knew was that Veranta was oddly trusting of the Silent Void. She'd never even seen the Void speak once. She didn't think they had a heart or emotions like a human did. Not knowing was enough reason to fear them, and particularly in Sophia's case; there was very little in the world she didn't know.

Nobunaga was a cruel, battle-obsessed maniac, but she still expected kinder treatment from him. She already knew his personality and fighting style, which was practically reassuring compared to the Void. If she had to choose which one she would fight against, Nobunaga was the better option.

Sophia turned unsteadily toward the door of the office. Nilmayne rushed to support her with her shoulder.

"Sophia, you've left the Rainbow Ring. That was my apology to you. It's a very valuable item, I promise," said Lunaère, pointing to the ring on the table.

Sophia looked back to Lunaère, but shook her head weakly and said, "...I'm tired. I don't want to think about anything right now. Please keep it."

"Are you sure? Oh, and that gold crystal is still on the floor where you dropped it. Is it some sort of dragon eye?"

Sophia twirled around. She'd accidentally dropped Tiamat's Eye when she vomited.

The Eye was an incredibly valuable item. She needed it to help her flee from Lunaère and the Unseen Hand after this.

It had been with her for the past eight thousand years. It was, in fact, the reason she'd managed to live this long and the reason she was called the World's Recordkeeper. It was as important to Sophia as her own body was, if not more so. Tired as she was, she couldn't leave Tiamat's Eye behind.

"That's right, thank you. I nearly forgot—"

“Why is this crystal showing Kanata?”

Lunaère’s unemotional voice had suddenly acquired a coating of frost. Sophia felt the blood drain from her face.

When Lunaère had burst in here, Sophia had been using Tiamat’s Eye to observe Kanata Kanbara. The images were still there.

Sophia had used Lunaère’s belief in her as a source of information—as well as the lich’s intellectual blind spots—to mask her role within the Unseen Hand, but even Lunaère’s naivety had its limits. If she learned that Sophia had been watching Kanata, she would put it all together.

“Do you *know* Kanata?” asked Lunaère. “No, that can’t be possible. There’s been no opportunity for him to get to know someone as important as you. So, how do you know *about* Kanata?”

Nilmayne covered her face with her hands.

There was no way Sophia could talk her way out of this now. All the lies she’d told to get out of this ridiculous situation had been for nothing.

“If you can’t answer that question, let me ask a different one. Sophia, are you a member of the Unseen—”

“T-Tiamat’s Eye has the ability to show the viewer the people or places they want to if they apply magic! It must have reacted to your magic!” Sophia blurted out.

“I’m not an idiot. I haven’t applied any magic to it. Do you really think an item this powerful would be so reactive in a situation like this one? If the magic to show images was only supplied by the item itself, the crystal would have run out a long time ago. I can tell that’s not true without even researching it. That’s a far-fetched lie.”

“U-uh, well...it’s just...” Sophia’s voice grew quieter and quieter. “Normally, that is true, but sometimes the residual magic from previous uses reacts to strong emotions! You must really be thinking about this Kanata person! If you weren’t aware of it...that’s right, it must be subconscious!”

“Huh? What... I-is that true? Me? Even in this situation?! Thinking about

Kanata the whole time?! Like I'm some sort of love-obsessed idiot?!" Lunaère's face turned red, and her eyes darted back and forth between the crystal and Sophia. "Th-there's no way! Th-that makes it look like I think about him all the time! Th-there are days where I think of him a lot...but *definitely* not right now! Not now! Quit saying such weird things to keep your lies going! Even if the crystal happened to activate like that, its images would be less clear!"

"W-well I don't know! But if you really want to look at that person so much, you can have the crystal! I am quite busy right now!"

"Really? B-but this is a Godly item... If I had this, I could always watch over Kanata, no matter how far away he was... But I'm not spying on him! I-it's just that he's in a dangerous position..."

Lunaère gently lifted Tiamat's Eye in both hands and stared at Kanata's face as it was shown.

Using this opportunity, Sophia dragged Nilmayne by the arm and leapt out the hole in the wall that Lunaère had created. They landed on the ground, drawing stares from the people around, but Sophia pulled Nilmayne's arm, and they ran.

"Once we get somewhere where the magic can't be easily traced, we'll use an item to teleport out of here!" said Sophia. "If you stay here, Nilmayne, either Lunaère or the Unseen Hand will get you eventually, so you're coming with me!"

"I am honored to accompany you on your journey, Lady Sophia... B-but is it all right to leave Tiamat's Eye? You treasured that!"

"Of course it's not all right! That item is my everything! But I won't trade my life for it!"

Tears shone in Sophia's eyes. Nilmayne saw how close she was to crying and said nothing further.

Bonus Story:

Studying Magic with a Certain Lich

— 1 —

AFTER I GOT THROWN INTO Cocytus by an arrogant, evil god just for entertainment, I ran into Lunaère and became her student.

I raised my level, learned some magic...

I'd thought I'd gotten pretty strong, but apparently it wasn't safe outside Cocytus either. The world of Locklore was made by Naiarotop and the gods for their own amusement. ItΩ¢ was rampant with monsters and more dangerous, nefarious people than I ever imagined.

Lunaère once said: *E-even if they're not as powerful as here, level 1,000 monsters are still everywhere...aren't they... Yes, they definitely are! You wouldn't last long, and I can't guarantee your safety. It's best for you to stay here and keep training.*

That was why I spent day after day leveling in the Cursed Mirror, studying magic, and practicing the Twin Minds Method.

Today, I was in the garden outside Lunaère's hut practicing alchemy. Lunaère had given me the alchemical task of "creating a living plant from nothing but ordinary metal." Around me were stacks of books on alchemy she'd given me; part of my task was also being able to find relevant passages in these books.

The ground around me was covered in magic circles I'd written for the alchemy as well as metal chunks scattered about on top of the circles.

It hadn't even been a month since I'd come here, but I felt like I'd studied a hundred times more than I did in the twenty years I lived in my previous world. Probably more.

Lunaère had given me lots of study aids—things like The Sorcerer King's

Research, a necklace that improved your ability to understand, Blood Ethers of the Gods, which recovered your magic and honed your senses towards magic, as well as several other elixirs and potions that improved my focus or eliminated my fatigue.

Thanks to those, I was able to continue writing magic circles for twenty hours straight and even understand most of the heavy tomes with just a quick read through.

When Lunaère told me to search through the mountains of books on my own to find passages related to my task, I thought I would spend the rest of my life in Cocytus. Surprisingly though, things moved along quite well.

“How’s it goin’, Kanata?” Noble asked as he shuffled up next to me.

“Sort of a slog, to be honest. The more I research, the more I find things that say it’s impossible.”

Creating a plant meant creating life. Making life from metal seemed to go against all rules of alchemy to me.

“Sounds rough. But she did say that you should practice the different types of magic on your own,” he said.

Lunaère had taught me the basics for each of the different schools of magic and I had no problems using those. If I could deepen my own understanding of magic even outside of Cocytus by reading magic tomes and training, it would be for the best.

But the field of alchemy was way too deep, and studying by yourself with books was totally inefficient. Having or not having a teacher made a world of difference; *my* teacher, Lunaère, told me I should prioritize alchemy over other fields of magic and dedicate more time to it.

“Eh, it’s how Lunaère teaches,” said Noble. “She can tell you’re getting close to finishing your leveling... She’s probably just pointing you at alchemy as an excuse to keep—”

“You seem to be having a fun *chat*, Noble,” said Lunaère, who was standing behind him.

He snapped his mouth shut with a shudder and pretended to be a normal treasure chest.

“Noble...if you make a habit of saying ridiculous things, I’ll make sure you can’t open your mouth while Kanata is around.”

“Give me a break, Lunaère!”

“P-please calm down, Lunaère-san. Noble-san always says whatever he wants... I never take him seriously, anyway,” I said.

“If you say so, I guess I can let it go.”

“He’s right! Totally right! And overreacting just means you agree it’s true!”

Without saying a word, Lunaère pointed her finger at Noble in a precursor to an attack. Noble closed his mouth again, going back to being an innocent treasure chest that didn’t need to get hit by a gravity bomb.

As always, he changes his attitude on a dime. Why won’t he stop teasing her if he knows it makes her angry? Then I noticed Noble discreetly poking his tongue out of his mouth like he was giving me some sort of sign. *That’s right. He doesn’t stop because he thinks it’s fun.*

“How are you doing on your task?” asked Lunaère.

“Um... Honestly, I don’t understand the basic gist of it. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It might have been a bit soon to give you this task. I’ll give you a tiny bit of advice. What’s your current approach?”

“I’m making slow progress, but I still have a few ideas to test out. I’ll think about it on my own for a bit longer.”

“O-oh, okay... That’s fine, too. I’m not busy at the moment, so don’t feel bad about asking if you need help...”

For some reason, Lunaère looked a bit disappointed.

“I thought there was no point if I can’t do it on my own. I do need knowledge and skill for alchemy, but there’s also trial and error, awareness, and inspiration.”

“Was that written in some book? You shouldn’t blindly trust someone’s

words, even if they're famous. No matter what the topic is, with enough scrutiny you should realize it's open to interpretation. What's important about words isn't what they appear to be on the surface, but how we understand them. Wh-which is why you don't have to work quietly by yourself forever. A little advice from me wouldn't hurt..."

"I'm pretty sure you're the one who told me to do it on my own though, Master."

Lunaère looked uncomfortable and stopped talking.

"Psst, Kanata," said Noble. "She doesn't care about your task. This is her own way of showing she wants more attent—"

"A-anyway, if you're not stuck, then you don't even need my advice!" said Lunaère loudly, her face red. "Look, Noble, Kanata's trying to concentrate, so stop bothering him. And...something very important has come up that I need to talk to you about. Come with me to the hut."

Lunaère shot Noble a cold glare. With a snap of her fingers, a shuffling golem appeared and lifted Noble.

"H-help, Kanata! She's going to kill me!"

Noble wiggled about, but the golem didn't even budge. It carried him off to the hut.

"...Maybe she would have been happier if I'd asked her for help," I muttered as I watched Lunaère and Noble disappear inside. Then I heard Noble scream and let out a small sigh.

...I just hope Noble learns when to stop teasing her.

– 2 –

TWO DAYS LATER I finally managed to complete my task.

"I-I did it... A living plant, created from alchemy with nothing but ordinary metal..."

In front of me was a single blooming flower. It was gray and had a metallic quality to it, but it was a genuine, living flower.

I opened the Acacia Memoirs and looked it up.

FALUMÉ, THE ALCHEMIC FLOWER

Value Class: Legendary

A flower created by alchemy. It is used as an abstract concept within alchemy and thought to be an object of nothing more than imagination, but it does exist here. While it is an incredibly priceless object, it is not capable of providing itself with nutrients and is therefore doomed to wither overnight.

It represents realized impossibilities and the potential of people, both for better or worse.

I stroked the petals of the plant I made...the Falumé. I felt attached to it, since I'd worked so hard to make it, but it seemed I couldn't hold on to it for a long time.

"Anyway, all that's left is to show Master," I said.

I was filled with a sense of accomplishment, and I wanted Lunaère to be happy at the advancement I'd made. Part of me also just wanted to hear her compliment me. This was all overshadowed by a feeling of loneliness—this also meant I was one step closer to moving on from Cocytus.

The only things left were to raise my level and improve the precision of my Twin Minds Method. My graduation day really was within sight; it probably wouldn't even take a week.

"We don't get to talk all that much, either. Maybe...I really should have asked Master for more help on this task..."

I sighed, then went to the hut to get Lunaère. Noble came too, since he happened to be in the hut with her, and I brought them back to my Falumé.

"...You really managed to complete it in such a short time. You're incredible,"

she said.

“I had the help of your items.”

“With this, there’s nothing else I can teach you about alchemy.” She sounded a little sad. “If you have the skill to make a Falumé, then it’s safe to say you’ve learned all of the alchemical basics.”

“Basics...? Every single book I read said the Alchemic Flower didn’t even exist...”

“W-well, uh, it’s because you might draw the attention of other travelers! It’s the bare minimum of basics in a world like that! It’s the basics of what you’ll need to survive!”

“So, you’re saying only a cutting-edge alchemist can live in the outside world?” grumbled Noble. “Humanity might be extinct by the time Kanata gets out of here.”

“Don’t twist what I’m saying, Noble!” said Lunaère, her face red and her voice catching. “A-alchemy is good for all sorts of things! If he can manage this much alchemy, it won’t be hard for him to take ordinary objects and make something suitably valuable out of them. An unfamiliar traveler who no one will trust may have difficulty finding work... At least if he’s able to do this, he won’t have to worry about money.”

“Are you kidding me, Lunaère? I’m hardly an expert, but I bet he could make enough money to live off for the rest of his life if he just sold just one Falumé to other alchemists.” Noble argued quickly against Lunaère’s defense, making her frown.

“This much competency lets him earn a lot of money quickly if something happens and he needs it! Like, if an entire country decides he’s their enemy, there would still be plenty of countries or organizations that would protect him if he showed them a tiny glimpse of his skill! Even if he needed to live in the middle of a continent with no other people, he’d be able to make everything he needed himself. He’ll never be poor! Th-that’s what I mean when I say this level of alchemical knowledge is necessary!” Lunaère spoke rapidly.

“Oh, you definitely realize this is way overboard!” said Noble. “Why not just

let Kanata stay—”

“N-Noble-san, please stop,” I said, cutting him off. Lunaère was making excuses to tell herself so that she could make more time to spend with me. Even I could see that.

But Lunaère had her own way of thinking. She had to protect the image she’d built where she was a fickle lich who hated humans and was only interacting with me to train me. There was no way that was just her attempt to hide her embarrassment over being a girl who wasn’t used to interacting with people.

“A-anyway, I’m just preparing him for the worst,” she said. “It’s like a rule of this world that travelers always get dragged into something. Going a little overboard is actually just perfect in his situation.”

That was for sure. Naiarotop gave travelers from other worlds powers, then used them to make entertainment for the other gods. Those gods would be disappointed if the travelers ended up living peacefully. They might come at me with something—no, not *might*. They absolutely *would*.

“But...I really am out of things to teach you. I’ve already taught you the basics of all the schools of magic. And since you made this, we can say your grasp of alchemy is solid. There’s not really any point spending more time on spirit magic, beyond what we already have... Th-this should be something to be happy about,” said Lunaère sadly.

“If you’re that sad, you can fix it by asking Kanata to stay—” muttered Noble, and Lunaère quickly pointed a finger at him. He immediately shifted to asking me, “Oh, Kanata. Maybe there’s something you want to learn from Lunaère before you leave?”

“Wh-what’s the point of forcing him to come up with something?! I only saved him on a whim. I wouldn’t even care if he died suddenly, so I’m only teaching him the bare minimum!”

Is there something I want to learn from Lunaère...?

Nothing immediately came to mind. Like Lunaère said, I’d already learned each school of magic. I’d got a lot of fighting practice in the Cursed Mirror, so I felt like I’d reached an acceptable level there, too. Even if I asked about culture,

history, or monster ecology, I'd already heard the basics.

After thinking that much about it...I realized there was one school of magic Lunaère hadn't taught me about.

"Master, now that I think about it, you haven't taught me about death magic yet. I'd like to learn the basics for that too, if I could..."

She'd taught me all the other schools of magic, but she'd barely even touched on death magic. Death magic was a field of magic that directly manipulated souls and minds. If alchemy was the field for manipulating physical objects how you wished, then death magic was the field for manipulating the soul.

Honestly, I didn't think I would ever need death magic. I only suggested it because I was afraid of the quickly approaching day where I would graduate from being Lunaère's student. But I also had a feeling that Lunaère had intentionally been avoiding teaching me death magic.

She'd use a death magic spell to become a lich; learning more about death magic meant learning more about her. But perhaps she'd noticed that too, which was one of the reasons why she avoided the topic altogether.

"Death magic...? It's a field I'm particularly good at, but I don't think you'll need it," she said with a grimace. A negative response, as always. "Why would you even... Death magic is only practiced in the shadows of civilization. If people find out you can use it, that would be enough to make them persecute you. And that's only natural: people want to stay away from those who play with life and death. You should stay far away from people who can use death magic once you go to the surface."

It was like she was warning me not to get too close to her either.

"Master..."

"Well, if that's the case, then Kanata'll graduate in like two or three days," said Noble. "All that's left is leveling him up a bit, but he can already hold his own against the demons in the Cursed Mirror. He doesn't even need to ask you or me for advice, just needs to go fighting without talking to us at all. ...It'll sure be lonely down here."

"...That is true," said Lunaère. "But even so, what does it matter, Noble? He's

been down here too long already.”

“If you teach him death magic, we can get a few more days, probably. Hey! Maybe you should teach just a bit of simple death magic, so he knows what *not* to do. Then we’ll have plenty of chances to talk with him.”

“T-the only person who would enjoy that is you, Noble, since you have so much fun blabbering on. If...if you want to go outside with him, I won’t stop you. Anyway, I don’t believe I should teach him death magic.”

While that’s what Lunaère said, her face looked uncertain.

Wh-what would happen if I pushed her on it...?

I hadn’t even been there a month, but there was something I’d learned during my time living with Lunaère: she had placed rules on herself that she would not break.

She believed that I, a human, shouldn’t stay in Cocytus for a long time. But if she could convince herself that me staying here was correct, even by the slimmest margin, she could tell herself that she wasn’t breaking her rules.

If I gently nudged her by saying I really thought death magic was going to be necessary for me, I could probably get her to give me another few days.

“I thought it would be better to know a bit of death magic just so that I can defend myself against evil death magic users. What do you think?” I said. “There might be a chance for me to learn death magic on the surface too, but... if that leads me to learn a biased interpretation, then it might make me accidentally go down the wrong path... That’s why I would feel better learning it from you, Master.”

Lunaère was silent and brought a hand to her mouth like she was thinking.

I blurted that out without thinking, but she seems to be seriously considering it.

“Well...it is true that I don’t know too much about the outside world. It wouldn’t be surprising if death magic usage has changed while I’ve been in Cocytus. Considering what could happen on the off chance it was used improperly, and how far I’ve come with you anyway, it might be wise to teach

you a small amount of death magic...”

I convinced her!

“But I’m only teaching you the most basic of basics! Anything more is absolutely off the table! I also forbid you from reading about death magic on your own in the magic tomes here! Is that understood?”

“U-understood! Thank you.”

“I’ll need to reread my books and select ones that are safe for you to use. Really now...why do I have to keep doing all these things? We’d best get started,” she said and went back into the hut. Her footsteps seemed a bit lighter than they did normally.

“You knew exactly what buttons to press, kid,” murmured Noble quietly as he watched her go. Then he stuck out his tongue and twisted it into the shape of a thumbs up in my direction.

“Noble-san...” For a moment, I considered saying something loudly so Lunaère would turn around and reprimand him, but...I decided to let him off the hook this once. “Good timing.”

“Right?”

“What are you two muttering about back there? Come here already.” Lunaère looked back at us. Both Noble and I jumped and he pulled his twisted tongue back in his mouth to hide it.

“I-I’m coming!” I said.

I actually didn’t want to know the bare basics of death magic. I wanted to know the advanced magic too, the magic she used to become a lich. There was no way she’d teach me that much though.

But this meant that I could stay with her for a few more days as her student.

That made me happy.

Afterword

THIS IS NEKOKO, your author. Thank you so much for buying the fourth volume of *Disciple of the Lich*!

This time on the cover, we have Kanata, Pomera, and Philia! The illustrations are as beautiful as ever! Since these are the same characters who were on the front of Volume 2, I wanted to have the atmosphere changed up a bit, so I asked for Philia out in the front. In the background, we can see the Garden of the Dragons, the primary setting for the events of Volume 4. I absolutely wanted the dreamy atmosphere of the Garden of the Dragons to get a color illustration. I was delighted that it made it onto the cover!

Both the internal illustrations and the color pages are absolutely fantastic; I feel so blessed to be the author who gets these illustrations! I'm so glad I became an author! There are two illustrations I thought were particularly incredible: the one where Ramiel is innocently blowing other people's money on food, and the one where Lunaère is so happy to get the crystal that she forgets to be suspicious! Thank you so much to the illustrator, Yoh Hihara!

The second volume of the *Disciple of the Lich* manga went on sale on July 25th, 2021! Please check it out!

