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Illust. Saki Ukai

DUNGEON DIVE

Aim for the Deepest Level



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CONTENTS

1 A Fun, Fun, Heartwarming Boat Trip

2 The Party Grows

3 Friction

4 Break Time's Over



Chapter 1: A Fun, Fun, Heartwarming Boat Trip

On the deck, I sucked in a lungful of the nice ocean air. The nose-tickling smell of the sea was so invigorating, and the salty breeze blew through my bangs pleasantly. I looked up at the sky, a boundless expanse of blue, and at the center of that clear-weather canvas shone the pure-white sun, its rays shooting in every direction. The reflections of the one ever-rounder sun up above, glittering on the water, looked like a dozen or so little suns.

The great deep that stretched beyond the horizon struck a slightly lighter shade of blue than the sky; while darker than aqua blue, it was still paler than *blue* blue, making for a beautiful ocean hue that was different from the sky. The canvas of the waves was painted with irregular patches of dark indigo as well. If I had to guess, I'd say the color shifted depending on how deep the water was there. Now there was a use of color that surpassed any art, and it could only be found in nature. A silver fish jumping from under the surface, a white bird flapping in the distance...the music of the sea playing alongside the quiet splashing of the wavelets. I closed my eyes and soaked in that exquisite music. It was truly tranquil, peaceful. I thought so from the bottom of my heart.

But my heart itself wasn't tranquil. The opposite of the clear sky above, ominous clouds darkened my soul. So much so that I let out a sigh.

"Ugh."

My heartbeat was alarmingly fast, and I felt suffocated, which wasn't helped by the pain of this mouth ulcer. I even got the feeling my skin was getting slightly chapped and rough. The rings around my eyes now deeper, I couldn't hide my fatigue.

"My stomach hurts..." I muttered, blurting out what I was thinking deep down toward the beautiful blue sky.

I staggered and leaned over some of the wood railing. I hadn't gotten much shut-eye, so I was feeling not so steady on my feet. That wasn't to say the voyage from the Alliance to the mainland wasn't smooth sailing, of course. I'd

won the Brawl, seen off Lorwen, the Guardian of Floor 30, obtained the magic gem ship the *Living Legend*, and shaken off our pursuers. And now we were traveling straight west without getting into any accidents or distress. What could that be called apart from smooth sailing? And yet here I was, tuckered out to the extreme. I was drained to the very bone. And I was so depressed I had half a mind to climb over the railing and jump into the drink.

Why was I so very weary, you may ask? Let's rewind the clock to the first day of the voyage.

First came the squaring of promises with my allies. Then there was the cramped sensation of being the sole guy in this small, sealed environment called a ship. The excessive *touching* they were inflicting on me. The death-circle of besiegement was only getting tighter. That wasn't to mention the trouble we were running into in the Dungeon and our lack of success in making it to the fortieth floor.

And then there was the cherry on top. The pièce de résistance. I'd run into the number one source of my woes. I'd run into *her*. The ephemeral girl with the white hair and fair skin. Her face looked so familiar, and that was only natural. After all, one of the materials that constituted her was once *him*.



The day after the Brawl ended.

After escaping the Alliance port in Greeard, we'd finally obtained some free time without having to look behind us constantly. After Reaper and I got our voyage nice and stable, Lastiara took the lead regarding the allocation of our cabins. Each of us entered the rooms we'd been assigned and tried recuperating from the fatigue of the Brawl. The second I entered the room I'd made a beeline for, I collapsed onto the bed. I didn't even have the energy to look around first. Getting to the port in Greeard had been difficult enough, but then Lastiara had needled me to raid a casino in order to secure funds, and while I had that to thank for acquiring the *Living Legend*, a space where I could sleep without keeping one eye open, it also ran me ragged. I figured I'd use this day to get some rest, and I was about to close my eyes when a knock on the door dashed those hopes of retiring.

“Mr. Kanami...are you there?”

It was Maria’s voice. Surprised by this unexpected visit, I got out of bed and opened the door.

“You’re good,” I said, after a pause. “Feel free to come in.”

Maria was a girl with black hair like me. When I first met her, she’d been scrawny, but now her build was more feminine and soft, probably due to the fact she had enough to eat these days. Her previously gloomy expression was gradually becoming cheerier, which was a good trend. But there was something I couldn’t allow myself to forget—both of her black eyes were artificial. Our battle against each other had cost her her vision.

“Forgive me. I know you must be really tired, but would you be so kind as to spare me some of your time?” she asked, with a serious expression.

“That’s okay, don’t worry about it. I’m A-OK.”

It wasn’t a lie. While I was at my limit physically, that just meant I couldn’t fight. A simple chat wouldn’t be a problem...so long as Maria didn’t revert to her previous look of gloom and start a fight. And so long as the ship didn’t catch fire from Alty’s insane flame magic. And so long as Dia or Lastiara or someone didn’t enter the fray, turning everything into chaos. As long as none of that happened, we’d be okay. Our party was a tight-knit band working as one. That was what we’d all sworn upon our daybreak departure to the sea. There was no way such a thing could happen. It couldn’t. We were going to be *fine*. At least, that was what I kept telling myself, but my eyes fell on the sword (Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan) at my waist and ticked Responsiveness to full power in preparation to listen to her.

All right, now let’s hear what’s on her mind.

“So, Maria, you’ve got something to tell me?”

“Yes. It’s important.”

Something important? Something important involving Maria... I quelled the trauma shivers and maintained my smile.

“I’ve got something important to talk to you about too. We’re aboard ship

now, so it's okay. Let's have a nice chat."

I had a hunch what this was about from Maria's general vibe. We probably had the same topic in mind. We'd been too busy in the Alliance to be able to bring it up, but now we had time.

She looked down at her feet. "Er, well...it's about when I fought you alongside Alty on the Day of the Blessed Birth."

"I figured."

I looked down too. That battle had left deep scars on both our hearts. I was sure that on a subconscious level, we both wanted to pretend it had never happened. But that was the very reason we lifted our heads and recalled the events of that fateful day.

"On that day, I betrayed you," muttered Maria. "I repaid your goodwill by spitting in your face, and I went so far as to aim for your life..."

Her face was contorted with remorse, and she was trembling from head to toe. I was probably making the same expression and trembling the same way. Just remembering the fires of that purgatory made our hearts shrink into themselves.

"Don't worry about it, Maria. I was the one who did wrong by you. I told you then, didn't I? You look a lot like the only family I have. That's why I spent my coin to buy you, kept you by my side, doted on you, and used you as a tool for my own satisfaction. I never spared a thought on what might make you happy, and I pretended like I never heard your feelings for me. I kept hurting you. The fire I tasted that day was my just deserts."

"No, you did absolutely nothing wrong. You rescued a slave and gave her a hearth and home by your side. Anybody who hears about what you did would think nothing but that you were perfectly in the clear. In fact, they'd be moved by the tale of your good deeds. And not thinking about a slave's happiness? Pretending you didn't hear about my feelings for you? That's a normal reaction."

"Huh? A normal reaction?"

"You're too good-hearted," she said matter-of-factly. "You may believe that

feelings of love need to be responded to earnestly and in good faith, but in the real world it's the opposite. The majority of people out there usually pretend they didn't notice or use those feelings to their advantage. Often enough, they just think of it as a pain and deliberately ignore it. Doubly so if that person is a slave."

In this world, these values—which were the opposite of my own—might be the most commonly held view. Since I wasn't of this world, I couldn't reply, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Despite that, your needless sense of guilt caused you to say you didn't mind if I made you mine to possess, and you didn't mind if you died. You're an idiot. You're a big, huge dummy," she continued.

Due to Alty's Decimal Trial driving my back to the wall, I'd staked it all on Maria, prepared to die in the process.

"I do get the feeling I said a lot of stupid stuff...but that's just what I'm like when I'm that cornered. I can't say any of it was a lie. If you really aimed for the deepest level in my place, then—"

"It's just not right," she interrupted. "I can't make you mine to possess." While the sentiment made her happy, she shook her head as she walked closer. "I have no reason to do that to you, after all. Not anymore. Not after what you told me. You said you won't leave me behind. That you won't leave me alone. And I believe you. I don't have my eyes, so I can't even tell for sure whether you're lying, but I'll trust you anyway. I'll trust in you from now on."

Maria embraced me. Placing her hands on my waist, she leaned her head on my chest, and I caressed her black hair.

"That's right. I won't leave you alone anymore. Rest easy."

Maria had torn up the "contract" I'd proposed on the Day of the Blessed Birth, but not because she didn't trust me. She'd rejected the idea *because* she trusted me. I could practically see the emotional bonds tying us firmly together. She had chosen to believe in the sanctity of our bond, which was far more precious to her than any agreement predicated on terms and conditions and self-interest. Consequently, both she and I stopped shivering so much. We had overcome our trauma to take another step forward. After a long hug, she

distanced herself. Gone was the dispirited look on her face.

“Heh heh. Now I’m relieved. You’re so pointlessly sincere and upright that I thought maybe you thought you were mine to have now. Not to repeat myself, but you don’t belong to anybody.”

It was her usual expression. Not the hollow look of days past or one of pure despair. She was back to the Maria I remembered when we’d tackled the Dungeon as a diving duo.

“Yeah. You’re right. No one owns me.”

“Hee hee, that’s right. It’s the other way around, really. If I had to say, I’m the one who belongs to you,” she announced with a radiant smile.

While she’d reverted to the old Maria, I could hardly let what she’d just said stand.

“Hold on, Maria. The conversation was totally about to end on a nice note, right? You know, a ‘nobody belongs to anybody’ sort of note. If I don’t belong to anyone, you don’t either. It’d be best to end our chat with that, don’t you think?”

“It’s apples and oranges. You did nothing wrong, but I’m sitting on so many sins. I was full-on intending to kill you.”

“Sure, but I forgive you. That’s not—”

“Well, it’s not to be forgiven and not to be tolerated. I need to atone for those sins. I burned down your home, betrayed you at the eleventh hour, and was even about to kill you. I can’t atone for all that through some run-of-the-mill penance. Oh, whatever should I do? I have no other choice; I simply *must* give my all to you. I don’t feel I can fully atone unless I go that far, so there’s no other recourse. No recourse but to become yours to have in a way that goes *beyond* a slave. Your complete and utter possession,” she said, clearly having fun.

My smile turned wry. “I told you I forgave you, didn’t I?”

“Hmm, what to do... You hate being called ‘Master,’ so how about I call you ‘Owner’? Doesn’t sound half bad, does it?”

“Listen to me, would you?! You did nothing wrong, so don’t go saying you’ll become someone’s possession!”

“I did nothing wrong? Try weighing our crimes rationally, please. No matter how you slice it, I’m the one who’s more in the wrong than you. Besides, you do realize this whole suggestion was yours to begin with? You’re the one who wanted to sell yourself to me first, aren’t you? Spouting a silly line like you’d gladly become mine to have if I saved your sister. So you’re saying it’s fine if you belong to me, but wrong if I belong to you? Oh, I suppose you’re just being nice to me again. Are you planning to always treat me with such undue partiality? You don’t want to be equals?”

“Okay, okay. I get it. I won’t give you everything. I’ll treat you as an equal, so please, lay off me...”

Hearing me surrender, her demeanor changed completely, and she spoke very calmly and peacefully. “That’s where we’re at. So even if you tell me you’ll become mine, it would do nothing but put me out. Please don’t forget that. I say all this because from where I’m standing, you’re the type to say the same thing to somebody else in a few days’ time if I leave you to your own devices.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll try not to say anything rash or hasty.”

Apparently, her whole ridiculous monologue was just to scold me for my behavior. Understanding what she was getting at, I nodded. To be honest, I had too much of a history with rash remarks.

“Good, please be careful. Otherwise, the boy I like will end up as somebody else’s possession before I know it. And I think that if that happened, I’d die.”

“Y-You’d die? You’re just joking, right?”

“No, it’s not a joke. And I meant ninety-nine percent of what I said earlier. Even if I had to become your possession, I’d still like to be by your side. I don’t want to spend a second away from you. I’ll come out and say it—I love you. Now that everything’s out in the open, I’ll say it again and again, so listen up! I, Maria, love you, Aikawa Kanami. I love you so much I’d die.”

“Right, got it...”

Her confession was so blunt that I didn’t know what tone to take. I mean, I’d

already known she liked me, but getting told all that in times of peace made a man feel embarrassed and awkward. Of course, that went for her too. While she'd maintained a poker-faced, generic smile, she was a tiny bit red around the ears. In the past, I probably wouldn't have even noticed that blush, but now I could tell. Her constant string of snide remarks had been to hide her own embarrassment. It was her habit of trying to appear strong because one doesn't want to show one's weak points to anybody. The more uneasy she got, the more lip she gave. And when the person she wanted to be liked by was before her eyes, she only ever said stuff that wasn't exactly endearing. The way she approached those she wanted to rely on was fatally broken. That was how she was. And seeing her that way pained my heart a little.

If Maria was like this, then the same must have gone for the girl named Alty. Unlike with Lorwen, I'd never really understood Alty even as our battle came to a close. I'd viewed her as a monster during our fight, not a person, and looking back, I really regretted that. The way she'd been lippy with me right until the end...

If I'm not wrong, that's just like how Maria... I grimaced.

Maria reacted by hastily adding, "Er, so, uh...I still haven't touched on the main thing I wanted to talk about, actually..."

"Ah, uh, yeah, I know. I've been wanting to talk about the main thing too."

I knew that, after overcoming that battle, she was making an effort to be more upfront about her feelings. We'd both vowed not to keep secrets anymore. That was why she was being so direct.

"How do *you* feel about *me*? Please tell me the truth—and leave any partiality toward me or sense of guilt aside. After everything I've done, are you really going to allow me to stay by your side?"

Her question rang nostalgic; Alty and Lastiara had asked me similar questions in the Dungeon before. Back then, I hadn't been able to reply immediately. I'd misrepresented how I really felt. It was time to tell her the unvarnished truth.

"I'd be happy if you remained by my side, of course. I do like you too. Only, I can't say that I love you in a romantic sense. I think that deep down, I still see my sister in you, so..."

I myself thought that was a craven way to phrase it. The reply was essentially the same as rejecting her love confession. Yet Maria smiled contentedly.

“That’s all I need. That’s enough for me.” The temperature of the room had risen in accordance with her confession. Burning magic energy was flowing from inside her. She blushed a little and said, “Thank you very much, Mr. Kanami.”

“No, thank you, Maria.”

I smiled back and put a hand on her head, which she accepted, digesting the tactile sensation and twisting around like a contented cat. With that, our relationship was back to the way it had been... No, I reckoned our bond was even stronger now. Maybe that bond had been born of something negative like trauma or the need to atone, but all the same, I could sense the presence of one as thick as blood.

As I stroked her head, I said, “Maria...I’ll tell you everything about me. Tomorrow, even.”

What we needed for the battles to come was mutual understanding. It was doubtless especially necessary in the face of a foe who would strike us where we were psychologically vulnerable. A foe like Palinchron. I’d decided that I would tell all of my allies everything—the fact that I was from a different world. The unidentified skills I had. Everything.

“Everything about you?” she said with a serious look. “You’re speaking of how you’re from a separate world, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking of gathering everybody together tomorrow so I can tell you all at once. I’m not just gonna tell you, I’m gonna tell the whole gang.”

“Okay, understood,” she said, beaming.

It was an expression I’d never seen on her face before. She’d accepted that we were all equals as if she had just hacked up all the sediment that had been building up inside her. The relief she felt was real, as if she had finally been able to fix a shirt that had been buttoned up wrong. That expression assured me that Maria would never let her troubles fester unresolved again.

Happy with my promise, she made to leave the room. However, right before opening the door and exiting, she said the following.

“Mr. Kanami. In all honesty, I don’t think even becoming yours to have would fully atone for my sins. So I’d like to repay the remainder to you gradually over time. From now until always.”

A pause. “Gotcha. But just so you know, I’m thinking the same thought you are.”

“Really? The same thought...”

We both wanted to make it up to the other. After learning that, we said our see-yous, just like we had in the past.

“Have a good night...my esteemed owner.”

“Yep, goodnight. You’re as cheeky as ever, Maria.”

But unlike back then, there wasn’t a shred of gloom between us. We left off with the sort of banter that friends who had their guard down around each other could spout. I stared at the door that Maria had closed behind her. Before I knew it, my body had stopped trembling. That was the moment I started believing that we had become *true* friends and allies. More and more, I had something to show for the battles that had led to today—the battle of the Day of the Blessed Birth and the battles of the Brawl. From deep inside to the tips of my fingers and toes, a sense of satisfaction was suffusing me—or that was the feeling I got.

Sadly, that sensation wouldn’t last long. It only lasted for less than a minute. My next visitor had come along to replace Maria.



After a light knock, the door that had closed mere moments prior swung open again. It was Snow, and she seemed jittery. Wearing her usual folk-costume dress, her dragonewt tail was wagging from side to side. And her eyes were darting restlessly as she pressed her index fingers together, chewing on her words.

“Uh, I just...happened by, thinking...I’d like to talk to you, so...yeah.”

From how she was acting, I could tell she’d listened in on my conversation with Maria. Snow then noticed that I’d noticed. She lowered her head in

apology.

“Sorry, Kanami. I eavesdropped on your chat with Mar-Mar.”

“That’s okay; we were speaking pretty loud. I don’t mind.”

It would have been a very different story if, however, she’d actively used her vibration magic to listen in. I couldn’t be sure, but I had my suspicions that was indeed what she’d done. She certainly wasn’t above eavesdropping. She had a prior record testifying to that.

Snow continued, unaware that I suspected her of foul play. “So, tell me, Kanami—it’s okay if you belong to Mar-Mar? When I asked you to be mine, you insisted up and down it was wrong.”

She’d asked me point-blank. No beating around the bush. Clearly, she was shocked to hear I’d once told Maria I didn’t mind belonging to her.

I replied without beating around the bush myself. “That’s because your circumstances are totally different from Maria’s. We’ve been through so much, Maria and I. We’ve been to hell and back...”

The light in her eyes faded gradually. “I... I see. We’re different... I mean, we’d have to be... It’s why you wouldn’t become mine... Heh heh. Heh heh heh. It’s okay. I knew it all along. I knew you just don’t like me—”

I grabbed Snow’s shoulder and shouted. “Snow! Wait, calm down! You overheard us, so you understand, don’t you? Maria and I had a dark past before that exchange happened. I’d wounded her heart badly. That’s the only reason I told her I didn’t mind if I became hers to have. I’m not saying that I would hate becoming yours to have in particular!”

I was afraid of Snow regressing after we’d made such progress. If a Brawl-level fight ever broke out on board, the *Living Legend* would go up in flames.



Seeing the sincere look on my face, Snow regained her composure little by little. “Uh, huh. Okay, got it. I knew it; you made a huge mistake in the past. In that case, it’s fine...”

“Good. For a second, I thought I’d have to have the same conversation with you as the day before yesterday.”

“Ah, by the way, if you ever do feel like becoming mine, I welcome it with open arms. Unlike Mar-Mar, you telling me that wouldn’t bother me! Far from it. It’d make me super happy!”

“I see. Got it. You’re incredible, Snow. Makes me wonder what talking your ear off two days ago was even for...”

“Tee hee.”

Snow smiled shyly. She didn’t notice my sarcasm and just scratched her head with an expression of complete spinelessness. Now that she had parted ways with the Walker Clan and freed herself from her shackles of many years, escaping the Alliance and its pursuers, she was totally relaxed. I understood how she felt, but she needed to be a little more on her toes. The way I saw it, this was where the real action began. We had a showdown against Palinchron ahead of us. But Snow just relaxed, a gormless smile on her face.

“So, have you come to, you know, *like* me?”

“Uh, no, how could I possibly? Did you think I had? It’s been, like, a day.”

As her question made obvious, Snow was frighteningly clueless about all things related to romance. I was glad that she was the marriage partner who had been chosen for me when I was missing my memories. If Palinchron had chosen someone who understood men a little more, I might have succumbed to that life of convenience. That was what was running through my mind as I sighed in exasperation.

Snow trembled with a start, clearly puzzled and sweating nervously. “Huh? Why could that be? Is it just me or are there bad vibes? Ah, I guess it must be what I call you. Maybe I should call you something only I call you, like how Mar-Mar calls you ‘Owner.’”

I didn't know what I was expecting her to say, but it wasn't *that*.

"Hrm... H-How about 'hubby'? Could I call you that?"

My knee-jerk reaction was, "Nope. Nuh-uh. No way in hell."

Why did both Maria and Snow insist on slapping me with such *heavy* pet names? There was a whole world of safer, more comfortable nicknames out there. Did she *want* me to dislike her or what? Was it true that she was trying hard to get me to like her? It wasn't as though I was against the notion of coming to like her but at this rate I didn't know how I could.

"What, I can't? It's just because I *am* your fiancée, technically. And I thought, you know, that kinda thing makes sense, considering?"

"I've never once agreed to be your fiancé."

"But during your duel with Elmirahd Siddark, you did say something to that effect, right? You stood up for me and it was so ridiculously cool! My husband!"

"Y-You're right. It's all coming back to me. That was when my brain fog was the worst, so I'd forgotten—no, I *wanted* to forget..."

"You ought to at least take responsibility for that much. If a suitor ever appears for me, I intend to tell them I already have a fiancé named Kanami!"

"I did make a whole grand declaration out of it during the Brawl. I guess there's no real taking that back. Dammit!" I rued the day I had done something so stupid in front of so many eyes.

"Heh heh, resign yourself to it, hubby."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Snow. Let me get away with vetoing 'hubby,' at least..."

I bowed my head without hesitation. It would simply be too untenable. It wasn't just for my sake; it was to keep the peace. Think about it: starting tomorrow, everyone on the ship would see Snow calling me her "hubby." The temperature aboard would drop instantly, that much was certain. Naturally, various things would catch fire. First, Maria would fight back and insist on calling me "Owner." Lastiara, tickled pink by the situation, would add fuel to the fire by saying something like, "Until the last minute! Wait until the last minute!" If that happened, Dia might get caught up in it and end up doing something bad.

Ms. Sera, Lastiara's knight, definitely wouldn't be on my side. If our voyage turned that disastrous, there was a possibility that my good friend Reaper would become disgusted and bounce. Without her, the only person with common sense, the ship would become a powder keg with no fire retardants around. The ship would be as good as sunk. It'd catch fire and become so much driftwood.

"For real? It's *that* taboo?"

"You can't. Please, Snow. I fear for the ship. Like, for real. It'll sink on day one."

The urgency in my voice must have made it through to her, since she acquiesced. "Hmm, guess it can't be helped. Looks like if I say it too much, I'd be putting you out. Okay, I'll stop. I do want you to like me."

"Yeah, so, about that... Just to make sure—you're not lying, Snow? You really do want me to like you, right? I'm easily duped when it comes to this sorta thing, so throw me a bone here."

"Of course I'm telling the truth! Just like Mar-Mar, I love you so much I could die! You're the only one for me, Kanami!"

"Uh...thanks..."

She told the object of her affection point-blank that she loved him without batting an eyelash. Although you might not think it, Maria was a shy person, so her declaration hadn't been quite *that* direct.

After her sudden, formal love confession, Snow eyed me expectantly. Maybe she wanted me to give her declaration a response. It seemed that after listening in on my chat with Maria, she was thinking she should strike while the iron was hot and presume upon my benevolence.

I chose my words carefully. "I'm sorry, Snow. Forgive me, but until I reach my number one goal, I don't think I can come to grips with your feelings. That's how little time or energy I have to spare right now."

"Your number one goal... You mean your real sister, right? The person who made you say you don't care if you die if it's for her sake..."

“Right. I’m seeking the deepest level of the Dungeon for my sister. I’ll tell you all the details tomorrow, but I need to achieve that mission. A love affair’s just not in the cards.”

“Okay, got it.”

I communicated my sincere feelings, and Snow nodded. My persuasion skills were definitely improving. I wasn’t repeating the same mistakes over and over again. I was about to wrap up our conversation there when she cut me off, her smile cheery as a sunflower.

“So in other words, if I reach the deepest level of the Dungeon before you, you’ll become mine? Judging by what Mar-Mar said, that’s what you’re getting at, right?”

“I mean, you could do that, but let’s not be like that. Also, are you seriously still aiming for *that*?! What happened to the determination you showed two days ago?! The oath you swore?! You’ve barely changed at all, Snow!”

“C’mon, I’ve grown a *little* bit. Like, this much maybe?”

She indicated a length of about a centimeter with her index finger and thumb. Much to my shock, my stirring speech from two days ago had moved the needle by one measly centimeter.

“Damn, people don’t change that easily, do they?”

“No, they don’t. So let’s take it nice and slow, Kanami,” she said with an amiable smile. “From what I can tell, you seem super flustered and impatient. I’d like it if you relaxed and let the tension out more; otherwise, you’ll make me all antsy too.”

Snow saw into my inner state more than anybody else had. She’d spent a long time with my amnesiac self. Back then, I’d had room to breathe. Compared to the me she knew, I probably seemed mighty anxious and impatient. My memories returning meant remembering all of the many errands on my plate. Of course, being too impatient would never lead to the results I wanted.

“You’re right. I’ll try to take things a little easier. Thank you, Snow.”

Ever since the Brawl had ended, I’d thought of nothing but Palinchron. At this

rate, I'd get such tunnel vision that I'd end up tripping over myself again. It was something I wouldn't have been able to notice without the insight of another.

"Yeah, let's just relax. Personally, I feel like voyaging the seas for a year or so. Leave Palinchron and stuff on the back burner and just...coast."

"That's *too* relaxed," I said. While amazed by just how constantly she was on the search for any chance to slack off, I was still smiling.

"But you do realize what a pain in the butt antagonizing Palinchron will end up being? How about we just tour the world instead?"

"For your information, Palinchron's fused with the Guardian Tida's magic gem; he must be extremely strong now. When we battle him, I'm enlisting your help."

"Hngh? But I'm keeping an eye on the ship. I'll do my best here and see you off."

"We can hire people to guard the ship. By all means, feel free to join us."

"Against a Guardian, you'll understand if I'd very much like to refrain..."

It appeared as though Snow wasn't feeling up to fighting Guardians. I recalled something similar being said during that time with Maria too.

"Are you really that scared of Guardians?"

"Yeah. In the past, I experienced a horrific tragedy thanks to Tida, so..."

It seemed the source of her fear was none other than that damned battle junkie. There had to be a time in the past when Snow was Dungeon diving. Maybe Tida had picked a fight with her, just like he did with me.

"No, you know what? I *will* try fighting. I get the feeling that if Tida is involved, that's all the more reason I can't allow myself to run away. I'm sure that if I don't fight, I won't be able to take the next step forward in life." She was scared, but she made this declaration with a stiff upper lip. Snow wouldn't have had the strength before. Though the going was slow, she was moving forward, and that was a relief to see.

"I'll be counting on you when the time comes, Snow."

“You can count on me, Kanami. From now on, we’re comrades on equal footing.”

Snow extended a hand. It was the promise she’d made during the Brawl. I grasped her hand. Nothing made me happier than the fact that I had a dependable partner at my side.

“Cool, I’m glad to hear it! Thank you, Snow. I’m gonna go hit the hay now.”

“Sure, goodnight.”

I walked out of the room with her and waved goodbye with a smile, watching her leave from outside the door. Then, I used *Dimension* to watch her go back to her room and fall asleep.

Instead of going back to bed, I walked around the ship. There was something I wanted to think about, partly because I was wide awake now anyway. I mulled it over in my head as I walked down the dark wooden hallways. Usually, I was thinking about the Dungeon or Palinchron. But not this time. Following Snow’s advice to relax, I cast my thoughts to a more pleasant topic—for you see, there was something I had come to realize.

It had never occurred to me before because of the unique situation of being in a different world, but it was extremely important. I’m referring to the fact that in my sixteen years, this was the first time girls had confessed their love to me. Not only that—she’d said “I love you so much I could die” directly to my face. My heart beat faster and my blush wouldn’t go away.

I was only barely past the puberty line. I had a fair amount of interest in girls, and if a cute girl approached me, I got all riled up. If someone confessed to me, there would have been no way I could fall asleep after that, no matter how tired I was physically. I held on to a faint dream with regard to the opposite sex. Strangely enough, back in my world, I’d only rarely interacted with girls my own age. For some reason, it felt like the only person of the opposite sex in my world was my sister, Hitaki. Yet in the span of a few weeks after I arrived in this world, two cute girls had confessed to me.

Honestly, I’d half believed the whole love confession phenomenon was an urban legend to begin with. I thought it only existed in fiction like TV shows or video games. At least in my school life, there wasn’t a lick of such a thing.

I could sense my walking speed increasing. I was also aware of the heavy responsibility all this had put on my shoulders. From what fiction had taught me about love confessions, I knew that if someone was rejoicing, somebody else was shedding tears. Choosing one person meant rejecting the others. But that didn't mean going without choosing forever was a good option either. I'd consumed enough creative works to know that a bad ending always awaited any protagonist who wavered and couldn't choose where to stand. The longer I put it off, the more the accumulated feelings of love and hatred would fester and make things worse. It was crucial for me to nip this brewing romance tangle (or whatever you'd call it) in the bud as soon as I could.

That was the conclusion I came to. And I'd made up my mind—I was going to give both their love confessions proper, concrete replies. That would be the best way to minimize the resulting sorrow, and it never hurt to start early. It was incumbent on me, Aikawa Kanami, to make it clear who I liked. By doing that, I could show everyone a new future. Maria and Snow would be able to give up on me and look for someone else to love. They'd come out of it less hurt, their time less wasted. Naturally, they may not be able to accept it at first, but I was sure that if I communicated sincerely, carefully, and patiently, they would understand in the end. Neither Maria nor Snow was the exact same person as before. Our chats earlier had confirmed that they had gotten at least that much stronger. If I tied this up quickly, I could go back to fully concentrating on the Dungeon. Moreover, it would reduce the psychological vulnerabilities Palinchron could exploit during our battle. It was nothing but upside. What a thing of beauty it would be.

I got the feeling I was thinking such crazy stuff because so much had happened today that my brain was fried, but even so, I started deliberating, giving what would make for the best ending my undivided attention. Who did Aikawa Kanami like the most? I pondered as I walked through the hallways. There were no sources of light inside the ship. As I ambled through the darkness, I drew my conclusion.

"Who could it be? Hitaki's my sister, so obviously not. Come to think of it, did I not have a single crush back on Earth? There must've been somebody. What, for real? I...can't think of anyone. All right, then, who in this world am I the

most attracted to?”

There was only one possible answer, really.

“Lastiara?”

The one I was into the most was Lastiara Whoseyards. The time we’d spent together on the eve of the Day of the Blessed Birth had made that clear. I clearly liked her that way. That was the reason I’d raided the cathedral and whisked her away. But thanks to ??? repeatedly disintegrating and reconstituting that crush of mine, it wasn’t able to retain its original form. The anger I’d felt had certainly remained, but the kind of crush that set my heart racing had been stripped from me, leaving my native feelings as a husk. On an intellectual level, I knew that I liked Lastiara romantically, but my emotions couldn’t catch up. I just couldn’t bring myself to believe that I was truly infatuated with a girl who was such a nutso.

“Urgh...I’ve got it worse than I thought. This is bad...”

No matter how hard I thought about it, the feelings that emerged were more anger than love. Anger at the ??? skill that tampered with my emotions outstripped my crush. Other issues remained as well. My main goal was to put my romance problem in order, and the ideal solution was for me to become romantically involved with someone, but I doubted Lastiara harbored any romantic feelings for me. She was a three-year-old homunculus. Anybody would assume that she must be at a stage where her emotions were still underdeveloped.

“Hmm...”

What to do, what to do? My own feelings of love and Lastiara’s were too ambiguous, too fuzzy for me to really understand.

“Guess I’ve got no choice but to ask her.”

I’d learned my lesson—acting early was best. I’d also vowed that I would never lie to myself again, as well as rely on my friends more. I changed course to Lastiara’s room. It was time to talk to her and find out. That way, I wouldn’t regret my inaction later on.

I walked briskly and arrived in front of her door. Then, after taking five or so

deep breaths, I knocked.

“Lastiara, it’s me. I’ve got something to talk to you about.”

“Hrnh? You can come in.”

She sounded sleepy. After hearing her go-ahead, I wasted no time entering. The thought that I was walking into a girl’s room made my heart beat a little faster, but it was only her first day there.

I looked around the room to find it had the bare minimum of furniture like mine did, without any girly features. Sitting in the chair at the wooden desk, Lastiara was writing something with a quill, illuminated by the light of the candle. Even in a dim room, her inhumanly good looks stood out. In particular, her shining golden eyes and long sparkling hair emitted more light than the candle did. Just by sitting there, she exhibited the power to transform the world around her into something magical.

I turned red in the face and my heart beat faster. Don’t get me wrong; I’d already gotten used to Lastiara’s insane gorgeousness. What had gotten to me was the sight of her with her outerwear off. She was in her undergarments. She didn’t seem to care, however, so I tried not to pay it any attention.

“What’re you writing?”

“Heh heh. I was hoping you’d ask. It’s my memoir. Once I’ve written a sizable enough chunk, I’m planning on making it into a hero tale or some such one of these days.”

“Wow, sounds like you’re having fun.”

“So in order to record the adventures of Lastiara the Great for posterity, I figured why sleep when I could be writing?”

“You mind if I look at what you’re writing from over your shoulder? I can also tell you what I need to tell you later.”

“Yeah, sure, absolutely.”

She furrowed her brow as she kept on writing. I watched her words from behind. Her personal account was better written than I would have expected. One could call it a hero’s autobiography for sure.

Time passed at a leisurely pace while I watched her write, and the silence wasn't awkward when I was with her. Just being with her was enjoyable in a way. It was weird; the time I was spending alongside her felt neither long nor short.

Eventually, she stopped writing. "Phew! Finally made it to the next stopping point!"

"Good work."

She got up and rolled her shoulders to loosen up. She looked a bit tired; looking closely, she had faint circles under her eyes. They were marring her supreme beauty. She also looked a tad unsteady on her feet. And this was Lastiara we were talking about; she was made of tough stuff.

"Are you tired, Lastiara?"

"Well, yeah, a wee bit."

She sounded tired too. I didn't know what to do. Maybe I shouldn't make her even more tired by discussing such a taxing topic. I did want to get the bare minimum off my chest, though. The reason she was so drained was because she'd been fighting continuously since the end of the Day of the Blessed Birth, and I wished to apologize for putting her through that.

"It's just...about the Day of the Blessed Birth..."

"What, that? This isn't about the Brawl but the Rite of Resurrection?"

"I'm sorry, Lastiara. I made so many promises to you at the cathedral, but in the end, I was unable to fulfill any of the stuff that was on me. I'm truly sorry."

"Ha ha, no need to apologize. People can't do everything they set out to do. So what? You're not the mythical hero who always saves the day, right?"

Her smile made me a little nostalgic. Her cheer had always saved me from despair.

"That's true...I'm not the hero."

"You're not, no, but you did do your best to serve me as the protagonist of my story. You taught me to be me. I'm really, really grateful for that!"

“But after all that, I wasn’t able to protect you from your Whoseyards pursuers. I promised I’d repel your enemies, but I didn’t even come close to—”

“According to our little contract, your job was to give me a fun time. I never asked you to play the hero for me. If anything, being a hero is my job, so don’t take that from me, thank you.”

I realized she didn’t want an apology from me, so I calmed my mind and nodded. “Gotcha. All right, I won’t say sorry anymore. I’ll just express my gratitude. Thank you so much for everything.”

I understood now. To her, it was natural for us to help each other, given we were friends and allies, so an apology wasn’t what she needed. Lastiara seemed satisfied with my thank you, though. We smiled placidly at each other, and time passed as we smiled in silence. It felt nice. I knew it; I was the most relaxed when I was around her.

That was the thought running through my mind when Lastiara’s expression suddenly turned impish.

“Ah! Come to think of it, when you were missing your memories, you promised that you’d do anything I wanted, right?! Remember when you and that Lorwen guy went to register for the Brawl?”

“Wait, huh? I promised I’d do whatever you said?”

I dug through my brain, and to my chagrin, she was right. I had indeed made that promise. Back when Lorwen and I had registered for the tournament, Lastiara and I had made a bet over what action I would take after the Brawl ended.

“We made a bet on whether you’d rescue me from Valhuura, remember? Oh dip, I totally won that bet, didn’t I? Because I’m, like, here?”

“Sure, okay, you won the bet, but...isn’t this kind of underhanded?”

“No takesies backsies! A promise is a promise! All right, let’s see, what’ll I have you do?”

The peace of mind I felt around her was evaporating. Recalling her track record made my head hurt.

“Hmm, can’t seem to think of anything...”

“If that’s the case, how about we pretend it never happened?”

“No. Wait. I’ll come up with something!”

Lastiara looked flustered as she racked her brain. I was in a cold sweat. There was no way anything that was coming out of her mouth wasn’t something unholy.

“Er...I know. How about you come give me a hug?”

“I’m sorry, what? A hug?” I was a little taken aback. Her demand was so wholesome.

“Yeah, let’s just, like, embrace. Hold each other tight, like this,” she said earnestly, miming a hug. “See what happens. You know, like how the protagonist of the story hugs the heroine?”

“But why?! Why a hug?!” This was hardly like her.

“How should I put it... It’s a scene that happens in every hero tale. I’m gonna write hero tales of my own one day, so I’d like to try it at least once.”

“Oh, it’s reference material for a story, huh?”

My eyes fell on Lastiara’s work on the table. It sounded like writing was one of her dreams. If this was to help her realize that dream, I wasn’t quite as shy about it as I would’ve been otherwise. It was still embarrassing, though. I hesitated, not knowing how to reply, and she looked a little disappointed.

“If... If you don’t wanna, I won’t force you to...”

“I never said that. If it’s just a hug, I don’t mind. If it’s just a hug, it’s fine! It’s fine if it’s just a hug!”

I was so frantic, I surprised myself. I just hated to see that sad look on her face. My emotions were calm while we were apart, but when we spoke right next to each other, I could feel my emotions swelling.

“You don’t have to psych yourself up like that! We’re just testing the waters. That’s all.”

“Yeah, it’s just a test. Let’s do it as a test.”

The two of us calmed down. This was just a test, we agreed. I extended my hands as I told myself that. Lastiara looked nervous. Gently, I hugged her to my chest.

“Ah...”

She gasped, almost inaudibly. Though that un-Lastiara sound surprised me, I put my left hand behind her head and pulled her in closer. It was too embarrassing to stare at each other, so I avoided that by bringing her head side by side with mine. Now that we were ear to ear, we could hear each other’s heartbeats. I hardly knew how to give a good hug, but I mentally rifled through creative works I’d seen in my world and did my best to accurately recreate the sort of scene from heroic tales Lastiara desired.

I could feel the heat of her body through her palms and torso. The smell of her hair tickled my nostrils, and the beating of our hearts reverberated through each other’s bodies. Because we were both so lightly dressed, our skin was in constant contact, and hers felt smoother than silk and softer than marshmallows.

Since we were hugging, her chest was pressed against mine. Every time I heard her breath in my ear, I found myself picturing her beautiful lips in my mind. My blood flowed faster, my heartbeat kept on growing louder and louder. Gradually, little by little, my heartbeat...

Damn. Any more than this and ???’s gonna activate.

I’d gotten caught up in the moment and experimented with this hug, but I was at my limit now. I was about to detach from her when she said, “Now I don’t feel so lonely, maybe.”

Her voice was calm as a still lake. She sounded so very relieved, as if she had weathered a terrible storm. I’d never heard that tone in her voice before. I ended up not pushing her away. It was then I realized that she had been pushing herself harder than I thought. While she’d laughed off my apology, it didn’t change the fact that things had been pretty rough for her.

I hugged Lastiara tightly again. If this was enough to give her some much-needed peace of mind, then I ought to hug her real real close.

Lastiara slowly exhaled, murmuring, “Finally... I guess this is the happy ending for the first chapter of my story.”

She leaned all of her weight into me. That was the moment her long battle finally came to an end. Realizing how harsh her battles had been, I decided to keep her in my arms, fraying all my nerves to will ??? away. I wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of this.

Time continued to tick by as we embraced. It was a time of quiet, peaceful beauty that couldn’t possibly be measured, subtle yet profound.

“Thank you, Kanami.”

“No worries. This is no skin off my back.”

Having sufficiently decompressed, she moved away from me a little. I was reluctant to let the sound of her heartbeat go as she pulled away from my embrace. Our faces were now inches apart, and when we perceived each other not through our heartbeats but visually, we snapped back to our senses.

I had only intended to briefly “test the waters” with a hug to fulfill a silly promise I’d made, but once it was over, we both realized that we’d been hugging each other like lovers. Lastiara’s eyes widened and her ears turned bright red. I was probably reacting much the same.

“Er, uh...I wonder what it is? Seeing people hug is fine, but doing it yourself is intense!” She averted her gaze; she’d begun to distancing herself from what had just happened.

Of course, I was all too happy to cooperate by piling my own excuses on top of hers. “Right?! They do it all the time in stories, but after you finish the hug, you end up feeling weird! Guess that’s what our little *test* revealed, huh? Well, we tried it out!”

“Yeah, you’re right, it was just an experiment! Boy, now I know, this isn’t the kind of thing you do even as a test!”

“You said it!”

After that, we couldn’t find anything else to say. By the way, we were grabbing each other’s shoulders, our faces bright red. I knew that I wouldn’t be

able to calm down unless I broke away, but I felt like if I moved now, I'd explode. I didn't know what to say to initiate our separation. I had no idea what to do next. I didn't understand a single solitary thing. And Lastiara was most likely in the same boat. This time, the immeasurable stretch of time was just awkward. A long time passed, and the candles placed on the table in the room began to flicker. Just when it looked like the candle was about to expend itself, Lastiara could no longer hold back.

“Wh-What is this?! What's going on right now?! What *is* this?!”

Her face turned red like an apple and she shook my shoulders vigorously. I wanted to scream too, but I couldn't. Not when ??? was creeping up right next to me. If I let my guard down in the slightest, it would activate. It was so close that I could be sure of that. I concentrated on keeping my raging emotions in check in order to protect the spark of the feelings that I was finally starting to regain, but it was taking everything I had to do so, leaving me unable to move a single step or speak a single word.



Meanwhile, Lastiara was shaking my body the whole time, before casting her eyes down. “No... No, this, I—no, no, no! This is wrong! This is, no!” she said, shouting from her diaphragm.

Unable to stand by and watch as Lastiara ran wild, I tried touching her. But I moved as stiff as a rusty robot. Lastiara brushed away my hand.

“S-Stop looking at me! Look away, Kanami!”

She thrust me away and opened some distance between us. It was enough distance to be able to see our faces in full. Her expression was complex, neither a smile nor crying.

“Auuughh! Enough already!”

Hiding her blushing face with both hands, she turned her back and ran, jumping out the window of her room and deftly climbing up the side of the ship. I tracked her part of the way through *Dimension*, but when I realized she was running away from me, I immediately dispelled the detection magic.

At the same time, the candle in the room suddenly went out. It became quiet, as if she had taken all the heat in the room along with her. I was left alone, flummoxed and up a tree. I reflected on the results of my little visit and reckoned this confirmed the question at the heart of why I’d come here to begin with—we did indeed have feelings for each other. Could there have been a better outcome? However, it was also true that I’d grappled with more than I could handle. The feelings of infatuation that ??? had taken from me had been rekindled after just a few minutes of conversing.

“Wh-What’s going on?! What is this?!”

I repeated Lastiara’s words. My heart was thumping noisily, and I was so fidgety I couldn’t keep still. Until a second ago, I’d thought she was just some kooky oddball, but now I thought she was the cutest girl ever. Slowly but steadily, my suspicion turned into conviction. I remembered how red in the face she’d been when she’d run away. Was it safe to assume that was because of her feelings for me? I mean, what other interpretation could there be? It was the only possibility. I wanted to interpret it as that.

Meanwhile, I was blushing the same way she was. I could only have felt this

flustered because I truly felt that way about her. I knew myself, so that much was obvious. I could conclude that I liked her and she liked me, couldn't I? This was what they called a requited crush. It had to be.

The moment I became cognizant of that truth, my body shivered. I hadn't been kicking for very long. Just sixteen years and change. This was the first time I'd ever experienced a mutual crush.

"Wait, no, hold on. Hold on now. Don't jump the gun!"

I chided myself for getting so ecstatic. Back in my world, I'd gotten ahead of myself and experienced more sadness for it. It happened all the time—receiving a love letter and getting stood up when nobody appeared at the rendezvous. Once, I'd heard rumors that a girl I was interested in liked me, but when I'd tried talking to her the next day, she'd expressed absolute disgust. And I'd never received Valentine's chocolates from anyone besides my sister. Needless to say, I'd also never spent a romantic holiday like Christmas with anyone besides her either. I couldn't expect the world to be so accommodating. Maybe I was misunderstanding. Maybe it *wasn't* a mutual crush after all. Maybe I'd misinterpreted Lastiara's reaction earlier. Until I made sure of it, I would be remiss to merely assume she liked me.

There were other problems as well. For one, Lastiara was three years old. This wasn't an older-but-in-the-same-generation situation. According to the laws of my world, laying a hand on a three-year-old kid was right out. Forget about an "illicit love affair"—it would be a crime heinous enough to land somebody in the papers. Even if Lastiara and I did become a couple, I wouldn't be able to return to my world so brazenly. There was a chance people would view me as having preyed upon a sweet, defenseless girl. There were so many issues.

There were so many issues, and yet...my heart wouldn't stop thumping. The possibility that she might indeed like me back was drowning out all of my concerns. I found myself wanting to share my thoughts with somebody. The sensation wasn't unlike how you felt before going to bed on the night before a school trip. It always made you want to talk to a third party about love stuff.

How do you think Lastiara feels about me? What should I start doing?

I wanted that kind of advice. I wanted to consult someone. I'd just learned

how foolish it was to try to resolve stuff on your own, after all. Unfortunately, I had no one to confide in. There wasn't a single other guy on this ship I could talk to, like I might have talked to a friend on a night before a school trip.

"Urgh...there's nobody I can go to! Wait..."

Maybe Dia would be a good choice. He always referred to himself as a boy, after all. I felt like I could talk to him about it without feeling too uneasy. And confiding in Dia had borne fruit in the past. On the night before the Day of the Blessed Birth, it was thanks to Dia's advice that rescuing Lastiara had gone so smoothly.

"All right, I'll talk to Dia about it!"

Confidently, I made for Dia's room, but my body froze up.

"Wait, huh?"

The Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan at my waist glowed. My Responsiveness skill activated on its own, and I started seeing a vision of the future. What did I see?

I saw myself covered in blood, sinking alongside the flaming ship. The skill I'd inherited from my buddy was telling me that if I went for advice, I'd *die*. The intuition of the swordsman who could perceive the natural laws of the world was perceiving my impending demise, despite everything being so peaceful now.

Sorry, what? Just by coming to him for advice, I'll die? C'mon, I'll disguise what I mean. What, even then?

I tried to reason with Responsiveness, but the burning image wouldn't leave my brain. I grew pale as a sheet. I couldn't imagine Responsiveness leading me astray. Maybe *death* was an exaggeration, but I could be certain that something terrible would befall me. That was how much I trusted the skill's accuracy.

"Yeah, uh, let's not."

I decided against consulting Dia. At that moment, the image of Lorwen in a cold sweat popped into my mind for some reason. I inwardly thanked my friend, whose will resided within Responsiveness, as I went back to the drawing board.

I could feel the train derailing—my ideal train of events: after consulting with Dia, I would manage to expertly communicate my feelings to Lastiara, and she and I would become a couple, after which I would gain Maria's and Snow's blessings, and all of my cares would melt away.

That had been what I was generally aiming for. Sure, it had various flaws that stood out, but I hadn't expected it to fail from the start. Now, I had no choice but to shift to the next best plan. If I couldn't consult with anyone, I just had to man up and confess my feelings head-on. When it comes to this sort of stuff, the worst thing you can do is draw it out by brooding over it.

To be honest, I wasn't confident about my crush. I knew that compared to once upon a time, my romantic feelings were more ambiguous. But it couldn't hurt to tell Lastiara that fact as well when I confessed. Knowing her, maybe she would understand and accept it all. I felt that, as I was now, she would react favorably. I pictured us in love with each other, and that was all it took to set my heart racing.

Yet at the same time, ??? came vaulting closer to me. I hastened to put ice on my blazing emotions, just managing to hold the skill back from activating. It was as though ???, the skill that had saved my life on countless occasions, was telling me that if I went down that path, I was choosing death.

So... So even if I just confess, I die?

Evidently, if my feelings got any more intense than this, it fell within range of ??? activating on me. The line between what was allowable regarding love stuff according to ??? had gotten clearer. If I ever moved into action with something like a love confession, ??? considered that out of line. Ultimately, I was being told that I'd be signing my death warrant no matter which path I followed, so I froze in my tracks in a peculiar stance.

I had no idea that this ship, devoid of enemies, could be so fraught with danger. I'd expected it to be a little dicey, maybe, but not *this* bad. Standing in place wouldn't solve anything, though. Starting tomorrow, I'd have to find a way to live on this boat alongside Maria and Snow and their tempestuous emotions. Granted, my senses were a good bit sharper than most. Due to my *Dimension-Responsiveness* duo, I'd probably be able to pick up on the girls'

friendliness levels. Did I really want to live with them without responding to their affections? That seemed like a fast track to an ulcer perforating my stomach.

I'll use my Thought Streams skill to make some predictions.

It was like I was trapped in a C-tier love drama at the moment. If nothing changed, that would make me the asshole guy character who simply used the girls for my Dungeon diving purposes. In the daytime TV serials about the tangle of love and hate, I was the guy who got stabbed to death at the end. Even outside those dramas, the fate of the fence-sitter character who played both sides was usually nothing desirable. That moment, a scene of spine-chilling *red* flashed into my head. My Thought Streams skill, the culmination of all my battles, was telling me to tread carefully because I'd meet my end otherwise.

Dead if I do, dead if I don't. "So, what do you want from me?"

I broke out in a cold sweat. While my suite of high-class skills had allowed me to evade the worst outcome, I'd also come to learn that at this rate, I'd still die, only torturously slowly. And no solution was presenting itself. I stood frozen in place, still in that strange pose.

That was when an angel appeared to rescue me.

"Hey mister, you did good to hold out. If you go about things too casually now, you'll legit die, you know? You'll get stabbed in the back—no, you might *wish* that's what happened to you. 'Cause maybe there won't be anything left of you."

Reaper had entered the room with a strained smile.

"Reaper!" I smiled in a way I had never done before, tears in my eyes.

"First of all, going to Dia is absolutely outta the question. This is the girl repeating your name over and over in her sleep we're talking about here. With a huge grin on her face, at that. I can't believe you'd even consider talking to *her* about another girl. You'd *actually* die. That's not a joke. You'd die, like *dead* dead."

I could tell via *Dimension* that Reaper had her own *Dimension* up and running. She was apparently monitoring the dozing Dia as she spoke.

“Don’t say *die*, Reaper. Because right now, it’s not funny...”

“Right, it isn’t funny because it’s not a joke. Listen, mister—don’t you dare go talk to her about it! She *likes* you, big brother!”

“Argh! You... Don’t come right out with something like that!”

Reaper had mercilessly boarded up my escape hatch. A new seed of worry had been planted, and I could practically feel the ring of death closing in on me.

“C’mon, you must’ve already noticed her feelings for you. Don’t you know I hate it when you lie to yourself like that? And since I hate it, that must mean you hate it too.”

“Urgh... I’m sorry. I really do only ever realize stuff thanks to you...”



I hadn't been unaware. Dia had become emotionally unstable when he'd lost "Sieg." He'd even hallucinated me. He must have been more dependent on "Sieg" than I'd realized. During the Brawl, my amnesiac self had gone on a date with Dia. He'd worn a cute dress and smiled like a cute girl. We'd watched a play and eaten a meal together, and in all that time he'd never let go of my hand. I hardly needed the processing power of Thought Streams or the intuition provided by Responsiveness to come to the conclusion that Dia probably liked me.

What's more, he'd fallen for me in a fairly warped, unhealthy way. Once I admitted that, consulting him was an option that was no longer on the table. The image of the purehearted and dependable boy I'd thought him to be faded away, and once again I looked reality in the face. I couldn't imagine the Dia who exhibited such bloodlust at every turn would welcome my getting hitched warmly. The same went for Maria and Snow, whose emotional landscapes were most likely just as warped. If they were the type to give up that easily, things wouldn't have ended up this way to begin with. My skill suite was in agreement—it was far too much to hope for.

"Mister, no matter what you do, don't tell anybody you like or dislike 'em. Even a little kid can see that if you throw off the balance, it won't be a pretty picture."

"So you think so too, huh?"

It looked as though this was all too obvious from an objective standpoint.

"Over one thing or another, I've linked up with the other girls before, so I know the gist of their circumstances. That's what I'm basing my warning on. Nobody will accept the idea of you getting hitched with anyone. You can count on that."

"But everybody's stronger now that we've overcome our trials and tribulations. They'll fight hard reality with determination in their hearts! I wanna have faith in them!"

"You honestly think that?"

Thought Streams and Responsiveness whispered "no" in my head. ??? did

too, and for the first time, it did so without shoving itself down my throat.

“I wanna have faith in them. I wanna believe they’re stronger than that!”

The more I said it aloud, the more my confidence faltered. My trauma flared up, and my legs wobbled.

“Mister, as Snow told you earlier, it takes longer than a few days for people to get stronger. It might look like they’ve changed on the surface, but they’re concealing intense emotions underneath. I’m no different either. I still haven’t really sorted out how I feel about parting with Lorwen.”

Managing to bring somebody around a single time would never be enough to totally transform them, and Reaper was using herself as an example to relay that cruel reality to me.

“Reaper...”

As I’d been the one who had taken Lorwen’s life, I had no reply.

“In any case, the balance of the ship is more precarious than you thought, so be careful, all right? Think of how Lorwen would feel if, a few days after you parted with him in such a badass way, he reunited with you in the next life because a woman stabbed you to death.”

“You’re right. I won’t tell anyone. Or rather, I *can’t* tell anyone.”

“Good, then we’re right as rain. Then again, I guess you could make them *all* your wives. That’s your other option!”

“Hold up.” I could hardly ignore that remark. Despite not being able to take a single step, I reacted with over-the-top surprise, which left me in yet another strange pose.

“It’s all or nothing! If you go for *all*, it should be fine, mister!”

“No, hold up. Hold on a second! What do you mean, make them *all* my wives?”

“I mean it literally. You claim everyone of ’em as yours. Isn’t that nice, mister? You get a harem.”

This friend, so little that I’d thought of her as a kind of daughter, saying shit

like that with the most innocent eyes...

Point me to 'em. Point me to the bastards who taught little Reaper a word like "harem"! Lorwen (the sword) and I are gonna lay the smackdown on 'em!

"No way anybody would be satisfied with that. Also, don't call it 'claiming' them; that's weird."

"Hm, I think it'll be fine, actually. Snow and Maria may be on the possessive side, but if you do your best to pamper and spoil them, they'll come around. Probably."

"Don't be absurd," I stammered. "Is polygamy normal in the Alliance?"

"There are plenty of lands within the Alliance that allow polygamy. If I had to guess, it's particularly prevalent among rich merchants and nobles and the like."

For real? Fantasy worlds are something else...

The culture of this alien world blew me away. My Thought Streams skill analyzed what Reaper had told me and concluded she wasn't necessarily wrong. After all, the girls regularly exhibited such excessive reactions to the idea of abandonment or getting left out. Maybe if I swore I'd never abandon any of them and made sure to tend to them equally, everybody would come out of it truly happy. If, as Reaper said, I catered to the whims of one of them whenever their expression started turning sour, I could manage to...

Okay, the more I think about it, the more I get the feeling I'm becoming a sleazeball and stooping to levels a proper human being should not stoop to. The kind of just-deserts ending you see in soap operas wouldn't stop flitting through my mind. I mustn't give up. There's got to be a way to avoid winding up like that!

"Dammit, I'm getting an aneurysm worrying about the scummiest shit ever!"

"It's your fault, big brother. That's just what womanizers get."

"First you say 'harem,' now 'womanizer'! Where'd you learn naughty words like that?! Tell me and I'll go have a little chat with 'em real quick!"

"D-Do you know how scary you look right now? There's no one person. I learned when I linked up with the people of Laoravia. Truth be told, I got hit

with so much raw knowledge that my head's all jumbled up right now."

"Oh, right. It was from that, huh?"

Having lost someone to vent my anger at, I felt a tad disappointed.

"And a subset of that knowledge is telling me that you're a womanizer, and not just any old womanizer, but one so scummy he can't hope to die a peaceful death! It's telling me that to keep breathing, you *need* a harem!"

"Normally I'd have half a mind to sue for defamation, but part of me knows you're right!"

"Be careful. No lie; the shadow of death will be looming over you this whole voyage. You're in grave, grave danger, not from *Palinchron* or *monsters*, but from your ring of ladies!"

"I see. So they're even more dangerous than Palinchron...and that danger will be with me the entire time..."

"But on the other hand, you're packed to the gills with skills that can detect impending death before it reaches you, so I'm sure things'll work out for ya. Good news!"

I felt nauseous. Just picturing it made my trauma intensify. Lately, I'd had the sense that far from overcoming my trauma, I was only getting worse. Given the girls' sheer power, they were easily capable of fashioning a fresh new hell, a fact that fueled my dark imagination. I could see it now. The fire. The flames!

"You think maybe it'll sort itself out if I tell everybody I like them all as family?"

"I dunno. If you ask me, that'd make them all look super gloomy. It might even cause their frustration to pile up until they explode."

"I mean, to me, saying you love someone like you love family is the ultimate expression of love."

"Sure, to *you*...but it's pointless. Because it would be more natural for you to like them not as family but romantically."

"So what you're telling me is that if I don't wanna bite it, I should make this polygamy thing a reality?"

“That’s what the doctor orders. Everybody wins!”

“I can’t see that ending in any way but tears and anguish, but okay.”

“Tears and anguish for you, yeah, but not for everybody else.”

“You don’t think my own happiness counts?”

“You gave up that right when you spread yourself so thin. Be mature about it and claim all of ’em.”

“Would you quit saying I’m ‘claiming’ them? What are they to you, pets?”

“You can’t blame me; it’s your memories and emotions that raised me. I think I’m probably the same as *you*. You want me to come out and say it anyway?”

If I heard it said, my heart would break. “Yeah, no, that’s okay.”

Now that I understood how scared for my life I should be, I began seriously mulling over Reaper’s polygamy suggestion. It was just to survive. And thinking about it, it *was* a practice that had occurred frequently throughout the history of my world too. To men of modern times, it sounded like a dream come true, but the important point in this case was the reason behind the whole idea, which changed what it entailed dramatically. It wasn’t polygamy for my sake, it was for *theirs*. This wasn’t anything as pleasant-sounding as a harem. It was something else. Something nasty and sordid.

“I... I can’t. I just can’t.”

My goal was to return to my world. How could I possibly excuse my actions to my sister when I did? “Polygamy’s a thing in that world, so I found myself with a bunch of wives”? Saying that simply wasn’t an option. Polygamy wasn’t legal in modern Japan, and I was Japanese. That was reason enough to firmly reject the notion. Besides, I saw the value in what I considered to be a normal love life. The sort of pure love you saw in S-tier TV shows was the ideal I aspired to. I didn’t want to get dragged into this faux-harem *something* that was more terrifying than the grave without ever having experienced proper romantic love a single time.

I strung together a reply as if somebody were operating my mouth like a puppeteer. “The only love I’ll ever pursue is *pure* love. A person should marry

their one and only soulmate, and that's it."

"Uh-huh," she replied less than energetically, staring at me with the eyes of a person watching a pig trying to climb a tree. She clearly thought my chances of that were nil.

"I'll never regard polygamy as legit, got it?! Never!"

"I get it, I get it. Fine, so if you're not gonna go the harem route, what'll you do instead?"

I gave it some more thought. Upon reflection, I realized that hitting Lastiara with how I felt about her wasn't going to work, and that confessing was a meaningless proposition from the outset. After all, even if she responded positively, all that awaited me on that path was ruin. Let's say we started dating. Our love for each other would likely deepen with every passing day, and the more time I spent with her, the fonder I'd grow of her—only for ??? to snatch those "dangerous" feelings of affection away from me, leaving her in the lurch. I could try controlling my emotions, but the end result would be the same. Either way, I couldn't avoid a fate where her affections went unanswered, and that was no sort of romantic relationship at all. I'd die before I'd call something like that "pure love." There was no way it could work out.

"For the time being, I'll refrain from confessing. I've only spent about a week's worth of time with her so far anyway, come to think of it. Thinking about it calmly, I understand nothing good can come of rushing things. Looks like I threw myself for a bit of a loop overthinking it."

It wasn't wise to have such heavy discussions with Maria, Snow, and Lastiara in such rapid succession. Now I realized how cornered I'd been feeling. I laughed hoarsely.

"Right. I'm happy you're calmer now," said Reaper, smiling sadly.

"I think I'll see how things go, at least until I can be sure of how I feel."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's wait a little longer. Wait until after you reunite with your sister...or at least until after you've defeated Palinchron Regacy."

"That's what I'll do..."

I decided to wait until I could delete my ??? skill.

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll return to the status quo. You good with that?”

“Yep, nothing else to be done.” Newly calm and composed, I no longer wished to stop my skills from doing their work. It was time to take the first step of my new life.

Just then, Reaper shivered with a jolt, much like a cat. She must have detected something through *Dimension*.

“What’s the matter?”

“Hm. Lastiara’s headed this way.”

I held my racing heart in check and asked her how Lastiara looked at the moment.

“Until a second ago, she was fidgeting like crazy over on the prow, but now she looks all sharp and dignified. Seems like she’s calmed down too.”

“Gotcha. Good, then.”

I was relieved that I could talk to her calmly before things became a tangled mess.

“All right, I’m off,” said Reaper, who was thoughtful enough to leave us alone.

“Reaper...sorry for the trouble I caused you. You’re a lifesaver.”

“It’s okay. We’re friends, aren’t we?” she said.

What a cool line. Just like always, she acted beyond her years. Or rather, her year.

“Yep, we’re friends. Thank you.”

“Hee hee. That’s all I want. That’s all I need to make me super happy,” she said, flashing me a carefree smile. “See ya!”

With that, she left through the window, probably to avoid running into Lastiara, who’d come in through the door. Personally, I wished she would quit using the windows that way. As a sort of guardian to her, people would think I had a screw loose, letting her do that.

Just as I found myself thinking such parental thoughts, Lastiara arrived.

“Er, Kanami? You still there?” she asked from the other side of the door.

I did my best to appear normal as I beckoned her inside. She stepped in awkwardly and squirmed a little as she chewed on her words.

“Er, uh, so, Kanami...” After cooling her head with the nice sea breeze, the redness in her face was gone. She was the same as me. She’d regained her composure after quite the fright.

“What... What happened before was just... I was just *startled*, so don’t get the wrong idea!”

Unable to fully choose her words, she shouted them out, which caught me off guard. I reflexively nodded.

She continued, as if trying to convince herself. “I tried doing something a bit hero-chronicley and ended up getting caught up in the situation, that’s all! It was the *situation’s* fault, so it never happened! It never happened, right?!”

Actually, maybe she wasn’t *just* trying to convince herself. I got the sense she was excusing her actions to the girl she was so close to—Maria.

“Yeah, I get it. I figured I’d just pretend it never happened, myself.” I agreed with her stance. Not that I had any other choice.

“Right, let’s just forget about it! Granted, it *was* useful as a reference for my hero tales...but now I know it’s not something to be done lightly either,” she said, head drooping.

“I’m happy it was at least some help to you...” I said, just as feebly.

“I shouldn’t have tricked your amnesiac self to ask that of you to begin with. I regret it a ton.”

“If that’s how you feel, then let’s restrain ourselves from now on, I guess.”

“Yeah, I won’t do it again. And that’s that. It’s over and done with! The end!”

She was trying to put her emotions behind her by shouting it out. I followed her lead and filed that hug in the never-happened box in my brain. And in doing so, we chose the harsher road forward.

Having totally switched emotional gears, I changed the subject. “So, uh, Lastiara.”

“Yeah?”

“Up ’til now, you’re the only one who’s known my true origins. The fact that I’m from a different world. I’m gonna stop keeping that a secret, though.”

In the past, I’d promised her that if I worked up the courage to tell Maria about my origins, I could ask Lastiara about her own secret. But I’d learned her secret already, so I figured I should uphold my end of the bargain by divulging mine without delay.

“Oh, that. Now that you mention it, I guess I’m the only one who knows... Damn, now I feel guilty again.”

“I’ll be honest; there’s more I’m keeping from you all too. Like skills and spells and stuff.”

“Oh? I could kinda tell. You’ve got loads of shady abilities, see. I figured as much.”

“I wanna take this opportunity to reveal everything to everybody.”

“Ah, that’s nice of you. I, for one, would love to hear your secrets.”

“I’ll tell everybody all at once tomorrow morning, so could you let the others know when you see them?”

“You got it. Leave it to me.”

We were chatting as comrades and friends, same as always. On the surface, it might have seemed like we were back to normal.

On the surface.

“Right then, see you tomorrow.”

“Yep, see you then,” she said, her expression sunny.

I returned to my own cabin, plopping onto the bed right away and falling asleep. And so ended day one of this brand-new leg of my adventures... It ended with an ever so slightly open seam.

Chapter 2: The Party Grows

Day two of the voyage.

Hearing myself moan in my sleep, I jumped out of bed. I didn't remember what had happened in the dream, but the night sweats that covered my body told me it hadn't been a pleasant one. It felt like I was chasing something... Or was I running away from something? Also, I got the feeling I'd been talking to someone, and someone had been taking me to task...

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. It was only a dream, after all. It had nothing to do with reality. I opened the curtains in my cabin and basked in the morning sun. That was when I noticed something unusual. My Responsiveness skill detected danger and made me take the optimal course of action—I deployed *Dimension* to ferret out the source of the danger and found something I wished I hadn't.

I exited the room with a furrowed brow and a frown on my face. A short distance away, there she was. Snow, smiling with a gloomy look on her face.

"Heh heh. Heh heh heh heh heh..."

That stiff rictus was painful to look at. I could infer everything from her palpable depression.

"Uh, so...you overheard everything yesterday, huh?"

"Yeah...I was a bit concerned, so I overheard using my vibration magic..."

It seemed that even if Snow's magic energy was lurking close by, I wouldn't be able to detect it unless I had *Dimension* up. Good to know.

"Well, if you heard the whole conversation, you'll know we got all psyched up over nothing," I told her (and myself), my voice strained.

"But... But at the very least, Lady Lastiara's a step ahead of me, right?"

She was quite a bit more than a step ahead, in point of fact, but Snow didn't need to know that.

“Nothing’s really changed. We’re still just friends. Yesterday happened because of the situation we found ourselves in, not because I feel one way or the other about Lastiara.”

After all, if I was *allowed* to feel that way about Lastiara, I wouldn’t be in such a rough situation. In that sense, it wasn’t a lie.

After giving me a look that was equal parts sad and chagrined, her expression turned a tad sulky.

“If, hypothetically, you do like Lady Lastiara that way, it won’t change how I feel about you, I hope you know,” she said, pouting a little. “I won’t give up.”

Snow, Snow, Snow. That reply was more childish than the youngest member of our crew. On the other hand, her saying she wouldn’t give up *was* a sign of personal growth. At long last, time was starting to move for her again, and she could move forward again. That was the sense I got.

“Right...thanks.”

Grateful, I put my hand on her head with a pat. My body had moved on its own, perhaps because she was acting like such a little kid. She looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled. It seemed that while she didn’t really know what was happening, she was happy that I was caressing her, and it was nothing more complicated than that.

She’s really cute when she smiles for real.

At the same time, guilt mounted within me. Reaper’s words from yesterday—*womanizers won’t die a peaceful death*—sprang to mind, spurring me to quickly take my hand off her. In order to escape Snow’s look of disappointment, I changed the subject.

“Uh, so, could you stop the vibration magic eavesdropping for me? I don’t think it’s very cool of you to be doing that.”

“Huh? How come?”

“How come? C’mon. Everybody’s got stuff they don’t want overheard. You must know that. Reaper and I only use our dimensional magic where necessary.”

“Huh, really? Well, I’ll consider it, okay?”

“Please do.”

Snow was averting her gaze, smiling spinelessly.

Yeah, no, she’s not gonna stop. I glared at her skeptically, and she got flustered and started fleeing.

“Okay, see you later!”

“Wait, hold on! I’ve got something to tell you up on deck in a second! If you could, tell anybody you spot to come too!” I shouted as she got farther and farther away.

“Okay, got it!”

After watching her run out of sight, I walked down the hall toward the deck, and on my way there, I bumped into Dia, who’d just gotten out of bed, as he (she? they?) was exiting his cabin. Dia was a little surprised, then rubbed his eyes before greeting me cheerfully.

“Morning, Kanami! Lovely morning, huh?!”

“Morning, Dia.”

His smile was pure, unvarnished. Having gotten a good night’s sleep, there wasn’t a shred of gloom in his expression. Unlike me, with dark circles under my eyes from the lack of shut-eye, he had a pep in his step.

“So much happened yesterday that I’m hungry as a horse! Yesterday, ol’ Maria said she’d make breakfast or whatever, so I’m kinda looking forward to it. But if it tastes the least bit off, I’ll give her a piece o’ my mind!”

His smile was so radiant I damn near closed my eyes. He was exhibiting zero trace of ill will or envy now. This was the practically angelic Dia I’d first met.

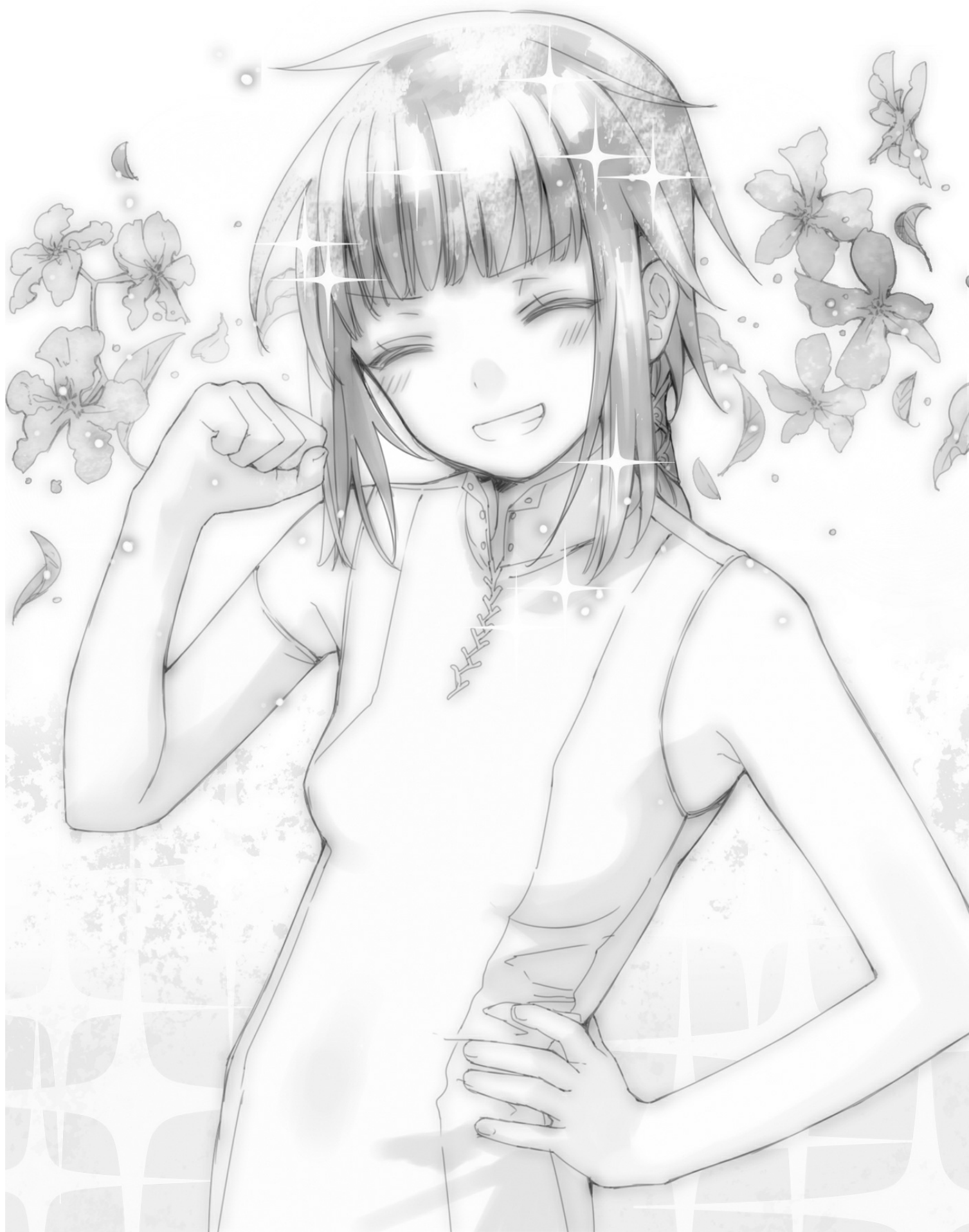
“My bad, Dia. There’s something I wanna tell everybody before breakfast. Sorry about this, but could you meet up with the others on deck?”

“Hm? All right, if that’s what you say, that’s what I’ll do!”

Dia trusted me completely; he nodded without asking any questions, all but skipping down the hall toward the deck. I was on the verge of tears seeing him

with such a song in his heart. Sure, we'd only exchanged a few sentences, but still, our chat had gone without a hitch. Never mind giving me an ulcer, it felt positively refreshing, like he'd just cleansed my soul.

Why can't everybody be like Dia? Why's everybody, myself included, gotta be so damn complicated? Then again, this is the same Dia who's more than capable of the kind of ferocity that razed Mr. Rayle's mansion to the ground... You know what? Let's forget about that tidbit for now. I'm just gonna let myself feel moved.



I soon called out to the rest of the crew and gathered everyone on deck. Maria, who always worked quickly, had set up a large table at the center of the deck and had finished preparing breakfast, so all six of them were seated there in a friendly little circle. My comrades and I faced each other with the table between us.

“There’s something I need to tell you all,” I started. “It’s very important, so I’d like you to listen carefully.”

In the hopes that this would help to ensure we never clashed again, I revealed everything I’d been hiding.



I finished telling them my life’s story, laying it all out there. I informed them in no uncertain terms that I was not a native of this world and that I was aiming for the deepest level of the Dungeon out of concern for my little sister.

The one who’d been the most surprised to hear all this was Dia.

“Damn, so that’s your deal... So, it’s all because you’re an *outworlder*, huh?”

“By the way, Dia,” said Maria, who was sitting next to him for some reason, “I knew all that already. I knew about his sister too. Unlike you.”

“Listen here, you!”

Two terrifyingly dense clouds of magic energy intertwined between them, with space itself beginning to visibly distort. I was used to their bickering by now, so I pretended not to notice, gauging everybody else’s reactions instead.

Lastiara wasn’t very surprised, while Snow didn’t show much interest to begin with; she was the only one who’d finished eating her breakfast. Reaper’s eyes lit up with childlike excitement, while Ms. Sera, who was wearing a maid outfit for some reason, was glaring at me. Her eyes were so bloodshot and scary that they were like something out of a school delinquent’s manga, so I couldn’t keep from averting my gaze.

From what I could tell, viewing her from the corner of my eye, she was extremely reluctant to be wearing that uniform. As for why she was wearing it, I

had my suspicions. I didn't know where those clothes had come from, but I figured Lastiara must have had fun making her don them. Through Responsiveness, I intuitively knew not to mention it and kept the chat going without touching on Ms. Sera, as discussing her situation would probably set off a land mine.

Responsiveness had been helping me avoid such pitfalls since the day prior. *Thank you so much, Lorwen. And I'm sorry; I know stuff like this can't be the reason you taught me this skill...*

That said, why were everybody's reactions so muted? "Hold on a sec; you guys swallowed this otherworld business so readily. Is my being from another world that easy to accept?"

"Huh?" said Maria. "Personally, I don't think it's that far-fetched if somebody uses magic to do it."

It seemed she thought that as long as something as convenient as magic existed, nothing was impossible. Maybe if I'd likewise been raised in a world with advanced magic rather than science, I'd have the same perspective.

Lastiara had a different reason to believe my story. "Well, in my case, I can see 'Outworlder' written in your status menu, so I don't doubt it. And I guess it doesn't hurt that people who are familiar with the Church of Levahn are vaguely aware of the existence of another world."

Dia, who was also familiar with the precepts of that religion, agreed. "Yeah, there are passages in Levahnite lore hinting at another world being out there."

"It could even be the case that Saint Tiara of the Church of Levahn has some connection to another world. Just like you and me, Kanami."

This was the first I was hearing of it. That was information I hadn't even been able to obtain at the library in Whoseyards. And the fact that Dia and Lastiara were important figures in Levahnism lent credibility to their information. I felt as though, at long last, I'd finally stumbled upon something close to a lead regarding other worlds. My hope was vanishingly slight, but it was a tiny step forward.

"Hey, you two, what do you think I should do to return to my world?"

Lastiara replied without giving it much thought. “I think you should stick to the path of aiming for the deepest level of the Dungeon. I can’t think of any other way.”

Dia agreed. To them, the idea that the deepest level of the Dungeon held *something* miraculous was a matter of course.

Maria hazarded her thoughts on the topic. “Assuming there is another possibility, maybe you could study up on your dimensional magic more?”

It was true that I sensed some promise in my *Dimension* and *Connection* powers. At present, it seemed most prudent to trust the lore and plug away at the Dungeon while honing my magic at the same time. And of course, I intended to continue collecting information regarding other possible methods as well. After we reached the mainland, I planned to visit libraries and wise sages in the major countries.

Just as I’d solidified my thoughts, Snow offered me her unique opinion. “Kanami, are you sure you can’t just stay in this world?”

It was a timid suggestion, one made with a half-hearted smile. Everybody’s eyes fell on her, and for a moment, silence enveloped the table. No one said it out loud, but they clearly viewed the idea positively. They were grateful to Snow for being the one to broach the subject.

But I shook my head. That point alone I couldn’t cede to them. “No can do. I can’t abandon Hitaki like that.”

Her half-hearted smile stiffened, and she looked up at me from under her lashes. “Oh, okay. Got it... I just thought I’d make that suggestion, so don’t get mad, okay?”

Why was she getting so frightened all of a sudden?

I replied with a smile. “Don’t worry, I’m not mad. Not at all.”

Maria was sitting next to Snow, and the look on her face was similarly stiff. “Actually, Mr. Kanami, you look quite angry.”

“What, really?”

“I know from experience how much you must love her,” she continued, “but

it's striking just how crazy your sibling bond is..."

"Yeah, we're pretty close. That's why I wanna get back as soon as I can."

"I get the feeling it's deeper than *close siblings* level, but if you're good with that explanation, I am too..."

Whatever Maria had wanted to imply, she made no more mention of it. Maybe Maria's past relationships with her own family hadn't been very good.

Now that we'd more or less finished covering my being from another world, we moved on to the next order of business, which was my ability to read their menus.

"Now, about your abilities, Kanami," said Lastiara. "From what I've gathered, your eyes are even more powerful than mine. You can see so many details that it kinda weirds me out."

"Yeah, I guess I can see more than you. Honestly, I thought it was the opposite."

Though Lastiara's abilities were similar, I could grasp things on another level. First of all, in my case, stats values were displayed down to the second decimal place, whereas Lastiara couldn't see those numbers beyond the decimal point, nor could she read the descriptions of equipment or items. While she could read information about monsters to an extent, it appeared she couldn't pull up any information when it came to inanimate objects.

"Your 'Analyze' isn't the only magic you've got that's amazing. Your 'Inventory' pocket dimension magic's incredible too."

"Wait, you're saying those abilities are magic? So they *are* spells after all?"

"I think they're probably applications of dimensional magic and ancient magic. They can't be out of magic's reach."

That made me feel a little more at ease. I'd initially feared it could be some force tampering with my brain and retinas and stuff, so hearing it was just magic was slightly relieving.

"They're not out of magic's reach, but..."

For some reason, she was looking paler than before. Looking closer, I found

the same expression on Dia's face. It seemed that people connected to Levahnism had reservations regarding what I could do.

"What's the matter, Lastiara?"

"N-No, it's nothing. It's true that that magic is special, but that's all there is to it. The real problem right now is one of your skills. Your emotions keep disappearing on you thanks to a skill you don't really understand, right?"

I didn't fail to notice how blatantly she changed the subject, but I didn't sense any malice there. She was doing it out of consideration for me, so I didn't press her any further.

"Yeah, thanks to *it*...I've lost a bunch of important stuff that I need."

"So we definitely wanna erase that skill somehow, and fast. Let's not mince words: it's the worst skill ever."

I hadn't gone into detail regarding what that skill, which Lastiara regarded with such contempt, had taken from me, yet she made plain the wrath she felt deep inside.

"Could you maybe seal it away, with your magic or Dia's? Like how that bastard Palinchron sealed it?"

"I don't think it's possible for us. I'm guessing he was only able to do it by borrowing the power of Tida, the Thief of Darkness's Essence. Even we can't measure up to that."

"I see. Then I guess all I can do is be careful not to let it trigger."

It seemed the idea was too good to be true. As much as it pained me, I gave up on erasing ??? for the time being. Then I pulled myself together and moved on to today's main topic.

"That's it for my life's story. Now then, since it looks like everybody's finished eating the food Maria graciously made for us, how about we talk about the next thing on the agenda—Dungeon diving."

After cleaning my plate of the last salad left on the table, I leaned in a little, a bit excited. In a total shift compared to the seriousness of what we'd been discussing before, the atmosphere aboard got a tad cheerier.

“Oh, finally! Dungeon, here we come!”

“Heh heh! It’s been a while!”

The Dungeon was one of the reasons Lastiara and Dia got out of bed in the morning.

“This is gonna take a bit, but I’d like you all to listen to my proposal.”

I had a plan that I’d been ruminating on for a long time. I’d thought about it when we escaped from the cathedral on the Day of the Blessed Birth as well; it was fun just thinking about what sort of party dynamic one could create with a large group of allies. It was the same kind of excitement I got from strategizing while playing an RPG.

Brimming with confidence in my carefully thought-out plan, I waxed proud about it. “I’m thinking that as a general diving policy, we should go in parties of four. I’m sure it would be the best way to raise our diving efficiency by rotating the party.”

My eyes sparkled like I was doing a slideshow presentation. I asserted that this was the optimal route for exploring the Dungeon due to the thought patterns I’d acquired through self-imposed challenges and speedruns I used to enjoy when playing video games. Plus, in order to win my comrades over to my line of thought, I put Thought Streams to work as I went.

“For my provisional Team A, I want Snow, Dia, and Ms. Sera. Guess we’ll make Lastiara, Maria, and Reaper Team B. Those lineups are definitely the most balanced.”

These teams would equalize the distribution of EXP and avoid huge disparities in strength, like when Maria, Lastiara and I, had dived together in the past. I wasn’t sure how reliable Ms. Sera was in terms of aptitude, but I figured I’d have let her focus on protecting our rear and providing a mode of transportation.

“In the morning, it’ll be me and Team A Dungeon diving, and once our MP runs out, we’ll switch to Team B via *Connection*. By then my MP will be mostly gone, so I’ll have Reaper supply me with more. From there, Team B and I will resume our progress through the Dungeon.”

Reaper still had her curse-link powers. Parting ways with Lorwen had caused her to lose stuff like her curse of intangibility, but she could still use other magic. However, after concluding that an excessive influx of memories was dangerous, she had only retained the minimum number of curse-links necessary. Another driving factor was her dislike of her own death god abilities. The only person Reaper was currently linked to was me, as I was the only one she could share her power with rationally. Everyone else was concerned about their privacy and avoided linking up with her.

After hearing my detailed strategy, Dia tilted his head in puzzlement. “Wait, huh? I don’t really get it...”

The others reacted with similar confusion, while Lastiara objected strongly. “You’re always so in the weeds, it takes the fun out of things. Besides, why teams of four? Is there a reason for that?”

“It’s to prevent the ship from going unguarded. Splitting up half-and-half is just enough for both places.”

That wasn’t my main reason, though. The true reason was that the number of people I could track with Thought Streams maxed out at four. Also, on the simpler side, I just enjoyed the act of team composition, and active parties of four people were the tried-and-true RPG standard. In fact, maybe *that* was the main reason all along.

“Hold on, isn’t it kinda shitty that you’re the only one who’s diving the whole time?” said Lastiara.

“Huh? But I mean, I’m the only one who wants to reach the deepest level no matter what, and I figured I’m putting the majority of the strain on my own shoulders that way, you know?”

“I don’t mind diving the whole time either! In fact, if you leave me behind, I’ll probably end up going in alone!”

“No, don’t! No going in without my say-so! I won’t let you dive unless you’re with me!”

“Wait, you need to chaperone me?! But why?”

“Because. Without *Connection* to bail us out at any given moment, it’s too

dangerous, isn't it? We need to prepare for unforeseen circumstances. That's one of the fundamentals of diving."

"Aww... Oh yeah, and another thing. Are these teams fixed?"

"Of course they are. They need to be fixed so people can refine their teamwork over time."

"If the teams never change, that's so boring. Let's draw lots or something and decide the teams at random."

"Excuse me?! We need to think these things through! What happens if you end up with a team of nothing but rearguard fighters? Or only frontline fighters?"

"That sounds fun!"

"Why is what's fun for you always exactly the same as what's dangerous for everyone?!"

Our quarrel continued, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. It was perfectly normal, measuring the distance between two people this way. As we bounced our diametrically opposed priorities off each other, Snow timidly raised her hand.

"Um, if I may?"

"What's wrong, Snow? If you've got something to say, there's no need to hold back."

"Er, it's just, could I stay on the ship instead?"

"Are you saying you don't feel like Dungeon diving?"

"Uh...not really, I guess? If I'm the only one left, then I have no choice, but when there are this many people, I feel like I, uh, maybe don't need to come."

"Maybe not, but then aren't you basically doing nothing to pitch in?"

"I... I'm good at sewing, so I can make everybody's clothes. And I can cook too! What I've always wanted is to be a housewife! I want the housewife life!"

"Okay, fine. I get it, I get it, so no more of that," I said, interrupting the housewife declaration that threatened to chill the peace and pretending she'd

never said that. “Only, you’re the one with the most experience Dungeon diving. You’re more help to me diving with me than doing housework...”

Reaper, who was sitting next to Snow, was of much the same mind as her. “Hm, I dunno. I’ve got no interest in Dungeon diving. I’ll help if I feel like it.” She left her seat nonchalantly.

“Ah, Reaper! Wait up!”

“It’s all so fussy. I’m gonna go play a bit! I tried fishing a second ago, and it was surprisingly fun!” With that, she ran right inside.

Hers wasn’t the only reaction I didn’t see coming. Ms. Sera was next to speak, her expression sour and surly. “Just so you’re aware, I’m not entering the Dungeon simply because you order me to.”

“Wait, huh?!”

“I’m a knight of milady. What’s more, I’m not even interested in Dungeon diving.”

Now that she mentioned it, that made sense. She was a knight, not a diver. She also had no reason to be loyal to me. My best-laid plans were gradually falling apart. I ground my teeth in frustration, and Lastiara welcomed my woe with a blissful smile.

“Hee hee! Looks like we lost half our party before we even set out once. It’s not *gonna* go according to plan! You never know what’ll happen on an adventure! That’s what makes them so fantastic!”

“Hey, that...that was just my Plan A. I’ve still got a Plan B! So I’m totally not butthurt over it!”

While Lastiara was reveling in a joy I couldn’t comprehend, I found myself making silly excuses. My plans had gone awry before the word go, leaving me with no choice but to propose a strategy making use of the remaining party members.

“Then let’s dive as a party of four, composed of Lastiara, Dia, Maria, and myself! And we can make substitutions when needed! The end!”

“Now we’re talking! Going in without some big plan makes things more

thrilling!”

“Our first objective is Floor 39. I don’t wanna release the Guardian of Floor 40 until after we settle things with Palinchron.”

“Aha! Sorry if I slip up and end up entering Floor 40 inadvertently, Kanami!” Lastiara cried.

“If that happens, we’ll just strand you there as bait, so that’s fine. If I dispel all my *Connection* portals, even a Guardian shouldn’t be able to chase us into the ship.”

“Uh, team leader? I think that’s kinda not something to joke about...”

“If you deliberately hit Floor 40, I’m within my rights. Besides, knowing you, you’ll probably survive somehow. If the Guardian’s anything like Lorwen, you’ll be able to talk your way out.”

“You’re just not being honest with yourself. Even if that did happen, you’d totally stay behind and you know it.”

“In terms of ability to survive, you’ve got us all beat, Lastiara. I believe in you.”

“Y-You’re actually serious... Okay, you win, I’ll be careful not to enter Floor 40.”

“Thanks kindly.”

I’d learned to rely on others, so I was serious about teamwork, and when Lastiara realized how serious I was, she piped down. Now that the squabbling was over and nobody was saying anything, I collected myself and suggested we set off.

“All right gang, what say we get a move on? Let’s think about the small stuff when we’re in the Dungeon!”

No use spending any more time thinking about Dungeon stuff while on the ship. Overthinking to the point of spinning my wheels was a bad habit of mine, so why not follow Lastiara’s example and stride into the Dungeon more aggressively? Lastiara, Dia, Maria, and I were basically the optimal party anyway, so it wouldn’t be much of a sweat.

Yet even after compromising and compromising again, the wind was taken

out of my sails.

“Ah, Mr. Kanami,” said Maria, “I, er, still have washing to do...”

She loved doing housework, and she’d taken the initiative to start doing chores for the ship that morning. It seemed she didn’t like abandoning her chores either. I had no choice but to grab Snow by the collar as she quietly tried to slip away from the scene.

“Here, make Snow do it.”

“Wha-huh?! Me?” Snow shook her head vigorously.

“Hey, what happened to you doing the chores? Is the so-called housewife of this ship not gonna do any housework?”

“I was willing to do them if nobody else volunteered, but I just thought if Mar-Mar’s doing it, I don’t wanna steal her work away from her, so...”

“You really don’t feel like doing anything on this ship but sleeping and eating, do you?”

“I... I’ll sew stuff too?”

“That’s just your hobby.”

“I can fish too?”

“Yeah, okay, fishing. You’d definitely just fall asleep. Not to mention we’ve got plenty of food, so there’s no need.”

“Heh heh heh...”

Snow tried to chuckle it all away, but my hand retained its death grip on her collar.

Just then, Reaper appeared from inside with fishing gear. “I finished the setup for fishing! Over here!”

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Snow broke free of my grip and headed for the hills.

“Ah, Reaper’s calling for me! Be back later!”

Apparently, they had been conspiring together from the outset. Reaper and

Snow grabbed their fishing gear and ran off to the stern.

“What do we do about the laundry?” asked Maria, who’d watched the whole scene play out.

I hadn’t planned to talk to Ms. Sera about the costume, but she was the only other person I could turn to. “Um, Ms. Sera? Could I ask you to do the laundry? Because, like, your clothes are...you know.”

“For the record, I’ve never done housework in my life. Also, if you mention my attire one more time, you’re dead.”

“Never? Not once?”

“Never. Not once...though I do plan to learn as we go.”

Although she wasn’t willing to help with the diving, I sensed she *was* willing to help with the voyage. From that back-and-forth, I could tell she was determined to pitch in as a member of our crew. She was a hundred times better “wife” material than Snow.

“All right, guess we’ll all just focus on laundry today.”

“Don’t mind if we do.”

“And once that’s done, let’s hit the Dungeon...”

We gave up on the Dungeon for the time being, forced to focus on domestic matters. Since the laundry was all women’s clothes, I was immediately banned from entering. I found myself with time to kill for the first time in a while, so I idled at the edge of the ship, my desire to Dungeon dive steadily ebbing. It was all such a slog...

The momentous first Dungeon dive of the crew of the *Living Legend* had gotten off to a sloppy start. Around when the laundry was finished drying on the deck, I retrieved Lastiara and Dia, who were having fun fishing with Snow and company. The moment I took my eyes off them, my party members came unglued, which was a giant headache. Perhaps it was a mistake trying to control them to begin with.

With our Dungeon diving prospects going forward in such doubt, I heaved a sigh as I passed through the *Connection* gateway.



Through *Connection*, we skipped straight to Floor 30, where I'd placed the portal earlier. The floor was unrecognizable; the field of crystal flowers was no more, leaving nothing but a stretch of lifeless stone. It evoked the same sense of melancholy as when Alty's floor had lost its master.

We descended to Floor 31, which wasn't all that different from Floor 29. The only real difference was that the sand felt a bit harder underfoot, providing better purchase. The sea of sand stretched on and on. Golems were prowling the desert, while fish monsters swam underground, and each and every monster was covered in crystal that looked so hard to break that this was probably going to be tricky.

Staying on my toes via *Dimension*, I checked everyone's menus one last time.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 303/313

MP: 391/796-400

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 18

STR 10.15

VIT 11.42

DEX 14.90

AGI 17.82

INT 15.33

MAG 40.52

APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 6.98

EXP: 8,409/60,000

EQUIPMENT: Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan;
Red Talisman; Mantle; Epic Seeker Uniform; Burned
Otherworld Footwear

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 4.89, Ice Magic 2.58+1.10

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimensional Magic
5.25+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Thought Streams 1.47,
Knitting 1.07, Swindling 1.34

???: ???

???: ???

It had been a while since I'd last dived, so I thought I'd look at our menus in greater detail than normal. As I'd set up quite a few *Connection* portals before leaving the Alliance, my max MP was on the low side, leading me to allot all of the points I'd received from leveling up into my magic energy. I'd also gotten slapped with the Swindling skill back when I earned the funds to buy the *Living Legend* at a gambling den. Imagine my surprise to see that notification after merely observing someone I had pegged as a swindler do their thing. This proved what Lorwen told me: there was no normal skill I couldn't acquire.

【STATUS】

NAME: Lastiara Whoseyards

HP: 735/735

MP: 338/338

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 17

STR 12.97

VIT 12.52

DEX 7.82

AGI 9.31

INT 13.52

MAG 9.69

APT 4.00

INNATE SKILLS: Weapon Combat 2.20, Swordplay 2.12, Pseudo-Divine Eyes 1.00, Magical Combat 2.27, Bloodknack 5.00, Holy Magic 1.03

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Book Reading 0.52, Doll Body 1.00

Lastiara had also gotten a little stronger, compared to the last time I'd fought with her. I'd decided to give her my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword, since she'd abandoned her trusty sword Noah back at the Whoseyards cathedral.

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 220/220

MP: 941/941

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 14

STR 8.11

VIT 6.59

DEX 3.60

AGI 3.79

INT 12.33

MAG 51.72

APT 5.00

INNATE SKILLS: Holy Magic 3.81, Divine Protection 3.08, Condemn 2.00, Concentration 2.05, Elemental Magic 2.10, Overprotection 2.45, Life Support 2.24, Targeting 2.03

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 0.11

???: ???

Dia was the one who'd grown the most. During the span of time he'd been with Lastiara, his stats had skyrocketed. His STR surpassed that of the former "strongest," Mr. Glenn, and his VIT had surpassed the hulking Mr. Vohlzark of Epic Seeker. Yet his Swordplay skill had only risen by a measly 0.01, and lamentably, that suspicious Overprotection skill had climbed steeply too. This was proof that no matter how hard one struggled, their stats wouldn't necessarily oblige them.

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 159/159

MP: 855/855

CLASS: None

LEVEL 10

STR 7.69

VIT 7.23

DEX 5.99

AGI 4.45

INT 7.96

MAG 41.13

APT 4.13

INNATE SKILLS: None

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Hunting 0.68, Cooking, 1.08, Fire Magic 3.53

Though she hadn't leveled up, her MAG and APT had ascended rapidly thanks to Alty's magic gem. Or maybe "ascended rapidly" was underselling it. Really, they were at a whole other level. Plus, the loss of both eyes notwithstanding, she had, via Alty's magic, obtained spatial awareness powers to replace her sight. She was vigilantly observing her surroundings through several will-o'-the-wisp flames she had floating in the vicinity. When she'd explained it to us, she'd humbly left it at her fire magic having gotten "a little bit stronger," but judging by those floating flames, it was quite the understatement. This fire magic reminded me of Alty's tremendous might. Out of the whole party, it was what Maria was capable of that had me the most curious.

"All right, let's stay on our toes, guys. Lastiara, you've got the two in the back."

"Okey dokey!"

I was at the front, while Lastiara defended the pair who formed our rear guard. I walked across the sea of sand with *Dimension* up and running. It felt less like traveling down a path and more like trudging through a vast desert; there were no walls in sight and therefore nothing to track one's direction with. Anybody who wanted to explore every corner of this room would have an anxiety-filled time of it, but that was of no concern to me. As guildmaster of Epic Seeker, I'd made *Dimension* envelop the whole town and now had it permeate the entire floor.

It was a lavish expenditure of MP, but I reckoned it paid to be cautious when starting off. I examined and memorized the floor's structure, the positioning of our enemies, and the staircase leading to the next floor. I also focused some of my attention on the space under our feet. My magic energy penetrated the sand more easily than before, and I had a guess as to why. The experience I'd accrued through Guardian battles had strengthened me. It was the kind of thing that wasn't displayed on some status screen. Numbers beyond numbers. It was the same as how my fight against Alty had deepened my understanding of fire; my fight against Lorwen had deepened my understanding of minerals. Compared to Lorwen's crystal, which had shrugged off any and all attacks, the minerals found on this floor were on the easy-to-understand side of the spectrum.

We advanced to the depths without difficulty. On our way, I spotted a handy test monster swimming nearby and went to engage it on purpose in order to ascertain the party's reaction and strength sooner rather than later.

【MONSTER】Jewelfish: Rank 29

It was the many-colored giant fish that resided on Floor 29. I promptly called out to the group, "Let's fight the monster over there as a test. It's a fish monster swimming in the sand, and watch out because it's fast and its skin is hard."

The other three agreed, and the first battle of (the tentatively named) Team *Living Legend* commenced. A portion of the sand-sea swelled, the jewelfish exposing its dorsal fin like a shark as it zoomed toward me: the advance guard. Its speed and motions were unfettered by inertia. Last time, its overwhelming celerity had forced me to use *Blizzardmension*, but things were different now. I had only to use my Responsiveness and Swordplay skills. Though its attack was so fast the naked eye couldn't track it, now that I had overcome the Trigesimal Trial, it felt like weak sauce to me. Compared to the sheer speed of Lorwen's swordsmanship, the monster might as well have been frozen in time.

Lorwen, Treasured Sword of the Arrace Clan, glowed faintly in my hand. The jewelfish and my blade crossed paths, as though the monster had gotten sucked in by the blade's gleam, and in that fleeting moment, I slashed its dorsal fin clean off. It wasn't a fatal injury, as it had managed to avoid a direct hit, albeit barely. I gave up on pursuing the jewelfish as it swam away and shouted to Lastiara behind me.

"Lastiara, it's on the move!"

"I know!"

The injured monster ignored me and pounced on Lastiara's group. She was closely tracking its movements with her eyes. Since I couldn't sense any magic energy, it seemed like she was doing so without any magic to aid her. On second thought, maybe she was being aided in a way. It was possible that her Weapon Combat skill tipped the scales in her favor when it came to close

combat.

The way she intercepted the attack was brilliant. The blade that was sent the jewelfish's way at the very same moment she drew her sword sliced through its body, splitting it in two down the middle while it was still in the air. It faded into light before it could even fall onto the sand. I got the feeling Lastiara had wanted to show off for the audience behind her, but either way, she'd wielded her sword superbly. For a final flourish, she swung the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword like a blade dancer before gracefully slipping it back into its sheath.

"As long as I'm here, I won't let you lay a finger on my friends."

I didn't know who she was speaking to, exactly, but she struck a pose, affecting an expression of solemn sorrow while hiding half her face with her right hand.

Is that supposed to be some kind of canned victory line? Maybe she was trying on the mask of the hypercompetent woman archetype for later when she took up the quill again.

"Cool, looks like we can handle that much. Let's move on."

Ignoring Lastiara as she gleefully asked Maria and Dia for their impressions, I led them deeper and deeper. The results of that battle told me that Dia and Maria were safe unless we got hit by the horde tactics I'd witnessed back on Floor 21. Moreover, while Lastiara and I were able to take down enemies on our own, the two in the rear had just finished preparing their magic. Even from this distance, I could tell they were able to track the monsters' movements. If, hypothetically, the monster had evaded Lastiara's strike, it would have been vaporized by their high-firepower spells anyway. Although we should never let our guard down, it didn't seem necessary to actively defend the two in the back, so I decided to head straight for Floor 32 without avoiding the monsters along the way.

We eventually encountered a creature we'd never seen before. It was a crablike being, its spiky body made of crystal just like the others. I hated the creepy, unsettling way it swiveled its lidless eyes to scan its surroundings.

【MONSTER】Quartz Cancer: Rank 31

There were actually two of them. I probably wouldn't have been enough to beat back both of them alone, so I decided to engage one and let my companions handle the other. Through Thought Streams, I also prepared *Wintermension: Frost* in advance, just in case.

"I'll do one of them; I'm leaving the other to you guys!"

The rest of my party finished preparing for battle and voiced their assent. Trusting in my friends, I focused on the enemy before me. The Quartz Cancer skittered sideways just like a normal crab, but even so, its movements were fast and sharp. I went straight past being weirded out and into the realm of afraid. I tried blocking the crab's pincer with my sword, and it responded with a unique movement, bending its joints in ways not normally possible and deftly catching my blade before attempting to snap it like a dedicated swordbreaker weapon.

Crystal ground against crystal, filling the Dungeon with a worrisome high-pitched screech. This Quartz Cancer thing had to be a monster that specialized in destroying its opponent's weapons, and that got me a little panicky; I hardly wanted this gift my best friend had bestowed upon me to be destroyed after a single day.

Then, with a *CRACK* like the sound of breaking bamboo, crystal shattered and spilled through the air. The crab's claw lay in pieces, while the blade called Lorwen didn't bear a single scratch.

The Quartz Cancer shrieked in surprise as I swung Lorwen at it. The blade severed its crystal body without resistance, and I watched it fade into light. This really reaffirmed the might of my weapon.

【LORWEN, TREASURED BLADE OF THE ARRACE CLAN】

A sword fitted with the magic gem of the Guardian Lorwen.

Attack Power 17

Attack Power corresponds to the user's Level. The user has the potential to remember the sword techniques of

Lorwen Arrace.

Can change shape.

+2.00 to the user's Earth Magic.

Lorwen had displayed fearsome sturdiness just now, but it wasn't merely hard or sharp. It also packed a slew of special abilities. I had yet to put it to the test, but it appeared that if I brought out the sword's full power, I could add a new element to the magic in my arsenal. In this world, people rarely gained new elements of magic, which only accentuated what a rule-breaker this sword was. Looking at its gleaming crystal blade, I smiled. It was like my friend was lending me his strength from beyond the grave. By joining forces with Lorwen, I could slay monsters with ease.

Next, it was time to see how the team fared with combo tactics. From a cursory look, it seemed to me like those three were cooperating effectively as well. Maria's fire robbed the crab of its sight and Lastiara used her sword to fend off its pincer. Dia capitalized by blowing it back with a *Flame Arrow*, knocking it off-balance and leaving it vulnerable to their all-out offensive. It was some fantastic teamwork. Lastiara forced in the finishing blow before doing another little dance-like movement and striking a pose.

"As long as I'm here, I won't let you lay a finger on my friends."

Is she planning to say that every time? It was so mechanical that it might as well have been one of those postbattle RPG victory screens. If she intended to keep doing that, I was keen to advise her to add more variation.

It was when Lastiara was insisting that her comrades high-five her that I cut in. "Cool, that went smoothly. Looks like we've got nothing to worry about."

I'd been slightly uneasy about whether Dia or Maria could hack it on Floor 30, but the battle just now told me they were strong enough.

Dia, by contrast, wasn't so satisfied. "Urgh, I'm having trouble adjusting my firepower. Not too strong, not too suppressed..."

Maria was similarly groaning. "I need to add more firepower, don't I?"

Apparently, the rear guard had their own worries to contend with.

“Hey, Maria, how’re you moving the fire around like that? I wanna be able to do that too, if possible.”

“How? I don’t know what to tell you; I’m just handling the fire carefully.”

“I’m trying to tell ya I don’t get how to do that!”

“You’re too sloppy about it. Just calm down and be more meticulous when crafting the spell.”

“You make it sound so easy! If I could do that, I would!”

Figuring another fight was brewing, I was about to intervene, but what Maria said next stopped me in my tracks.

“Still, this is a good opportunity. There’s something I’d like to test out, so lend me an ear, please.”

“Hm? What’s this about?”

Maria whispered into Dia’s ear. When it came to battle stuff, those two got along, surprisingly enough.

Dia grinned toothily. “Wow. Sounds good. Let’s go for it!”

“Yes, I do believe it warrants a try.”

Between the two of them, it looked like they didn’t need me around to come up with stuff. I decided to respect their autonomy and not say anything.

Lastiara, on the other hand, got caught up in the moment and interjected. “Dia, Mar-Mar, you oughta just leave everything to *me*! Thanks to this sword, they’re super easy to take down! The Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m proud of that baby too.”

It wasn’t quite on the level of Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, but the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword was a superb weapon in its own right.

“I really like it. It’s hard, it’s fast, and it’s sharp!”

She swung it around, lack of enemies notwithstanding. Which was honestly

pretty dangerous, but she had such a mirth-filled look on her face that no one could tell her to knock it off. Through our morning chat, Dia and Maria now knew that Lastiara was younger than they were, and considering she was a three-year-old who had led an unfortunate life, they'd probably end up being lenient with her.

"Yeah huh. C'mon, let's just do this thing. Soon the enemies'll be more numerous. We're relying on your help," I told her.

"Leave it to me. So long as the blade known as I, Lastiara, is around, not one enemy shall pass me...so you two can relax."

Once again, she was trying to act cool. The way she was speaking reminded me a little of Lorwen. Maybe she was doing her best imitation of him after seeing him swear his oaths as the Blademaster and as a Guardian. You saw it all the time in young children. I decided to low-key keep watch over her.

After confirming that battles on Floor 31 posed no problems for us, we proceeded deeper still. Needless to say, we didn't go out of our way to avoid enemies, as the main objective of this dive was balancing out our levels. If we neglected to level up Maria now, we'd be setting ourselves up for failure in the future. Fortunately, the monsters on Floor 31 shelled out a ton of EXP. Defeating a single one invariably netted Maria about a thousand points, and the amount required to level up after level 10 was still roughly in the tens of thousands, so it didn't take terribly long. For the most part, Lastiara and I mowed them down with just our swords while Maria and Dia experimented with various spells in the rear (without much to show for it). From time to time, a spell that left me wide-eyed with astonishment came flying at me, but it was never stable enough to last.

"Dia, magic energy isn't anything you should compress like that. Please craft it more carefully."

"You're the one who told me to compress it!"

"But only to a degree. Visualizing the spell in a balanced way is an important part of fire magic."

"I keep telling you, adjusting the degree is what's hard for me!"

To be frank, I'd been nervous about when a fight would break out, and the fact that Lastiara was watching and taking pleasure in their bickering only fed my anxiety.

"I suppose it can't be helped, Dia. I'll help with your aim and maneuvering through my fire magic, so please just focus on the power and speed."

"So we're going for total division of labor, huh? It's true that could make things easier."

From the sound of it, they were trying to combine their magic into a single spell. I'd known that was possible; the books at the library and the folks at the pub called the technique "resonant magic," and it was used all the time as a combat tactic by armies and bands of knights and the like. For example, if ten or so mages worked on a single *Flame Arrow*, they could generate a fire javelin of tremendous size, and there were times when that was more effective than ten mages firing ten *Flame Arrows*. Of course, resonant magic did require intercompatibility and training. The way most divers viewed it, any bump in effectiveness they might achieve wasn't commensurate with the amount of effort it took to learn how to do it. Thus, one didn't often encounter resonant magic outside of very well-organized groups of people. Incidentally, my joint spell with Reaper, *Dimension A Wraith*, fell into that very category.

While Reaper and I were pretty compatible, Dia and Maria's compatibility remained to be seen, though if they did prove capable of acquiring some resonant spells, it would definitely help out in all sorts of ways. I reckoned that merely experimenting wasn't a bad thing, so I chose not to butt in.

While those two continued their trial and error, we reached Floor 32 and elected to take a breather. Since Maria and Dia seemed about ready to level up, we finished doing so after making sure the surrounding area was safe.

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 220/232

MP: 869/989

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 15

STR 8.61

VIT 6.99

DEX 3.80

AGI 4.01

INT 13.21

MAG 54.76

APT 5.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 159/203

MP: 822/945

CLASS: None

LEVEL 13

STR 8.27

VIT 8.11

DEX 6.84

AGI 4.65

INT 9.06

MAG 48.43

APT 4.13

Dia’s MAG grew at a bizarre rate, same as always, and Maria was beginning to exhibit that abnormal rate of growth as well. I couldn’t imagine Lastiara would say her APT wasn’t up to snuff anymore. In fact, she was now the one with the

lowest APT out of us.

Relieved that the HP of our two rearguard mages had increased, I enveloped Floor 32 with *Dimension*, using my MP lavishly once again. I didn't use *Calculash* in battle, opting to fight with Responsiveness instead, leaving me with MP to spare. That reminded me of the games I once played, where it was common for lower-level spells to become unviable in battle after learning higher-level magic. As the father of *Calculash*, I felt a little sad.

The desert was behind us, the floor layout returning to the normal corridors from Floor 28 and back. The walls were still made of crystal, but it was much easier to progress than trudging through a sea of sand. Naturally, it wasn't identical to before. The ceiling was unusually high, and a thin, majestic river ran through the crystal corridor. The water was beautiful and clear, like this was a mystical Shangri-la, and the crystals sparkling at the bottom were as dazzling to look at as the starry night sky. The number of insect and animal-type monsters was decreasing, the number of flying monsters increasing to replace them—information I shared with everyone in a cold sweat.

"Flying monsters, huh?" Lastiara's expression was particularly glum. This dug up memories of the Rio Eagles of Floor 22, against which she'd been ill-equipped to fight.

"But this time, we've got Dia and Maria with us, so..."

Our party contained more than just swordfighters now. With mages in tow, our ability to deal with problems was far improved. Upon hearing that, the two mages made their excitement known.

"Please, leave it to me," said Maria. "I've leveled up and am now bursting with magic energy. Plus, my resonant spell with Dia is on the cusp of working smoothly. From here on out, we'll try handling things without cause for concern."

"Let us take care o' the midair ones! Up 'til now, I've been kinda holding back a bit, but it's time I go all out!"

I accepted their proposal, partially so as to avoid dampening their enthusiasm. *Let's explore this floor with Maria and Dia in the driver's seat.*

With the two in the rear as the formation's new core, we started making our way through Floor 32. A large quantity of monsters were flapping their wings in the air. Unable to avoid all of them as we pressed forward, we found ourselves engaged in combat after a few minutes.

Detecting the approach of the enemy through *Dimension*, I turned around and shouted, "We've got company! Maria, Dia, a bird monster's com...ing... Huh?" I saw countless fireballs flying about. Actually, they weren't fireballs, exactly. *Are those fire eyes?!*

"Yes. I can see them too," Maria answered. "Dia, let's do this as planned. Spellcast: *Flame Calculash, Firefly.*"

"Don't gotta tell me!"

Flames of various sizes flew across the narrow corridor. It was a veritable fireworks display. I was at a loss for words at the sight of what looked like a recreation of Alty's floor. The balls of flame soared as if they were alive, hurtling toward the monster I'd detected. Next to Maria, Dia began to craft a spell; it seemed like his entire body was emitting light, perhaps due to the sheer density of magic energy. The colossal swell of it filled me with anticipation. How magnificent a spell was I about to witness?

Maria kept manipulating her fire, not needing to hear my instructions. It was likely the case that each one of those fireballs had the same effect as *Dimension*, and the fireballs moved so accurately and unhesitatingly that I was convinced that was true. Then the fireballs changed into rings and began to rotate. The pair crafted innumerable fire rings, which formed neat lines in the air before stretching toward the monster's location, gradually turning into a cylinder of flame. They'd fashioned a track for Dia to shoot his magic through. Or no, a gun barrel, the muzzle always pointed at the dread bird thanks to Maria's precision and control.

Dia completed his spell's construction at last. "*Flame Arrow!*"

The light emanating from his form gathered into a point, and he shot it out of the palm of his hand with all his might. That magic laser passed through the guiding gun barrel Maria had composed from fire and pierced the monster, the unimaginable heat melting a hole through the bird's body of hard crystal. It fell

to the ground before it could even see us, helpless before the vicious megablast.

“Nice one, Dia,” I said. “Only, there’s another one right nearby. Let’s take it down too while we’re at it, shall we?”

“Yep, got it. Let’s do it!”

Maria was now a specialist in fire magic, second only to Alty herself. In other words, not only did she possess the same ability to detect enemies that I did, she could also guide Dia’s *Flame Arrows*.

“*Flame Arrow!*”

The laser bent as it passed through the fire-cylinder, piercing the moving target right through its vitals. This was a whole different beast from the resonant magic I knew of. In fact, neither *Firefly* nor *Flame Arrow* was supposed to be this kind of magic to begin with. Both spells had evolved to the point of being unrecognizable, and when skillfully combined, they evolved *again* into something else entirely, resulting in a spell that was *this* brutal. It seemed Lastiara’s reaction was much the same as mine; she was watching with her mouth agape.

“Mr. Kanami, we defeated them. But it seems other monsters are getting closer after hearing its death shriek. I’m sorry.” Since she’d spread out her sense-organ fireballs, Maria had detected the movements of distant monsters.

Since *Dimension* had informed me of the same fact, I could tell that her detection abilities were very nearly a match for mine. “Huh? Ah, right. Looks like these things are the type of monster that calls for reinforcements. In which case...”

I was about to suggest we move, but Dia was war-minded. “All right, Maria and I are gonna cook ‘em all!”

Judging from her expression, Maria didn’t think that was a bad idea. “You’re not wrong. Let’s take our time exploring after wiping them all out,” she said casually.

“Maria...” I replied timidly. “You can wipe them out?”

“Of course. Allow me to show you.”

She smiled reassuringly, but thanks to the terrifying amount of heat that was floating behind her, I found myself unable to smile back. Dia started incanting again, and Maria began creating more flames, which were shaped like neat squares and triangles this time around. She wasted no time compressing the fire until it lost its characteristic wildness, thereby constructing smooth surfaces that resembled reflector boards.

“Dia, all you have to do is fire. I’ll do the guiding.”

“Got it. Here I go!”

Countless fire arrows were now floating in Dia’s vicinity. Unlike Maria’s fire, they shone white hot. Before I knew it, Maria’s fire-cylinders had increased in number. This time, the gun barrels were short, but they were pointed at the magic reflector boards.

“Flame Arrow: Petalrain!”

Then the formerly stationary white fire arrows all shot out, their speed and heat fearsome to behold. Though taken individually, each *Flame Arrow* was inferior to a single-shot version, they were still ferocious feats of magic that could be called lasers in and of themselves, and they burst forward like streaks of light.

The innumerable lasers of white fire, bent by Maria’s cylinders of kneaded flame and at times turned drastically off course by the magic reflector boards, followed their red-fire cousins to assail the monsters that were gathering one after the other. There were more than ten heading this way, but they were all run through by fleeting beams of light and before fading away. They truly were annihilating all our enemies. In the blink of an eye, the one-kilometer radius around us became a monster-free space.



“And that’s that,” said Maria. “Shall we move on, Mr. Kanami?”

“Phew, glad that worked!”

The pair that had created that hellscape walked forward leisurely. Lastiara and I were dumbfounded. Looking at their menus, their MP had only ticked down by one digit. To them, that whole display had been akin to some light exercise.

“R-Right... Let’s go, shall we?”

They’d also earned a truckload of EXP. Lastiara and I could run around till we were blue in the face, but we’d never catch up to their sheer EXP-grinding efficiency. Their overwhelming power to not only kill but utterly exterminate left my mind blank. And here I’d been protecting the two of them with my sword just moments ago. Imagine my shock when I realized there had never been any need to do so. Lastiara’s earlier on-top-of-the-world attitude was gone. Confused, we meekly followed in Dia and Maria’s wake.

But there was no time to remain in a state of shock, as a few minutes later, *Dimension* picked up new monsters approaching us.

“W-We’ve got monsters! They’re coming from three directions simultaneously —”

“Are they the same monsters?” asked Maria. “If they are, it won’t be a problem.”

“Leave it to us! *Flame Arrow!*”

Streaks of light passed through gun barrels made of fire, and the monsters disappeared before we’d even caught sight of them.

“Th-They *were* coming at us from three directions, but they all died. Right, so...guess we’ll go pick up their magic gems.”

The battle ended in the blink of an eye. Maria had her flames floating in the vicinity at all times, which was likely the spell called *Flame Calculash*. Any monsters that entered its area of effect would be killed instantly by one of Dia’s *Flame Arrows*. Their resonant magic was perfect—*so, so perfect*—that my

enemy detection and Lastiara’s attack power were rendered completely unnecessary. The duo intercepted monsters so fast that Lastiara never saw so much as a shadow of an enemy.

Thus did we stroll toward Floor 33. We were repeatedly attacked along the way, but in the end, none of the monsters got close enough for us to even see them. We reached the thirty-third floor unscathed, without ever even learning the name of the crystal bird creature.



“Ms. Lastiara, if you could please level us up; thank you.”

“Ah, sure thing.”

Lastiara leveled Maria and Dia up. They’d wiped out so many high-level monsters that they had accumulated more than enough EXP for it.

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 220/244

MP: 629/1,030

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 16

STR 8.81

VIT 7.19

DEX 4.01

AGI 4.21

INT 14.11

MAG 58.16

APT 5.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 159/233

MP: 601/1,005

CLASS: None

LEVEL 15

STR 8.87

VIT 8.73

DEX 7.40

AGI 4.81

INT 9.89

MAG 53.22

APT 4.13

What was scary was that our mages were curbstomping the enemies at less than half the recommended level to face them.

“Now I have even more magic energy. I should be able to increase the number of active flames.”

“Yeah, and I oughta be able to pour even *more* power into it!”

I felt kinda bad for the monsters. Maria and Dia’s resonant magic, which had been perfected during their trial and error over successive slaying sprees, had turned the duo into a juggernaut.

“Dia, what should we name this resonant spell?”

“Name? You’re right; giving it a name would be handy. Hmm...how ’bout we have Kanami choose? He’s always making a buncha new spells.”

“Good point. Mr. Kanami, could you name it for us?”

Her calling out to me snapped me back to reality (Lastiara was still in a bit of a daze).

“Its name, huh? Er...how’s ‘Aegis’ sound to you? In my world, it means something like a shield or armor to protect somebody.”

“I like it. This spell is fire magic created to protect you, Mr. Kanami. What say we name it *Flame Aegis*?”

Having settled on a name for the overpowered fire spell, we resumed our dive. Floor 33 was structured with a lot of water in the form of rivers and shallows and the like, and it was inhabited by different types of monsters. The number of hard, mineral-based monsters had decreased, and the number of water-based monsters had increased in its stead. My expression turned cheerier; aquatic monsters were likely very resistant to fire magic, so I continued onward, figuring it would soon be my and Lastiara’s turn to shine. But then...

“Flame Aegis!”

“Flame Aegis!”

That was not, in fact, the case. Dia’s spells blazed straight through the monsters lurking under the waves like a hot knife through butter. A little bit of water was meaningless before such a crushing amount of heat. The water evaporated the instant the spells touched it, so whether the monsters were aquatic or mineral-based was immaterial. Lastiara and I had our swords out, on high alert for aquatic threats, but we never got to swing them; the battle always ended with us simply standing there.

“The... The monsters keep evaporating before they can get close...”

“We’ve got nothing to do, do we, Kanami? I mean, it’s important to stand guard over them in case push comes to shove, but it’s like...you know?”

I completely understood what she meant by “you know?” because really, who were we kidding? There was no reason for us to be there. There was no way the monsters were going to actually slip past *Flame Aegis* and attack our companions. In all honesty, Dia and Maria were all the party needed. We were just leeching off them at this rate. But neither Lastiara nor I could state that aloud, because we got the feeling that if we openly acknowledged that fact, the pride we’d built up over all this time would come crumbling down.

The pair in the rear faced us with tranquil expressions.

“We’re only able to fire our magic with peace of mind because you two are with us, Ms. Lastiara.”

That was nice of her to say. It really was, but...

“Yeah!” said Dia. “You two can just sit pretty in the back for us.”

“Right. We’re doing this because we enjoy it. Please, leave it to us and relax, Mr. Kanami.”

In another context, what she said would make me sound like a kept man. As you might expect, Lastiara and I were no longer able to hide our restlessness. We pondered ways we could contribute, but reality was a harsh mistress. So long as we were unable to propose a strategy that surpassed their use of *Flame Aegis*, our time to shine would never come. When monsters attacked, we silently sheathed the swords we’d drawn, over and over and over. The repeated anticlimax was a thing of sorrow. I felt true sadness at my inability to participate, given how my newfound freedom had increased the amount of time I thought about the Dungeon in video game terms. Lastiara’s expression mirrored mine, but we kept going, relying on the other two entirely.

“Resonant spell: *Flame Aegis!*”

“Resonant spell: *Flame Aegis!*”

Bits of flame flitted everywhere along the corridors, evaporating the monsters the moment they entered their domain. This was no longer a stirring string of battles; it had turned into *work*.

As I picked up the magic gem drops, I was reminded of how when a player’s party was too strong in an RPG, they reached a point where they could blast through any enemy by pressing a single button again and again. Just by walking alongside Maria and Dia, we could effectively skip all monster encounters.

We eventually reached the next floor, once again without seeing so much as the shadow of a monster. In all that time, Lastiara and I did nothing more than pick up the magic gems the monsters dropped upon dying. We looked down at our feet with dejected expressions, because what else could we do?

It was midway through Floor 34 when Maria addressed our crestfallen forms.

“I’m running out of MP. Mr. Kanami, the *Connection* gate.”

“Ah, right.”

I created one. At this point, I was well served by doing everything Maria told me to. There was nothing to object to...

I plodded through the portal, and Lastiara, who was beginning to lose sight of the very meaning of life, followed me through.

Beyond the door, we saw the great blue sky—we were back aboard the *Living Legend*. I checked the fruits of our first Dungeon dive together.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 303/351 MP: 366/889-400

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 19

STR 11.05

VIT 12.52

DEX 16.32

AGI 19.84

INT 16.53

MAG 44.52

APT 7.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Lastiara Whoseyards

HP: 735/783

MP: 338/353

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 19

STR 14.99

VIT 14.12

DEX 8.59

AGI 10.44

INT 14.21

MAG 10.57

APT 4.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 220/269

MP: 182/1,107

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 18

STR 9.19

VIT 7.54

DEX 4.41

AGI 4.62

INT 15.80

MAG 65.26

APT 5.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 159/264

MP: 23/1,065

CLASS: None

LEVEL 17

STR 9.50

VIT 9.31

DEX 8.00

AGI 4.98

INT 10.23

MAG 58.12

APT 4.13

In just a few hours, we'd gotten almost halfway to my goal of Floor 40 and had gained a large bounty of EXP as well. We'd succeeded brilliantly at evening out our levels more, and on top of that, no one had suffered a single injury. You could call it a flawless Dungeon dive. In fact, today's excursion was exactly the kind of well-oiled machine I'd always wanted. What was there to complain about? Nothing. And yet...

"Good work, everyone," said Maria. "Now then, I'll be working around the ship again."

"I'm gonna rest in my room," said Dia. "You worked me ragged today, Maria."

The two of them slipped into the ship's interior, leaving Lastiara and me on the deck. Their casual, easygoing stroll gave me the impression that they were brimming with the sense of accomplishment you got after clearing an FPS. Maybe because Lastiara and I had barely used our energy or strength, our bodies wouldn't stop trembling.

"I... I, uh... I'm useful for leveling up and healing and stuff, so..." Lastiara began.

"And... And I'm useful too, for detecting enemies!"

Without saying something, we'd be admitting that we were useless bums.

"But Mar-Mar's able to detect enemies now too!" she replied.

"If you're gonna go there... Dia can cast holy magic too!"

For some reason, we were both sniping at the small niches we'd carved for ourselves. That was just how shaken we felt. If it wasn't just my vanity talking, I'd been trying to pull everyone along as their leader. Lastiara, for her part, must have thought of herself as something of a subleader. But if things continued like this, the idea of us being leader and subleader would be laughable. The party was now hanging entirely on two who were smaller and younger than me. That state of dependence was something I wanted to avoid. I had no grievances about Maria and Dia being so strong, but still, I couldn't let the situation stand.

That naturally led to my next decision. I drew my sword. "O-Okay," I stammered, "time for some intensive training!" We had plenty of MP and were far from exhausted.

Lastiara drew her sword as well. "Sounds good! Intensive training! I like the sound of it! You see *that* all the time in hero tales too!"

So began the training session of the duo, who were currently so pale in the face.



"I can't be trying to act all cool by saying magic's not for me," said Lastiara, her hands balled into fists as tears streaked down. "The blade's behind the times. Those hero stories where they're always fighting with swords were always just fairy tales!"

"Yeah, I should've known nothing beats magic. Now that I think about it, back in the games people play in my world, spells that hit all of the weakling enemies were the most efficient. Attacking one enemy at a time's just plain dumb."

"Magic's our ticket! We gotta train to use magic to an extent too!"

"You said it, Lastiara! Let's train up a storm!"

We pressed our palms together and asked about each other's intentions.

"So, what kinda training are you planning to do, exactly? I haven't got

anything in mind.”

“I dunno. I think that for the time being, it’s important we learn new spells in general.”

That was the only way to get stronger faster. Like with my composite spell *Wintermension* and Maria and Dia’s resonant spell *Flame Aegis*, there were times where, as long as you had a solid idea in mind, your basic magic exhibited dozens of times its normal power.

“But I’ve got no space left to learn new spells, so I think new applications of existing spells will be the main thing for me,” said Lastiara.

“Or we can learn a resonant spell, you and me.”

“Oh, nice idea. Wanna give it a whirl?”

“Then again, guess you can’t use dimensional magic...”

“The space element of magic’s so obscure that it’s not recorded in my blood. I’ve got lots of ice spells, mind you.”

“Meanwhile, I’ve only got a couple of ice spells. *Freeze* and *Ice*; nothing else.”

While we were both into the idea of making a resonant spell, we didn’t have much magic that fit together.

“The magic you can use is real lopsided, huh?” she said.

“I couldn’t acquire more ice spells, man. It can’t be helped.”

I’d once swallowed a magic gem for learning *Snow Fleck* to no effect, leading me to believe that I could only learn new dimensional spells.

“All righty, how about we try a bunch of stuff, just see what works?”

“For now, let’s try combining some simple ice spells. We can’t go wrong starting off by imitating what Maria and Dia did.”

Beginning with *Ice* and *Freeze*, we deployed a variety of spells, attempting to blend our magic together through trial and error. Our only success was our imitation of *Flame Aegis*. Much of the art of magic hinged on one’s mental visualization, after all, and all of my spells were emulations of what I’d seen before.

“Spellcast: *Ice Arrow*.”

“Spellcast: *Wintermension, Snowmension*.”

“Resonant spell: *Ice Aegis*.”

“Resonant spell: *Ice Aegis*.”

A mystical ice barrier encompassed the deck, inside of which *Snowmension* fluttered through the air. The arrow of ice that Lastiara had fired passed through it, guided by the path of snow I’d created. As an imitation of *Flame Aegis*, it was a success, but it was inadequate in terms of precision and power. We tried striking a moving target as a test but ended up not being able to strike down so much as a single bird in flight.

“It’s no use,” I lamented. “We’re lacking some fundamental ingredient.”

“You’re not as good as Mar-Mar at precision control, and my firepower’s not as good as Dia’s. Guess it’s no wonder it’s not going so great.”

We had a battery of hurdles to tackle. It would be meaningless to simply pour in more magic energy and make the spell bigger; even if we managed to land a hit on a bird, that didn’t mean it would work on Dungeon monsters from Floor 30 onward.

“Oh well. Let’s try to improve how finely we can control our magic energy before anything else.”

“And it looks like I should reexamine stuff, starting with how I craft spells. My firepower’s lacking because I can’t focus it like Dia can...”

We moaned and groaned as we kneaded our magic energy. Attempting the same spell as Maria and Dia cast the gap between us and them into sharp relief. I pondered a way of clearing our hurdles while training my magic. To pass the time, we created a magic snowman, indulged in a snowball fight, and got ourselves all covered in snow, but the whole time, I kept agonizing over the main issue.

After messing about a whole bunch, we were there, red in the cheeks, our breath visible in the air, when suddenly, Lastiara went, “Ah!” with a sunny expression.

“Did you think of something?”

“More like I remembered something. It’s a ruleset for when mages duel each other. We create different sides of the arena, like this...” She used her foot to draw a line in the snow that had come from all our spellcasting practice. “We each take one side and fire spells at each other. If you use anything but magic, you lose, and if you move, you lose.”

“Wow, sounds fun. Might make for some good training too.” I copied her and drew a line marking my territory. We locked eyes.

“Now then, guess I’ll start off nice and gentle. *Ice Arrow!*”

“Spellcast: *Wintermension.*”

I whipped up a magical winter, which tampered with Lastiara’s spellcrafting, causing her own spell to fizzle.

“Urgh. I see you still love your countermagic,” she griped.

“It’s your fault for half-assing your spellcrafting. I mean, given this ruleset, how could I *not* go for countermagic?”

“So you’re saying that if I craft the spell properly, countermagic won’t work on it?”

“Yeah, if there are no gaps to exploit, I can’t counter it. You should try crafting with that in mind.”

“Gotcha. Makes sense.”

We crafted one spell after the next, giving each other tips and advice all the while. Since our talent at using magic was roughly equal, the battle dragged on longer than anticipated. In terms of MP, I had her beat, but her blood was encoded with a great variety of spells and experience, which she leveraged to fortify her spellcrafting, attempting to get around my countermagic (by any means possible at times). Her sense for combat was truly exceptional; in such a short span of time, she was already reworking her spellcrafting from the ground up. She’d passed the realm of incantationless magic and reached the realm of contracted spellcrafting. She also kept me on my toes by hiding where the magic would manifest, as she switched it up from her hands to her legs.

She fired magic of multiple elements at me from all directions at once, and if I'd never seen a particular spell before, using *Wintermension* to disperse it was more difficult than not. Moreover, she was getting more and more used to her magic being countered, and the exploitable gaps in her spellcrafting were decreasing. I had to admit I was at a disadvantage. My usual strengths were little use in a spell-slinging contest where my feet were planted in place, leaving me with no choice but to switch to a strategy that relied on my MP edge.

"Spellcast: *Midgard Freeze!*"

"I was waiting for that! *Ice Battering Ram!*"

Seizing on the moment in which I abandoned my countermagic, Lastiara opted for a big move herself, her giant ice hammer smashing my great ice serpent to pieces and chasing me away from my zone. She had won our duel.

I brushed the ice off my clothes as I approached her. "You got me. Gotta say, mage duels are pretty fun! I like how based in logic they are."

She did the "V for victory" sign, but her expression, by contrast, was serious. "That made for some good practice. If I let the smallest gap through, the spell was countered, so it was easy to tell where I went wrong. And now I realize just how crude and sloppy my spellcrafting's been up 'til now."

"I learned a lot too. I got in plenty of countermagic practice, and I witnessed a bunch of magic for the first time."

Whether I'd countered a specific spell before made a big difference. I'd almost certainly be countering the magic of scads of enemies in the times to come, so I figured it might serve me to practice beforehand with Lastiara's help.

We both felt a measure of *refreshed* now that we'd run out of MP.

"Phew... Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever made an effort to become stronger."

"Same goes for me," I replied. "I've had my dimensional magic from the start. And thanks to leveling up, I've never had to train before."

"Meanwhile, I've had sword skills, martial arts, and magic on lock from the beginning. You can't blame me if I never got the urge to work very hard."

We smiled at each other as we wiped the slight sweat from our brows.

“Novel sensation, huh?” I hadn’t felt this emotion since before entering this world.

“Yeah, working up a sweat feels nice! It’s the springtime of our lives! It’s a regular adventure tale!”

To see the fruits of our labor, I checked the skills portion of each of our menus.

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 4.89, Ice Magic 2.58+1.10

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimensional Magic 5.25+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Thought Streams 1.47, Knitting 1.07, Swindling 1.34, Magical Combat 0.72

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Weapon Combat 2.20, Swordplay 2.12, Pseudo-Divine Eyes 1.00, Magical Combat 2.27, Bloodknack 5.00, Holy Magic 1.03

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Book Reading 0.52, Doll Body 1.00, Concentration 0.21

We’d each picked up one new skill, though the numbers attached to them were low. We’d essentially only dipped our feet in the pond, but it was still concrete progress, so I was grinning. Lastiara had to be able to see our newly acquired skills too; she was smiling like a girl who’d just been gifted some pretty new clothes. My heart started racing—but I immediately tamped down my emotions, calming myself down so as not to provoke ???. I gave her a high five instead, the same “we’re friends” thing I’d always done.

“Hey, Kanami. Is there any other intensive training we oughta be doing?” She must not have ever attained anything by working for it before. She edged up to me all excited.

Could you not? It's making it harder to keep my emotions in check. "Hmm, let's see..."

I pondered the matter using Thought Streams and took Lorwen out of my inventory.

"A sword? Oh, I get it. You're gonna teach me Lorwen Arrace's moves?"

"Yeah. I think it'll help you be an immediate threat, and knowing you, you should be able to learn."

I wouldn't be able to teach her everything. I couldn't even say that I understood all of Lorwen's sword techniques myself. However, as someone who inherited his sword style, I was sure I could teach her a thing or two. Lorwen, for his part, would have wanted his knowledge of the blade to spread, and Lastiara had a keen interest in it as well. The potential benefits of teaching her didn't stop there either. The sword possessed a wealth of special abilities, and one of them allowed the wielder to recall Lorwen's swordsmanship. If I made good use of that, I might be able to understand the nitty-gritty of blade theory that Lorwen had been unable to convey. I could be killing three birds with one stone this way.

"Maybe if I get Fenrir Arrace to be my coach, I'll learn faster." She closed her eyes and scraped the bottom of her MP tank. "Bloodspell: *Fenrir Arrace*."

Her hair changed color a little, and all of a sudden, her sword stance lost its weak spots. If what she was saying was true, I was bearing witness to Fenrir Arrace, former Blademaster and current head of the Arrace Clan, at the peak of his powers.

"All right, let's do some light swordplay. Watch and be in the moment. Try to remember."

When Lorwen taught me, it had been almost entirely by way of combat, so I wanted to try emulating his teaching style.

"Okay, got it. Let's do it!"

Holding our respective swords at the ready, we began to swing at each other, stopping just before we could land a hit. I might have lost our mage duel, but when it came to a sword fight, I had the advantage. While my physical strength

was inferior, my skill far exceeded hers. Besides, in a battle fought without the assistance of magic, I would always have the edge thanks to Responsiveness (and the more Responsiveness was put into operation, the bigger the advantage). After we had crossed swords for some time, I took a point off her, leaving her panting for breath.

“Wait... Wait up... I’m supposed to learn by *watching*?”

“That would certainly make it easier for me...”

“That’s absurd!”

“All right, I’ll try going a bit slower for ya.”

It seemed that even with the support of her blood magic, it wouldn’t go so easily for her. I tried slowing down the pace of the lesson, but the look on her face wasn’t getting any cheerier.

“Besides, Lorwen’s sword style is weird to begin with!”

“Huh? It is?” I asked.

“Normally, swordsmanship centers around the notion that you’re fighting someone roughly the size of a person. But Lorwen’s swordsmanship is predicated on the assumption that you’re fighting a monster around the size of this ship!”

“I mean, isn’t that to be expected? Otherwise, what’ll you do when a giant monster pops up?”

“No, because once a monster-size enemy comes along, you’d *normally* give up on fighting it with a sword altogether. Yet this style is adamant about fighting everything with a single sword. That’s why I’m telling you it ain’t normal,” she insisted.

“Oh, gotcha. I guess he tried to pull something off against *everything* using just a sword since he couldn’t use magic...”

“In order to grasp this absurd fighting style and overcome this absurd training, I’ll have to push myself a bit more...” She strengthened her blood spell to the limit. Her hair radiated light in many colors before settling on silver. It seemed she’d called on the experience of another to an even greater extent. “Come at

me slow, okay?! Go slow!”

“I get it, I get it...”

Once again, we clashed. Lastiara’s movements were sharper than before, and I could tell that she was mimicking Lorwen’s techniques, devoting every ounce of her attention to absorb whatever she could. As blade met blade, it wasn’t just the steel that shone, but also Lastiara’s eyes.

Our special training continued until sunset when a delicious aroma wafted from the ship’s interior. Just as Snow and Reaper returned from the stern, carrying their fishing gear, Lastiara and I simultaneously collapsed from exhaustion.

“Hff, hff, hff...” I gasped.

“Boy am I beat! This sweat feels great, though!”

While I was wheezing, the smell of blood on my breath, Lastiara smiled delightedly. Maybe she was experiencing a sort of runner’s high.

Seeing us bathed in our own sweat, Snow spoke up. “That was quite the workout. Training while the weather’s this nice out? Talk about strange tastes. I mean, both you and Lady Lastiara.”

Lastiara got back to her feet. “It’s fun, you know. Wanna join us?”

“N-No, I’ll respectfully decline. I don’t much like tiring myself out. See you later!” Snow fled from the deck, taking Reaper with her.

Lastiara was puzzled. “Huh. She didn’t bite. That’s weird. It’s so fun.”

I tried to move my utterly exhausted body. “You’re just about the only one who’d call this fun.”

“Oh c’mon. Sure, you get a little tired, but isn’t seeing yourself get stronger a ton of fun? It’s like, I dunno... The process of getting stronger is such a rush.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m a fan too, but that kinda thing depends on the person,” I answered. “That said, there sure are loads of benefits you can get from sword training. It’s just like you told me—upon reflection, the Lorwen Arrace school of the blade has its weird points.”

“Let’s make it a habit to train regularly.”

“Yeah, sounds good. Let’s work together to hone each other’s swordsmanship skills.”

The sword style I had inherited from Lorwen was important to me; I had no intention of keeping it on a pedestal to collect dust. He would have wanted me to raise the art to greater and greater heights. Given how much he cared about his friends, I could be sure he’d want me to use it to make myself even stronger. But how could I accomplish that? Exactly how *should* I wield Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan? I had to make things more pragmatic by getting it to work in concert with my dimensional magic.

With thoughts of developing a new sword style in my head, I returned inside. After we all ate Maria’s homemade dinner, day two of the sea voyage to the mainland came to a close.



The day after my intensive training alongside Lastiara, I was out by myself on the deck starting early in the morning; sleeping for short durations had become a habit for me. Our training had been worthwhile, there was no doubt about that. When it came to drawing out the power of Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, on the other hand, I wasn’t satisfied. It was true that my instructing Lastiara wouldn’t have gone as smoothly without the sword’s help, but I reckoned that wasn’t where its *true* value lay. Compared to the dramatic change Palinchron and Maria had undergone when they had taken in the magic gems of Guardians, this wasn’t cutting it.

I jumped off the deck toward the sea. “Spellcast: *Freeze*.”

I deployed my ice magic at my feet the moment I made contact. Then I started running, freezing the water’s surface as I went. I soon spotted a small island right by me. Reaching the shore of the island, I took a large quantity of bags from my inventory. I collected sand and stones and other such things from my surroundings and tossed them into the bags, filling them one after the other. After acquiring more than ten kilos of sand, I returned to the ship, satisfaction written on my face; I’d gotten what I needed.

Then one of my crewmates spotted me. “What the? What’re *you* up to,

mister?”

It was Reaper. She’d been heading for the stern, once again carrying fishing gear. Snow was with her as well, so maybe they were planning to treat themselves to some early morning fishing. *Good god, these two... They’re really intent on enjoying another day in paradise, huh?*

“I popped out to pick up some sand.”

“Huh? Why sand?”

“To practice drawing out the power of Lorwen’s sword. I haven’t used this guy to its fullest extent yet, see.”

“Wow, sounds fun. Hey, Snow, let’s watch and see what happens!” she said, pulling at the hem of the older girl’s clothes to stop her.

“Lorwen’s sword... If that’s the case, I might be a little curious.” Snow put down her fishing things and stuck around to watch.

“No getting in the way, got it?” I spread out the sand on the deck and brandished Lorwen with both hands before closing my eyes and focusing all of my attention on the sword.

Unfortunately, all that flowed into my mind was sword techniques. Never before had my head been so thoroughly bombarded by them. I couldn’t help but smile at the sheer one-sided extremeness of my good friend’s inner nature, but still, I inwardly asked the sword for something apart from that. I clad the sword in some of my body’s magic energy and concentrated my thoughts on magic of an all-new element. I’d already constructed the visual in my mind. The mental image of the basic earth-element spell, *Earth*, used for commanding soil and the ground itself.

“Earthspell: *Earth*,” I muttered, unhurriedly tracing lines in the sand with Lorwen.

The sand started creeping up the blade like iron fillings sticking to a magnet. The sand sprang up like it was alive, going up the blade like a fish fighting a current. This was certainly neither dimensional nor ice magic. It was earth magic—an element I shouldn’t have been able to use.

“Urgh!”

But the amount of magic energy this was draining from me was staggering. The sensation that I was making use of something that I by all rights didn't have access to was making my body scream, and I was sure I knew the biggest reason: the sword itself wasn't happy that it was being used for training in something other than sword techniques.

“C'mon, Lorwen, please. Lend me your power...”

I did as my intuition dictated and activated Responsiveness. A new wave of power that grasped the underlying, essential laws of nature was added to the wave of earth-element magic. The bangs of my hair swayed, lifted by the ripples of the two power surges mixing together. I experienced the false sensation of my consciousness being sucked into the sword. I thought I heard a voice from inside the sword too: *“I'm no good at it either.”*

I saw a vision of a young man with chestnut hair. He was pouting a little. Then I got the feeling I heard a sigh.

“I suppose if I *must*.”

With those words, the world around me shifted. The grains of sand on the deck of the *Living Legend* began dancing in the air, with me standing in the center of the sand mist. My magic energy turned over, and the name of the spell came naturally to my lips.

“Quartzspell: *Quartz*.”

The dimension-spell magic energy that flowed out from within me was, through Lorwen, being converted into the crystal-manipulating magic energy of the Thief of Earth's Essence. That energy encroached on the sand particles flying through the air. I'd obtained a small fragment of the power to “essence-thieve,” the power to throw the fabric of reality itself out of kilter. The sand was now turning into crystal. No, not *just* crystal. What was once mere stone was turning into gemstone, and what was once mere sand was turning into gold dust. After witnessing the spell changing all of that into every conceivable form of mineral, I dispelled the magic, upon which the former sand that was floating in the air fell back onto the deck. A river of glittering jewels was born.

“Whoa! What the?!” said Reaper, taking the transformed sand and stones in her hands. “They’re so shiny now! Are these all gemstones?!”

Snow was even more excited than her. “Ordinary sand turning into jewels?! Could this be alchemy? Wow! Just as I’d expect from you and Lorwen Arrace! With this power, we’re unbeatable! We’ll never want for money! We can lead lives of unchecked debauchery until the end of our days!”

I glared at the girl who was so close to jumping for joy. “Hey, hold your horses.”

“I... I totally didn’t say anything.” She averted her eyes as she picked up more of the jewels.

The pair began playing with the glittering “sand” on the deck like two kids on the beach. I did understand what Snow was getting at, so I picked one up myself to examine it. The sand and stones I’d brought in weren’t changing back. Although the value of jewels in this world was comparatively low, it wasn’t nothing, so this ability could go in the “overpowered” column. If I devoted all my time to alchemy, I could easily cause the market to collapse. Depending on the minerals I transmuted, it could even affect a country’s overall cost of living. It hinged on how I used it—I could very well use it strategically as another means of attack.

The ship’s finances had reached geopolitical levels, but at the same time, my unease was growing. Look at how much power could be unleashed when the magic gem of a Guardian and that gem’s user were the slightest bit in alignment. It seemed safe to assume that Maria and Palinchron were capable of much the same, which meant they both individually possessed the power to tilt the world’s economy. I trembled at the thought of the unfathomable potential of both the ally whose help I was enlisting and the foe I would be fighting before long.

“Mister, what exactly are you gonna do with this much crystal and gold?” asked Reaper, having tired of playing with the “sand.”

“Good question. We couldn’t possibly handle all of it between the seven of us, could we? I’m thinking I’ll go ask for some advice. Wanna come with?”

It was way too much for us to use. We could take it to a money changer’s

store, but we simply didn't need to spend this much.

"Er, wait...does that mean you're going to the Alliance?"

"Yep."

I'd created a direct route to Alliance territory by means of my transportation spell, *Connection*. I could return any time I liked in no time flat.

Snow averted her gaze. "The Walker Clan's too close for my liking back there."

I couldn't blame her. She was finally relishing a taste of freedom; she wouldn't gladly go back to her estate of her own volition.

Reaper warmly patted Snow on the head as she took up the fishing gear. "We're gonna go fishing. Our little competition's not over yet!"

She was going to stay out of consideration for Snow. I knew she most likely did want to check out the goings-on in the Alliance, so that was sweet of her.

"Gotcha. Cool, I'll be back in a jiffy."

I got as much of the various minerals scattered about the deck back into my inventory as I could, then incanted, "Spellcast: *Connection*."

A light purple doorway was born, redefining the concept of distance. This portal's counterpart lay not in the Dungeon, but in the headquarters of Epic Seeker.

A Guardian's magic gem may be overpowered, but I'm no slouch with the things I can do.

I passed through the gate, beyond which I stepped into a corner of my old room. I planned to maintain the portal placed in the Epic Seeker office on a semipermanent basis. When I last left the office, it was a fairly barren room containing no more than the bare minimum of furnishings, but boy had the room changed after vacating it for a short spell. Stacks of papers were piled up everywhere; there was nowhere on the floor I could stand. It was a veritable mountain range of documents.

I sensed somebody's presence. "Good morning. Or should I say, I'm back?"

The woman who was slumped over my former desk lifted her head. "Wait,

huh? Is that you, Master? It's only been a few days since you left, you know?"

It was Tayly Linkar, one of Epic Seeker's mages. It looked as though she had taken charge of the paperwork after I left. She looked a tad dumbfounded. Apparently, she was thinking I had some nerve, poking my nose back in so suddenly after exiting the way I had. I didn't remember saying I'd never come back, so I continued without paying her amazement any mind.

"I'm not guildmaster anymore, so please don't call me that."

"What're you on about, dummy? As Epic Seeker guildmaster, you'll never lose the title. It'll be forever yours, kiddo. I hope you know that."

"Huh? But, like, why?"

"It's easier for us to get by if people think you're the leader working in the shadows. We're taking the liberty of banking on your name, deary."

"I don't mind, but...isn't banking on my name gonna work *against* the guild? They view me as a kidnapper, don't they?"

"Well, you're not wrong, but you know that even criminals can be popular, don't you? You may be a wanted man, but in Laoravia, you're basically a superstar now. The people of Laoravia must think you had your reasons. Like, 'I'm sure of it; our hero of Laoravia must have whisked those princesses away because they were suffering in confinement.' That sort of thing. Not that it's not the truth. And we here at Epic Seeker intend to actively spread those rumors far and wide."

"Uh...damn..."

I had no idea how to respond to the notion that I was a superstar. It could only have a negative impact on my Dungeon diving going forward.

"What do you mean, 'uh, damn'? Did you really think that after everything you did, it'd be no big deal? You're seen as 'the strongest' and 'the hero' now. Oh, and add 'the Blademaster' and 'Guardian Slayer' on top. You're the object of admiration of adventurers all over. Your legend will persist for a century *at least*. There you were, participating in the Brawl all by yourself despite being a guildmaster, and then, following a battle straight from the pages of a myth, you overpowered one of the Guardians, greatest enemy of the Alliance, head-on.

After which, I might add, you proceeded to cajole the living god of the main religion of the Alliance and its Apostle too, plus the young heiress of one of the four high noble clans, not to mention all the lady spectators your airheaded demeanor won over, *not to mention* the *guys* you cajoled—the former strongest, the former Blademaster, and the heir of a high noble clan. And then that ‘Airheaded Hero’ fled from the Brawl in splendid fashion. That’s how they’ll pass the story down, anyway. Isn’t that just lovely, Master? By the way, they’ve started putting on a play depicting your feats over on the theater-ship *Valhuura*, so more and more people are coming to learn of your legend.”

“Wait, for real? You’re kidding me... It’s exaggeration, misunderstandings, and bias all the way through! This is messed up!”

“If you ask me, there’s no exaggeration or misunderstanding or bias at play here, but oh well. In any case, I’m sure traveling bards will go around singing about your battles in the Brawl soon enough. They’ll be the legendary tales of the new hero born of the Alliance, Aikawa Kanami! Hee hee hee!”

“Okay. Okay, cool. Maybe it’s time I change my name.”

At that moment, I found myself thinking that I wouldn’t mind changing my name back to “Sieg” after telling everybody what was going on. While I was busy racking my brain for a way to escape all this glory, Ms. Tayly changed the subject.

“So, what’d you come here to do, anyway? Did you change your mind about marrying Snow? Oh, you know what? If you two have kids, could you let me name one?”

“Nope, not gonna marry her, not gonna have kids with her. I came because I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“Oho, *you’ve* got a favor to ask? Consider me curious.”

I took some of the transmuted minerals from my inventory and spread them out on the table at the center of the office.

“It looks like I can mass-produce whatever minerals I want using the power of Lorwen’s magic gem. Do you know a good way to convert them into money? If possible, I’d like to get a big organization to convert them into money for us

through Epic Seeker as a standin. That'd be a huge help."

At the sight of the treasure trove before her eyes, Ms. Tayly put a hand to her mouth. "Well, I'll be. This is way too big and important to consult with just me. But you're in luck; someone who's important enough to handle this sort of thing happens to be in the next room."

"Someone who's important enough?"

She drew in a breath and shouted, "Mr. Glenn! Could you please come over here a second?! And Vohlzark, you might as well come too!"

Glenn, as in Glenn Walker. I wasn't expecting him—once the strongest Dungeon diver—to be here at Epic Seeker. The door to the office opened moments later; he really had been in the next room. In walked Mr. Glenn, rubbing his sleepy eyes. Mr. Vohlzark tagged along behind him.

"Could you give me some peace, Tay-Tay? I just got up a sec...ond...ago..."

The moment his gaze fell on me, his heavy-lidded eyes reeled open, blazing with a fiery passion. He practically flew over to me to grab my hand.

"Kanami, is that you?!" he stammered. "What're you doing here?!"

"Good morning, Mr. Glenn. I swung by because I have a favor to ask."

"Kanami, drop the stranger formalities! In fact, you can call me 'brother,' because, you know, we'll be brothers-in-law? When will your wedding with Ms. Snow take place, I wonder. Heh heh, heh heh heh heh!"

"Hang on, what is this place, a Snow fan club?!"

Amazing how everybody was coming right out of the gate marrying me off to Snow. In response, Ms. Tayly nodded like it was perfectly natural.

Could you not?

"That's right. That's exactly right. And the president of the Epic Seeker Snow Fan Club is *you*, Kanami."

"I wish it wasn't so... By the way, is pulling out—"

"You can't."

"Even though I'm president..."

It was such a powerless figurehead position that I could cry. *Once again I'm reminded that the members of Epic Seeker are all a little funny in the head.*

I decided to pretend that I didn't hear any of that before asking Mr. Glenn a question. "Never mind that; what're you doing here, Mr. Glenn?"

"For the most part, I'm the one dealing with the aftermath of the problems Ms. Snow caused. Now that I've lost the title of 'the strongest,' I've got a bit more time on my hands, you see. For the moment, I plan on indebting myself to you as the member of Epic Seeker at the foot of the table."

"Oh, gotcha. Thank you very much."

"I should be thanking you."

I'd heard he was a member of the guild in the past. He'd probably started watching over Snow as her "brother" during their Epic Seeker era.

"So, what business are you here to do, hm? You came because something came up, right?"

"It's about these minerals here. I'd like to make some money off them."

I gestured toward the table. Mr. Glenn looked, and his smile was gone. "This the power of Mr. Lorwen's magic gem?"

"You put that together quickly."

"I'm on the perceptive side. But yeah, little wonder the big shots on the mainland would go into a frenzy over it. Any individual who lays claim to such power could easily shift the fates of nations."

He took a gemstone in his hand and gave his opinion as a hero who had fought in the upper echelons of the Alliance.

"On second thought," he continued as he stared fixedly at the jewel, "maybe they had different designs. Could it be they sought to use the magic gem for... Nah, couldn't be." Remembering the topic at hand, he turned to look at me again. "Ah, right, how to turn these gems into money. No worries. I've got contacts. We'll take on the task through Epic Seeker. We couldn't ever turn down a request from the president of the Snow Fan Club and her future husband."

“Could I reframe it as a private guild commission?”

I was afraid that this ill-defined “position” of mine would otherwise be set in stone, so I tried making the request not as a guildmaster but an individual diver.

“In that case, we’ll have to charge ya. And I’m thinking I know just the price to set too: a baby between you and Ms. Snow. By the way, if I get the right to name your kid, I’ll do whatever you like.”

Judging by the look in the battle-tested hero’s eyes, he was serious. So serious, in fact, that he came across as unhinged.

“I... I’ll make the request as guildmaster, then.”

“Okay, consider it done.”

With a strange sense of defeat, I accepted the position of honorary president. Then, I took out all the minerals from my inventory and tallied them up. Though we divided the labor between us, the work of counting still took time. Along the way, we naturally engaged in small talk, though the vast majority of it was about Snow.

“So, any new developments with our Ms. Snow?”

“Yeah,” said Ms. Tayly, “that’s the number one thing I want to know.”

If you asked me, they had more pressing things to wonder about, yet the two inquired about goings-on with Snow with the most earnest looks on their faces.

“Not really. She’s being real lazy all the time. Always off fishing. Or basking in the sun. Never anything else. To be honest, I’d love to send her back to Epic Seeker.” If possible, I wanted them to come with me to the ship to give her an earful.

“That’s great,” he replied. “She must be having fun.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I can see her in my mind’s eye, smiling, carefree... I’m so happy for her.”

All I got back was words of celebration. Why? Their beatific expressions had me straight-up vexed.

“Um, guys, could you please play ball with me here?”

“Hee hee hee, look, we get it. She’s just too cute; the way she looks when she’s basking in the sun, right? If you ever push her down and hold her because she’s too cute to resist, you have my permission as her brother.”

“In fact,” said Ms. Tayly, “we encourage it. There’s no obstacle between you two, so don’t be shy. First, you two stuck together through thick and thin, then you dueled her villainous fiancé, then you confessed your love during the Brawl, then you eloped abroad. You went through all the beats of the drama, Kanami, so we can feel good leaving our Snow in your hands.”

Oh, you mean the hardships she put me through, the heavy burden forced on my shoulders as her “fiancé,” the wiretapping she perpetrated during the Brawl, and her attempts at preventing me from getting my memories back? Because that I remember. All the beats of a drama, they call it. These two, I swear.

“Now, now, Tay-Tay, the drama’s not over just yet. Now that Ms. Snow’s been freed of the yoke of her suffering, an all-new story’s going to play out for her under Kanami.”

I had to hand it to the former Epic Seeker member for being able to keep up with Ms. Tayly’s fevered imagination with such ease. It was beyond me.

“You’re right. The real drama starts now! How nice it would be if someone could write up reports on what’s going on and send them here every day. Hey, deary, I don’t suppose writing skills are a specialty of anyone around you?”

“N-No, ma’am...”

Knowing Lastiara, she’d probably be delighted to do it, but I chose not to divulge that because I just knew she’d fabricate stuff.

The pair continued their beyond-my-comprehension discussion, a stiff expression on my face, until a third party cut in like manna from heaven.

“Ah, Master,” said Mr. Vohlzark after heaving a sigh. He had the same expression on his face as me. “Glenn’s sister ain’t exactly raring to tell you herself, so let me be the one. When all’s said and done, she’s actually fairly good at reckoning with numbers and sorting documents, things like that. Or maybe it’s less that she’s good at it and more that she’s used to it. Either way, I’m sure she ain’t working for her keep, so give her odd jobs like that to do.”

“Huh, I had no idea.”

At long last, someone was playing conversational catch with me. The other two hadn't been throwing the ball back to me; they'd been playing air hockey or something instead, aiming for my vitals from frightening angles. It had taken all my effort to keep the bullet-speed puck called marriage from getting past my goal line.

“Look at all the fawning she's been surrounded by,” he said, exasperated. “She's lived her life getting spoiled rotten. For her sake, give her some honest work.”

“Okay, sir, I will.”

Mr. Vohlzark was the one acting like the real big brother here.

“Vohlzark!” said Mr. Glenn, aghast. “What're you saying, buddy?! Ms. Snow's finally broken free of the Walker Clan's ball and chain! How could you burden her with any more obligations?!”

“What he said! What if, by doing your *odd jobs*, she roughs up her beautiful hands?! We can't have that for Kanami's future bride!”

It had taken me leaving Epic Seeker to come to the realization that Snow wasn't solely to blame for her personality. The fine folks in her ambit shouldered a good bit of the blame.

“If you let her slack off any more than she already has, it won't do her any good. Besides, you know how stupid tough her skin is. She won't be roughing up her hands anytime soon. I'm counting on you, Master.” He wasn't the type to wear his heart on his sleeve, but Mr. Vohlzark was clearly quite concerned about Snow's well-being. I could sense the distinct Epic Seeker-style kindness of the people of this guild.

It was then that we finished our tally.

“All right,” said Mr. Glenn, “I'm done counting. I'll convert all this to money; you can count on it. It's for my future brother-in-law, after all!”

Having realized that nothing I said would make an impact, all I could do was force a smile. “Mr. Glenn, I figure it can't hurt to ask... Would you be interested

in coming with me on my journey?” I invited the man who had once boasted the title of the strongest. Putting his personality aside, I had no criticism of his prowess. And best of all, he was a guy. I wanted to alleviate the gender gap, however marginally.

“That’s not gonna happen. Your whole party’s a Palinchron victims association, isn’t it? I don’t think I’m very qualified.”

I could see how someone would think that. Now that he mentioned it, we kind of were a Palinchron victims association. You could even say we owed the bastard for our strong bonds of solidarity.

“Are you like Mr. Rayle in that you can’t bring yourself to hate him?” I asked.

“Oh no, I do hate the guy. I’d reckon you’re not gonna find many who’d be fond of *him*.”

Mr. Glenn flatly disavowed Palinchron as a human. But then, in the same breath, he said, “Only, we did use to be allies. I do have a debt of gratitude to him in that sense. It’s only decent to honor that.”

He looked nostalgic. For all Palinchron’s faults, Mr. Glenn couldn’t repudiate him on that count, at least. I’d seen that sentiment coming to an extent. If, on the Day of the Blessed Birth, Palinchron had never stabbed us in the back and had instead tackled the Dungeon alongside me...and if I’d eaten meals and fought foes with him for many months or years, I might have said what Mr. Glenn just did. There was something about Palinchron that made a guy think that way. He was truly a bum-ass snake in the grass, but you had to admit he had charisma. Case in point, back when I had amnesia, I’d been fond of the son of a bitch. I really had. I couldn’t deny that...

“I see,” I replied. It was a peculiar feeling that seized me. My expression turned sullen.

“But... But wait, hold on! It’s not like I like Palinchron over you! I’ll always be the biggest fan of you and Ms. Snow! Don’t get the wrong idea, please! Y-You’re not pissed at me, right? Tell me you’re not!”

He was just like his sister, the way he flew into suck-up mode. Even though they were totally unrelated by blood, they were two peas in a pod.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay. I’m not pissed at you. It’s just, thinking about Palinchron got me all stirred up, that’s all.”

“Phew!”

“Now then, I’ll be taking my leave. Thank you for taking care of the jewels.”

“Ah, Kanami,” said Ms. Tayly, keeping me from leaving. “I won’t hold you if you don’t have time, but could you help me do these documents? It’s all paperwork you generated when you won the Brawl and scampered off, so...”

“Huh?”

“It’d be easy with your abilities, right?! Please!”

I broke into a sweat surveying the tall peaks of paperwork, but I could hardly turn tail and flee. Not after I’d just asked them a favor, and not least because my actions had caused this headache for them. Running for the hills would be way too cruel.

“Okay. It’s my fault for abandoning my guildmaster responsibilities out of nowhere, so it’s only right.”

“Thanks, bud! That’s Snow’s handsome groom for ya!”

“I’m no one’s groom, but okay...”

Mr. Glenn was right by me too, and he was pleased as punch. More so than the speeding up of the paperwork, he seemed happy to simply spend more time with me, Snow’s potential future husband. Having to work in such an environment was anxiety-inducing. I pictured him waxing on and on about Snow, just like a second ago.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Mr. Vohlzark was there, an apologetic look on his face. *Good. At least one of them knows how I feel in these trying times.* That could very well have been all I needed to soothe my soul.

Maybe I could get Mr. Vohlzark to join my ship—mainly to fill the role of Aikawa Kanami anxiety reliever.



A few hours later, the contract for the jewels-to-money conversion was

decided, and now free from the paperwork, I was walking through Epic Seeker HQ. I figured that while I was there, I might as well make the most of it.

My current goal was to become stronger, because the stronger I became, the more threats I could handle, making Dungeon diving easier. It also would serve me well for the coming battle against Palinchron. In order to become even stronger, I thought about it in terms of video game stats. The plan I settled on? Collecting weapons and armor. It was what you might call equipment optimization, and it was a tried-and-true recipe for success. If this were a video game, it wouldn't be the least bit surprising to run smack into a wall I wouldn't be able to clear without a good loadout.

Up until now, I'd been behind in the equipment department because I'd lacked the money and time, not to mention connections. In addition, since my fighting style emphasized avoiding hits altogether, I'd rather wear nothing at all than something shoddy. But now, thanks to Lorwen, I had a steady revenue stream. Moreover, I had plenty of time to burn on the voyage and lots of allies who could use a set of equipment. Now was the time to tackle that.

I walked toward the Epic Seeker atelier with a pep in my step. Now that my mind was more at ease than before, I could feel my love of RPGs beginning to poke through. I was going to enjoy the process of gathering equipment. Enthusiastically, I hit the threshold of the workshop and opened the door. The interior was more than a little cluttered, same as always. In the background, a long-haired man was holding a hammer and pounding away. Noticing my presence, he welcomed me without seeming all that surprised.

"Oh? Ha ha, if it ain't my master. Came back quick, ya did," said the smith of Epic Seeker, Mr. Alibers.

"I figure I'll swing by to check up on everybody once in a while. As always, it's a pleasure to be working with you."

Maybe it was because of his peculiar sensibilities as an artisan who took pride in his work, but apparently, showing up this abruptly did little to startle him.

"I came here today because I'd like a new set of equipment," I said as I looked at the armor on display around the studio. "I need some for my crew too, so I think you'll have quite the number of things to make for me."

“I see. So you’re giving serious thought to procuring weapons and armor, are ya? Glad to hear it, Master. It was always running through my mind how I could whip up something more impressive for ya whenever I saw ya fighting with that loadout.”

“Er, actually, this is how I Dungeon dive too. Was I being stupid?”

“At the very least, it ain’t the sorta getup the leader of an organization oughta be wearing. Those shoes and that mantle, especially. They’re all battered and worn out. You oughta discard ’em lickety-split and switch ’em out for new ones.”

“It’d be a shame to throw them out. Also, I’m kind of attached to them.”

“Well, that side o’ ya is one o’ your good points too. But you’re here because that ain’t cutting it no more, right?”

“Yeah. I Dungeon dived some more, and I’m feeling a bit out of my depth now. That’s why I thought I’d focus on the nuts and bolts first: our equipment.”

“Very well. If ya need something right away, I don’t mind if ya take the stuff on display. There ain’t no equipment that wouldn’t be happy getting used by you. I *will* be charging ya, though.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As Mr. Alibers resumed his hammer-pounding work, I walked around, checking his completed gear, using Analyze on all the equipment in the storehouse in the back as well, but nothing really caught my eye. Or perhaps I should say, there weren’t many that fit sizewise to begin with. It wasn’t so bad for me, but there were practically no child-size ones that Dia, Maria, or Reaper could equip.

“Now that I think about it, half of my crew are child-size...”

“That reminds me, the girls cheering ya on during the Brawl were all little kids.”

While my objective today had been to get stronger myself, I had the presence of mind to understand that my priority should be outfitting the party’s rear guard, Dia and Maria.

“Sorry, Mr. Alibers, but could I order some child-size stuff through you?”

“I don’t mind. If I know their sizes, I can make as many as ya like. Are you gonna provide me with the materials?”

Incidentally, I found myself knowing all the girls’ measurements thanks to *Dimension*. I hadn’t meant to snoop on them like that, but I was always eventually going to absorb that information by osmosis at some point. I was sure that Ms. Sera, for one, would overreact if she ever knew, so I intended to keep absolutely mum about it with her.

“Here you go. Magic gems from all-new floors. I’d like you to use these, if possible.”

“Well, well...again ya bring me some real scarce magic gems. You sure you’re okay with *me* handling these?”

“You’re the only blacksmith I know...”

“You do realize that one o’ these days, you’ll bring me magic gems so precious and rare that my skills won’t be high enough to work the ingredients to their fullest potential, don’t ya? I think o’ myself as pretty damn good at my job, but I’m still just the blacksmith of a single guild. If ya ask me, you oughta be talking to a famous smith someplace bigger and more happening.”

“Sure, but I’m basically a fugitive all over the Alliance. It’d be a real pain if I stood out too much and got spotted by the Walker Clan or some such.”

“Hrm. So your hands are tied, huh? Guess ya can’t go even though ya wanna.”

As I ruminated on that remark and perused my stats menu worriedly, a capital idea came to me. I recalled how I’d obtained a new skill, Magical Combat, after training against the combat expert Lastiara. All I had to do was repeat that. I didn’t *need* to visit other smiths. What I should do instead was compete with smithing experts in order to gain the Smithing skill myself.

“Mr. Alibers, is there anything I can help you with?”

“You wanna help? But you’re a novice, ain’t ya? I can leave any simple manual labor stuff to ya, but...” he said, grimacing.

It seemed I’d jumped the gun a bit. I could most likely pick up new skills

through Thought Streams, but it wasn't like Mr. Alibers knew that. First, I had to prove to him that I met some baseline of smithing competence.

“Spellcast: *Layered Dimension*.”

Burning through a large amount of magic energy, I enveloped the nation of Laoravia with my perception field. Since I'd protected Laoravia as the guildmaster of Epic Seeker in the past, the whole country was like my stomping grounds. I knew the locations of all the workshops in Laoravia and where all the best blacksmiths worked.

Sorry to intrude, I said inwardly before tracking the movements of all the people working at the smithies. I grasped and memorized all the movements they made, just like when I followed the trajectory of an opponent's sword style with my eyes. Compared to when I mimicked Lorwen's swordsmanship, these smiths' movements were much slower, so I figured it would be easier to mimic them. At the same time, I walked inside the workshop and fetched what I'd had my sights on.

“These are guidebooks, right? May I read them?”

“S-Sure... Go right ahead.”

As a former mage himself, he noticed the abnormal amount of magic energy I was emitting. Shaken though he was, he trusted me, so he didn't press me for an explanation. I took out all of the books pertaining to smithing and piled them up in a corner of the studio. Then I flipped through two of them at high speed, one in each hand. After overcoming my third battle against a Guardian, my level and stats had increased, and my brain's processing speed had reached a whole new realm. I was reading multiple tomes at a time, as though there were more than one of me. And of course, even while I was cramming my head with smithing knowledge, I was also peeking in on the smiths of Laoravia as they plied their craft.

My body was generating intense heat from processing such a huge amount of information. I was surprised by how laborious it was to make one sword. I hadn't even known the difference between casting and forging before, so everything was new to me. The deluge of terms I'd never heard before was downright dizzying. Imitating the distinctive motions of a blacksmith was

different from imitating sword techniques. And to think I'd gone into this so casually... It was taking a ton out of me; there was no cutting corners, learning this trade. And since I had both *Dimension* and Thought Streams running at full capacity, my MP and stamina were draining at an alarming rate. But thanks to my efforts, my understanding was deepening, little by little. The fundamentals of the calling. The basic theory. The proper way to use atelier tools and apparatuses. How to handle the furnace. Hammer pounding form. The trick to nurturing the fire. All of the processes, all of the techniques...

【STATUS】

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 4.89, Ice Magic 2.58+1.10

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimensional Magic 5.25+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Thought Streams 1.47, Knitting 1.07, Swindling 1.34, Magical Combat 0.72, Smithing 0.69

A few hours later, I was wobbling on my feet. But there it was, in my menu: Smithing.

I smiled. "I know this sounds insane, but please, Mr. Alibers, let me give you a hand."

"After seeing you give off the same amount o' magic energy as during your finals match in the Brawl, I can't exactly say no to a request like that. Then again, these are my master's orders, so I was never gonna say no to begin with."

He seemed intrigued. I wasted no time walking through the workshop with a stride like I'd been using the tools I picked up for years and years, and soon I was helping Mr. Alibers with his work. Needless to say, I made mistakes at first. Seeing and doing were completely different, after all. You could even say they were worlds apart. Yet the amount of experience I'd gained was on another level too. Using *Dimension*, I could adjust errors of less than a millimeter on a second-by-second basis. I sensed Mr. Alibers's gaze and the way he flexed his muscles as he worked next to me, predicting what he wanted. Mobilizing all the

knowledge I'd acquired, I ordered my body to move in the most efficient way. At the same time, I memorized the temperature of the forge and the timing of steel striking steel. I felt the heat on my skin, pounded the steel with my own hand. Copying the skilled blacksmiths of Laoravia, I moved exactly the same way they did, and...

After assisting him for about an hour, he completed the first stage of his work and we took a break.

"I see. I'm getting the hang of it. Smithing can get pretty deep, huh?" I muttered candidly.

He was practically trembling in fear. "The master o' my guild reached mid-level smithing skill...in less than an hour."

"Uh...I've got confidence in my dexterity, see." My usual excuse.

"Oh, that's beyond dexterous, believe you me. No, this is something else. Something more terrifying...though I guess it can't be helped when it's you, Master. I remember Tayly over there saying something awful similar. Heh heh, heh heh heh. That's my master for ya. You're the guild's great hero!"

Shocked though he was, he laughed with blushing cheeks. These people's hero fixation really was disconcerting. Despite the fact that I'd stolen all the skills he'd built up till now, he was staring at me with a sparkle in his eyes. The look he gave me screamed, "*Our guildmaster's the hero, so this shouldn't surprise anybody!*"

Reassured that I hadn't ended up wounding his pride as a smith, I brazenly asked for yet another favor.

"Before long, I'm gonna want to try making something nice and simple myself."

"You got it. Frightening as it is," he said, the joy on his face still there, "I'm sure ya can forge it without no trouble. No need to hold back; as far as I'm concerned, you can make something right here, right now."

"Am I wrong to think that the easiest thing to make with an immediate impact on battle is a small magic item?"

“Magic items take quite some work too. Inscribing the magic formulas eats lotsa time...for normal people, but maybe it’s easier for you?”

“Detail work is my forte.” My best stats were DEX and AGI, and it certainly didn’t hurt that this sort of thing had been a strong suit of mine since before I’d even come to this world.

“Well, magic items are my area of expertise, so it’s maybe the easiest thing for me to teach ya...” He trailed off. “All right, let’s try our hands, huh? What shape do ya want? If it’s, say, a ring or some kinda accessory, anything’s fair game. A necklace, a hairpiece, you name it.”

“Let’s start with stuff that’s quick and easy to make. What’s the easiest thing?”

“Hmmm. A ring’s as small as it gets, so I reckon it’s fast work. When stuff’s that small, it’s challenging because of all the minute details, but that should be no sweat for you.”

A ring, you say? I was reminded of the late Mr. Hine. Plus, his brother Liner also liked using rings.

“A ring sounds handy. Please let me make one.”

“Sure. Let’s see how you do. Are ya gonna pack it with your ice magic?”

“No. This time around, I’m thinking of packing it with a different spell. As of recently, I can use a new element.”

Thus, my first foray into creating a magic item began. Step number one was making the magic gem that would be its core.

“So, Master, ya know anything about magic formulas?”

Magic formulas. Glyphic reproductions of the mechanisms of magic that people used. Passing magic energy through one such formula catalyzed the smooth activation of a spell. But of course, the story didn’t end with merely passing one’s magic energy through one. The user’s level of understanding and their compatibility with the magic formula were also important. The magic gems inscribed with magic formulas that Maria had once swallowed to learn *Firefly* and *Impulse* were top-quality examples.

Magic and magic formulas were different fields, so being good at casting spells didn't necessarily mean you were good at magic formulas, just like being good at exercise didn't necessarily mean you were knowledgeable about the science of fitness or physical education. Luckily for me, I had the soul of a researcher by nature.

"Yeah, I know a thing or two."

When it came to understanding magic, no mage was superior to the dimensional mage. For example, one of the spells I had devised, *Wintermension*, was something I'd conceived from scratch. I fully comprehended the magic formulas that composed the construction of that spell. It did take time and effort to convert them into glyphs, but thanks to *Dimension*, I had a dictionary in my head. Given enough time, I could convert that knowledge into magic formulas and inscribe them onto the magic gem. I directed *Dimension* to switch from smithing knowledge to summoning my knowledge of magic formulas.

"Looks like you're ready to go, Master. Now then, let's get ready to carve the formulas into the magic gem."

Smithing implements and magic gems were spread out on the work desk. The essentials were similar to the smithing process. I whittled one magic gem and melted another, pouring it into the first. The task required tremendous concentration. Just thinking about doing it without the help of *Dimension* gave me goose bumps. No wonder the street prices of the magic gems inscribed with magic formulas were so high. To think that every one of the magic gems lining store shelves was the product of an artisan expending so much time and energy. Even deviations of less than a millimeter were unacceptable, and not once did I pause. Sweating bullets, I managed to claw my way through carving the formulas by working *Dimension* raw.

"I expected no less, Master. It's looking good. I'll give ya the ring. It's got a formula for a trigger that can be pulled via magic energy that's already incorporated, so that's that."

"Thank you very much, sir."

I'd opted to inscribe the formula for earth-element quartz magic. As I

manipulated the minerals using my *Quartz* spell, not letting a single error slip through the cracks thanks to *Dimension*, I combined the magic gem and the ring.

Behold, the finished product I'd poured so much blood, sweat and tears into:

[*QUARTZSHIELD RING*] A ring containing the power of *Quartzshield*.

"It's... It's finished!"

"Ha ha ha! Magnificent, Master! Never would've thought you'd be making one of the top-tier magic items in all the nation in a matter of hours! I'm amazed! As a blacksmith, all I can do is laugh!"

"No, Mr. Alibers, it's all thanks to your help."

"Above all, it *looks* so beautiful! Not only did you capture the image of a crystal in all its purity, but the decorative touches are so ornate too!"

"I'd have hated to see the sad look on your face if I made it anything less than opulent."

In truth, I hadn't wanted to make the ornamentation so excessive, but because he'd been staring at me from the side, I'd ended up burning more time on it. I had no head for artistic design, so all I did was try to mimic my memory of my parents' engagement rings. It seemed it was a hit with Mr. Alibers, though.

"How should I put it... It's like it's pure and innocent, but it draws eyes to it all the same. It's the stuff of legends. A ring only the hero could create..."

"I'm happy you like it."

Just then, a voice came from behind. "You're taking forever!"

It was Reaper. She must have come through the *Connection* gateway. Now that she mentioned it, I *had* spent the whole day here so far. Maybe she'd come out of concern for me.

"We can't eat lunch unless you come back, mister! So come back already,

would you?!” She had her hands on her belly. It seemed what she was concerned about was lining her stomach.

Mr. Alibers and I looked at each other and nodded.

“That’s a wrap for today,” I said. “Thank you again for your help.”

“Ya never got to make anything besides a single ring. If there’s anything else ya want, do drop by. You can take whatever weapons and armor ya see in the studio too. The stuff ya ordered, I’ll make by the next time ya pop in.”

I received the completed ring and took anything that seemed useful, though of course, not without paying him for it. After thanking him one last time, I left the workshop and hurried to the office to cross the portal and get back to the ship

On the way, Reaper saw the ring I’d made and cocked her head quizzically. “What’s that, mister?”

“Oh, I just created a magic item.” I put the *Quartzshield* ring in the palm of my hand to show it to her.

“Oh wow! So this is one of those magic item doodads?! Ring’s so sparkly!”

“You can touch it; I don’t mind. Have a good look.” It felt oddly nice, having my smithery praised like that. It was the joy a full-fledged *creator* felt.

“Can I wear it, mister? Can I?”

“Of course. In fact, it’s yours now. I was planning to give it to someone from the start.”

“Yay! I’m gonna wear it, then! Wait, huh? It’s not slipping on... Oh, it fits perfectly on this finger!”

The ring wasn’t a particular size. Mr. Alibers had provided me with one that was on the small side out of consideration for my smaller companions, but I hadn’t given him specific measurements. As a result, the finger that it fit just so happened to be...Reaper’s left ring finger.

“Hrm?”

As far as I knew, it wasn’t a custom in *this* world. It had to be a coincidence.

The only one who'd be bothered by it was me, since I knew of the custom, so I decided not to get on her case about it.

"Whaddya think, mister? Does it look good on me?"

"Uh, yeah, uh-huh...it looks great on you, Reaper."

She gazed contentedly at the crystal ring on her finger. Even though I knew it wasn't a custom here, I still felt a weird sense of embarrassment. I didn't want to rain on her parade, though, so I could hardly tell her to switch it to another finger.

I made to pass through the portal in my office, but Responsiveness rang out a familiar warning klaxon. The alarm bells sounded so wild and loud, screaming, that at this rate, I might legitimately die. I froze up.

"Whoa! Wh-What's wrong, mister?"

After I stopped in my tracks, Reaper nearly bumped into me. Looking back, I found what had tripped the danger sensors of Responsiveness. It was the ring on her finger. I'd realized in the nick of time that returning with it still on her finger was asking for trouble. All that smithing must have demanded so much of my concentration that it had cooked my brain. How could I have missed something so obvious?

"Sorry, Reaper, but could you please put the ring away?"

"Huh? Sure, I don't mind, but..."

"Try not to flaunt it or show it off, okay? There's only one of them, so..."

"Got it!"

Reaper nodded and put the ring into the pocket inside her hood. Responsiveness subsequently stopped sounding the alarm.

"Phew..." I'd been *this* close to needlessly creating another hassle for myself.

I took deep breaths to relax the tension in my body. Then, with the same wariness as when entering the floor of a Guardian, I passed through the portal onto the *Living Legend*, crossing through space itself.

The swaying of the ship, the salty sea breeze. I was back on the deck. A large

table was there, a wide variety of dishes atop it. My crew was seated around it. I could tell from the way they were chatting without satisfying their hunger that they'd all been waiting for my return.

"Ah! Welcome back, Mr. Kanami," said Maria, far from angry at my tardiness. "Please sit there. Let's partake."

Meanwhile, Lastiara was just one of the girls who expressed her dissatisfaction.

"Sorry I'm late," I said as I took my seat.

With that, we all started digging in. It was an extravagant lunch with fresh fish as the main constituent, featuring everything from sashimi to grilled fish. These were probably Snow and Reaper's catches of the day. There was nothing so civilized as soy sauce around, so they used the juice of a fruit not unlike a yuzu to season the morsels of fish. But this was a cuisine I'd never seen before. Cuisine from a different world. How was it meant to be eaten? There was something wrapped in pie pastry, but I didn't know how to eat it, so I continued to watch and see. Sure, they were my trusted crewmates, but I didn't want them to think of me as rude or impolite.

"Er, Mr. Kanami?" said Maria. "Is the food not to your liking?"

"No. I don't really have dislikes, foodwise. It's just that this is my first time seeing this dish, so I thought I'd wait to see how everybody else ate it..."

"Oh, I see. You don't have to worry about that. Here, I'll cut it into pieces for you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Maria cut a slice of the pie-pastry-wrapped food and put it onto a small plate. Her dedication was noble; it was like a newlywed peeling their spouse an apple or something. You know who'd recently declared she wanted to be my wife? Snow. She should really take after Maria's example, that dragonewt—or should I say, that dragoNEET. But she was contentedly stuffing her face with Maria's cooking, not lifting a finger to help her.

Seeing Maria making a portion for me, Reaper suddenly leaned over.

“Oh, Maria! Make me a portion too!”

Reaper tried handing the small plate in her hand to the girl across from her. Needless to say, she leaned *all* the way forward.

Responsiveness klaxons rang in my head.

You may be wondering why. The thing was, Reaper’s clothes were very loose. It was a black cloak created using her magic energy. She seemed quite attached to her mantle, and she wore it of her own volition. This choice of attire left her, shall we say, defenseless in places, but the darkness magic that had accumulated inside her clothes made it so that you couldn’t see what you oughtn’t, which was reassuring (although to be honest, Lorwen and I had never stopped being against the idea regardless).

As a result of her cloak being so big and her leaning so far forward, the ring that she’d stuffed into her inner pocket as an afterthought was threatening to fall out, as *Dimension* detected. My perception field became strung so tensely you might think I was facing a Guardian.

My battle-tempered body acted swiftly, spurred not by conscious thought but reflex. I leaned forward in the same way Reaper had and reached for the ring inside her clothing.

“Reaper!”

“Huh, wha, huh?!”

I activated *Dimension: Calculash* without incanting. The magic energy in my body suddenly became agitated, sending electric shocks through my brain. The electric current coursing through my body roused every cell; I was now hyperware, the outside world moving in slow motion. Slowly, I saw my right arm inch for the ring. I managed to grab it before it could spill out, successfully pushing it back into its pocket.

“Did it!”

“Wait, what?!” said Reaper, startled. “You did what?!”

Via Thought Streams, I assessed the situation and came up with the most suitable excuse.

“Ah, uh, your clothes were about to touch the food.”

“Th-Thanks, big brother,” she said, blushing.

Just as I was about to reply that she needn't thank me, the repulsed Maria cut in. “Mr. Kanami, how long are you going to keep your hand there? Reaper's naked under her clothes, so keep your hand there longer and, well...”

It took a second or two for those words to sink in. My body froze, and once again, Responsiveness struck pots and pans together for my immediate attention. Just when I was feeling relieved, the roar of the five-alarm fire reverberated in my brain, and I trembled in shock. I couldn't continue to remain frozen in *this* pose, though. If I didn't remove my hand from Reaper's clothes soon, they'd think me some kind of sexual deviant. Despite the warnings from Responsiveness, however, I wasn't sure I ought to move without thinking it through. Still, it was certainly unwise to keep my hand on a girl's soft skin for all to see. Taking my hand off her had to come first. Otherwise, the nightmare that had dogged my steps would come to fruition. The ship in flames, sinking beneath the waves. All of my skills had concluded that was the level of the danger sweeping this table.

In a panic, I whipped my hand away from her, inadvertently dropping the contents of her pocket in the process. The crystal ring with the same elaborate design as an engagement ring clattered onto the table, shining heartlessly in the sunlight. All of the pains I'd taken up until now were rendered futile.

“Hm? What's that, Reaper?” asked the keen-eyed Snow, who was sitting next to her.

“What, this? Big brother gave it to me a minute ago.”

“Wait, you got it from Kanami? A ring?”

I instantly pushed Thought Streams to its utmost limit. The gears in my head were turning so rapidly that it was a computer at this point. They were definitely breaking speed records.

“It's a *ring*!” shouted Lastiara gleefully.

“A ring?!” said Dia and Maria.

Everyone was staring at the ring. I could tell that not just Responsiveness, Thought Streams, and *Dimension*, but everything else inside me had now been marshaled. I was so frantic, I could probably weave a spell surpassing even *Wintermension: Niflheim* at the moment. But I didn't let my inner turmoil show on my face.

"Oh, right, about that," I said smoothly. "I forged it with Mr. Alibers, who graciously taught me how to make one. It's actually a weapon. A weapon for Dungeon diving. So you see, it's not a ring at all. It's nothing if not a weapon. I put a spell from Lorwen into it, so I gave it to Reaper. You know how close they were. Oh, and you know what? Next, I'm gonna make clothes, and I'll gift those clothes to the rest of you. No ulterior motives or hidden intentions to see here, I swear."

It took my abilities working at full capacity, but I'd stated all that without faltering.

"So... So that's it. Mr. Alibers from Epic Seeker..." said Maria, cowed by how clearly I was clinging for dear life.

The rest swallowed it too. *Whew, we're okay.* It appeared that through my swift save, I'd averted the worst-case scenario.

"Uh, actually...I think I'd rather have a ring than clothes, maybe? You know, the kind of ring that could be used as proof of an agreement! It's settled! I'll take a ring too!" Snow cried.

Sorry, Snow, did you just say something? I couldn't hear you.

I prayed they'd let me pretend this had never happened. I kept a wry smile plastered onto my face and tried to smooth everything over. Yet I could see that everybody was still shooting the ring glances. Boy, had I let my guard down. While the left ring finger thing was a custom that existed only in my world, that didn't change the fact that the ring itself was used for weddings in *both* worlds. It was only natural for people to overreact after learning I'd given one to a girl. I should've made it into a bracelet or something. I'd let my guard down in the smallest way, and now I'd cornered myself into having to give everybody new clothes.

I couldn't help but heave a dejected sigh. I'd probably have to string together

excuses every time I gave one of them some equipment, just like I had today. In my eyes, this was merely a means of boosting the party's strength, but they'd view it as *a gift from a boy*. Just thinking about the times to come made my stomach cramp. Bumbling into these types of situations and narrowly avoiding terrible consequences by way of my skills was really busting my balls, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do but endure as ulcers conquered my gastric wall bit by bit. A death by a thousand cuts.

Forced to ask everyone in the party what they wanted, I promised to give it to them as a gift at some point. What I really wanted to hand out was simple yet functional equipment, but it would probably take a long time before that could come to pass. Halfway through the meal, I stopped registering the delicious taste of Maria's cooking, and before I knew it, one of my few joys in this life—lunchtime—had passed me by.



After lunch, we set about our preparations for Dungeon diving. While I was looking over the equipment in my inventory that Mr. Alibers gave me, Lastiara, who was leaning back against a wall of the ship, called out to me.

“Heh. Our dive's starting soon, I take it?”

She was clearly brimming with confidence, but I knew that she'd been waiting there the whole time (without helping with the dishes, I might add), so it was a bit late to be spouting cool-guy lines. I could only see her as a little kid who couldn't wait for the field trip to start. As per usual, she had a screw loose in her head...but that said, I understood how she felt.

“Well, aren't you confident in yourself, Lastiara.”

“The new and improved Lastiara's about to dazzle you. Today I'm gonna show you just what blood magic's capable of!”

She smirked as she generated red mist at her feet. While I had to admit it looked kind of cool, it was nothing more than a waste of MP. However, intensive training buddies that we were, I could only respond in kind. I took out Lorwen and scattered crystal particles into the air. The glimmering reminded me of a stipple drawing.

“Same here. Today I’ll show you the power of my friendship with Lorwen.”

I affected a smirk. Needless to say, this was also a frivolous use of MP. We both laughed evilly.

“Mwa ha ha!”

“Mwa ha ha!”

It was certainly true that I was looking forward to showing off my power-up.

It was while we were there, creepily laughing for so long, that someone cut in.

“Mr. Kanami, Ms. Lastiara...what on earth are you two doing?” asked Maria.

She was above the ship’s steering house and was beginning the work of drying the laundry. Apparently, she’d moved on to the next chore immediately after tidying up the table after lunch. Talk about someone who could get a lot done quickly. It was a huge gulf between her and a certain NEET, who will remain unnamed, who was delusional enough to insinuate that she was wife material.

“What do you mean? We’re getting ready for the Dungeon! C’mon, Mar-Mar, let’s go! I’ll show you what a dependable big sister type I can be!” said Lastiara excitedly, beckoning her to come down.

I beckoned her down too. “Let’s go, Maria. You can expect more out of me than last time.”

But she gave us a vexed look. “Er, I’m sorry, but I’m not coming today. And neither is Dia.”

“Wait, hold on, what?! How come? How come, Mar-Mar?!” Lastiara was less than pleased that she could no longer show off the fruits of her training.

“Just look at all of the laundry that’s piled up.”

“Put that silliness on Snow to do! Or whoever!” I shouted. I was feeling the same as Lastiara.

“If Ms. Snow was amenable, I *would’ve* made her do it,” Maria replied with a frown. In other words, she’d asked Snow, only to be told no.

“That little... Spellcast: *Dimension!*”

I searched for her and found her alone in her room. She quivered and shook her head out of nowhere.

“Heh heh heh...” she said into the air.

She must have heard me say “Spellcast: *Dimension*” using her own *Vibration* spell. Which meant she was *actively* trying to escape any sort of responsibility.

Hold on, never mind that! There’s no sign whatsoever she’s ever gonna stop casually listening in on people!

“Enough! Come here, Snow!” I said, knowing she could hear me.

She got pale in the face and ran off.

“Ah! Don’t you run!”

She was heading for Dia, who was asleep. It was clear as day; she was once again planning to cozy up to someone so as to escape hardship.

“All right, Maria,” I said with a smile. “I’m gonna go grab that dumbass a sec, so wait here.”

“That’s quite all right. You don’t need to go that far. I’ve already asked Reaper and Ms. Sera to go to the Dungeon instead of us, so...”

Reaper and Sera, who were at the edge of the deck, came over to us.

“I’ll come!” said Reaper. “‘Cuz I feel like it!”

“Lady Dia and Maria asked me to accompany you, so I shall participate,” said the knight in the maid uniform. For some reason, Ms. Sera was giving Reaper a ride on her shoulders, and she seemed to be in good spirits. The party must have deepened their camaraderie little by little unbeknownst to me.

I could tell that Ms. Sera had, on the whole, built favorable relationships with everyone (apart from me), and I welcomed that. If I’d requested her presence, she probably wouldn’t have obliged me. It was good that she was friendly with the others.

“So, today, it’s me, Lastiara, Reaper, and Ms. Sera?”

“So it would seem.” Maria kept airing out the laundry at her usual rapid pace. It was impressive how her hands didn’t stop for a second even as she chatted

with us.

“Great, that leaves us with nothing but frontline fighters...”

I always had RPG party composition on the brain, so the lack of balance made me sick to my stomach.

“Wait, Kanami!” said Lastiara. “We trained so hard to improve our magic; shouldn’t we hold up the rear today?!”

“Y-Yeah... Maybe that’s okay some days too...”

I had to stop thinking about it in purely negative terms. Following Lastiara’s example of positivity, I opted to view the day’s dive as taking on a challenge to employ a new battle strategy. The experience might just come in handy when I least expected it.

Regardless, I *would* be taking Snow to task later. First, as Mr. Vohlzark had asked me to, I’d make her run up the ledger of income and expenditures. To be honest, there was no real need, since I never forgot numbers, but I’d have her do it anyway.

Having learned via her eavesdropping that I had my party for the day, she was strolling through the interior with a satisfied look as she wiped the sweat from her brow. She seemed absolutely delighted about getting to enjoy another day of unfettered freedom.

One of these days, I’ll be taking you to the Dungeon if I have to drag you there, Snow, mark my words.

Then I headed for the Dungeon for the second time on our voyage.

Chapter 3: Friction

【STATUS】

NAME: Sera Radiant

HP: 269/269

MP: 109/109

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 22

STR 6.61

VIT 8.24

DEX 9.54

AGI 11.02

INT 5.74

MAG 8.00

APT 1.57

INNATE SKILLS: Intuition 1.77

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 2.14, Holy Magic 0.90

After looking at Ms. Sera’s stats, I relayed our plan of action to all assembled.

“Could you please leave it to me and Lastiara for now? We’d like to test out the results of our training first.”

Neither Reaper nor Ms. Sera had any objectives in the Dungeon, so they didn’t dissent.

“Kay,” said Reaper. “I’ll watch.”

“I’ll think only of how to protect milady and Reaper.”

We walked through Floor 31 with me and Lastiara at the front, searching for an easy kill. We soon found a single small monster that had strayed from its swarm.

【MONSTER】Crystal Ant: Rank 26

You often saw them on floors above this one. *Dimension* granted us the initiative, and we incanted from a little ways away.

“Flamespell: *Flame Arrow!*”

“Quartzspell: *Quartz Parallax!*”

Flames raged from within Lastiara’s body, transforming into a bird of fire and swooping in for the attack. Unlike a normal *Flame Arrow*, the flame glided through the Dungeon as if it were alive. The Crystal Ant walking along the corridor noticed the flying death flames and lowered its diminutive frame to try to dodge it.

“Ha! I was waiting for that!”

Lastiara raised her right index finger and brandished it like a conductor’s baton. Then, like a trained pet bird, the flames began chasing the Crystal Ant. It was a splendid display of spell-steering.

I couldn’t let her show me up. I gouged the sand beneath us with Lorwen and suffused it with earth-element magic energy. As the sand I’d sent flying turned into crystal, I molded it into sharpened stakes. The bullet crystals whizzed toward the fleeing Crystal Ant.

Even while dogged by the two separate spells at the same time, the ant persevered by way of its astounding physical capabilities. It dodged the firebird, saw the bullet crystals coming, and hurried away on its many legs. But this was less a case of how nimbly it could move and more a case of how insufficient our spell-steering had been.

We poured more power into our magic as we groaned. I upped the number of bullet crystals and she divided her firebird into two, blocking the ant’s path of escape. Only then did our spells successfully hit it, but even so, they failed to

crack its sturdy armor. It was slightly singed and thin stakes were stuck shallowly into it, but that was all.

“Why you... *Flame Cutter!*”

“Ugh, let’s finish it off! *Quartz Bullet!*”

I let my magic energy do the talking, adding even more in. It wasn’t terribly mature, but it didn’t look as though we could take the thing down otherwise. This time we went for spells that were all about sheer attack power. Sharp bladelike flames and highly penetrative pyramid-shaped crystals flew through the air. We landed direct hits on the Crystal Ant, which had slowed down due to the damage from before. But it *still* wasn’t enough. Not only was our spell-steering not up to snuff, but it didn’t pack a punch.

We *had* powered up through yesterday’s training session. If an ordinary mainland mage had witnessed us in action, they would probably have fainted at the sight of our insanely advanced magic. But we were facing a monster on a floor over 30, well beyond the point humanity had ever ventured before. This wasn’t going to be easy.

“*Flame Cutter! Flame Cutter! Flame Cutter!*”

“*Quartz Bullet! Quartz Bullet! Quartz Bullet!*”

We resorted to rapid fire. Whittled away by our carpet bombing, the monster faded into light and died. Dripping with sweat, we wordlessly picked up its magic gem and attempted to resume the dive.

Reaper casually voiced the taboo thing to say. “Uh, wouldn’t it have been faster to just cut the thing?”

She pointed out how fundamentally wrongheaded we had been. After a moment of hesitation, all we could do was nod, visibly disappointed.

“Yes! We should have!” said Lastiara, throwing a hissy fit with tears in her eyes. “But we wanted to be mages today! I wanted to blow all the enemies to smithereens like a mage can, okay?!”

“Uh, right, gotcha... So you wanna fight using magic. In that case, how about Sera and I lure the enemies away so you can take your time and weave your

spells from behind?”

“Okay, let’s do that.”

As she consoled Lastiara, Reaper pulled her black sickle from thin air. “All right, miss,” she said, addressing Sera. “Help me out.”

“Sure. Let your big sister lend you a hand. Oh, Kanami. Look over there a second.”

Ms. Sera responded to Reaper’s request with kind eyes...or rather, *indulgent* eyes. I’d had this impression for a while now, but she clearly had a soft spot for cute little girls. She was so soft on them, it was bordering on criminal.

I turned away as ordered. *Dimension* detected Ms. Sera taking off her maid outfit, so I dispelled it immediately. The sound of the rustling cloth was enough to make any guy blush. Then came the crack-crack of metamorphosing flesh and bones.

Reaper spoke next. “You can look now, big brother. Hold on to her clothes and weapons for her.”

I turned to look, and there Ms. Sera was, in wolf form. It seemed she’d gotten serious about this. I put her maid uniform in my inventory, and then we changed our formation.

“Now then, this time Sera and I will form the front, ’kay?” said Reaper, who was positively lousy with borrowed experience, handing out orders without hesitation. “I’ll use *Dimension* to detect enemies instead of you, so you two stay back and focus on your magic.”

Our dive resumed, and we traversed the sea of sand that was Floor 31. Before long, we encountered a new monster; a large spiderlike foe appeared before us. However, from its slender body and smooth, fluid movements, we realized it was no spider. It more closely resembled a water strider, only this was a sand strider. It could most likely attack us unaffected by the poor footing the sand provided.

【MONSTER】Sand Surface: Rank 32

“Sera and I will keep it occupied. Darkspell: *Dark.*”

Riding atop Ms. Sera, Reaper unleashed a cloud of magical shadow stuff, which enveloped the wolf’s giant form like a robe of obsidian black. Then the darkness *ran*. The beast’s four legs kicked up the sand, producing speeds undaunted by the unfavorable conditions.

Lastiara and I far outstripped Ms. Sera in terms of our AGI, but what we were witnessing belied those numbers. The wolf of darkness was dashing at unparalleled speed. The crystalline strider, not to be outdone, also dashed, and a battle not unlike a car chase unfolded, the combatants skating smoothly across the desert and kicking up clouds of sand as they clashed and clashed and clashed.

It wasn’t long before one side tilted the battle in their favor. Sera wasn’t alone, after all. She had Reaper, darkness and dimensional mage extraordinaire, at her back. A black mist lingered in the wake of their sprint, and the space there warped and distorted, darkness spreading through the corridor and blocking the view. Aided by Ms. Sera’s blistering speed, the two finally managed to overtake the sand strider and face its back.

“Got your back!”

Ms. Sera leveraged her size and tackled it, and Reaper followed up with a sickle slash, slicing off one of its many legs. Regardless, the monster used its remaining legs to counterattack.

“It’s so slow to turn around! It’s got nothing on us, huh?!”

Its attack came to naught as it slashed at empty shadows where Reaper and Ms. Sera were no longer located. They moved to stay in its blind spot, never letting it catch sight of them. This went beyond “keeping it occupied.” It was safe to say they were outright overpowering it. It didn’t look like they needed our help to win this fight. Nevertheless, we did as were told and worked our spells.

Reaper’s *Dimension* detected that our spellcrafting was complete.

“Ready, huh?”

She and Ms. Sera showed how united they were as rider and steed, ably luring

the monster to a spot that made it an easy target for our magic. Then she snapped her fingers.

“Night becomes dawn.”

All of the darkness filling the corridor cleared up, and the creature looked puzzled by the suddenness of its vision returning.

“Hyahh!”

Reaper landed a light kick on its back, knocking it off-balance and toppling it onto the sand. Perfect. That was the moment where everything lined up for one prime spell-firing opportunity.

“Flame Arrow!”

“Quartz Bullet!”

Lastiara blasted it with her highest-firepower flames, and I blasted it with my highest-speed crystal bullets. The monster burned in the crimson blaze, and my rotating rounds pierced its center.

“D-Did we do it?!” shouted Lastiara.

“I think, maybe?!” I replied excitedly.

Sadly, after the flames disappeared, the sand strider was still alive, doing its best to move despite the crystal bullets it had taken to the chest. It *was* seriously injured, but seemingly not injured enough to die.

Then came Reaper’s merciless scythe to finish the job. Sliced in twain, it faded into light and disappeared.

“Like I said, wouldn’t it be faster to just cut the thing?” she asked, a wry smile on her face. She wasn’t being sassy. She was just giving us her heartfelt advice.

“Uh-huh,” we said quietly, drawing the swords at our waists.

I should have known a single day of training wouldn’t bear fruit. I had no choice but to admit it.

“Since we’re here and all,” said Reaper, “the number one thing to do is train at the stuff we’re already good at. You can’t get all antsy and rush this stuff. That’s how accidents happen.”

All we could do was mutter another “uh-huh” under our breath. We couldn’t even muster the energy to argue back. To think we’d crowed about how we would show them the fruits of our training... The results were too tragic for words. We kept walking, gloom written on our faces.

Reaper reacted to our dejection, her arms flailing around as she strove to reassure us. “B-But working on your weaknesses little by little is good too, okay? If you keep training, it’ll be a strong weapon in your toolbox *someday*, maybe!” The fact that a girl so young was fussing over my feelings made me want to die.

“Uh-huh,” we said quietly. What other response was there?

The excitement was totally gone, and our spirits weren’t getting any lighter. Reaper heaved a sigh and, left with no other choice, began leading the way. And so we continued through the Dungeon with a new leader at the helm.



Unlike before, the dive had taken a form that was fairly easy to understand. Reaper searched for enemies from the front, cutting down any monsters if it seemed we might encounter them. That repeated over and over again. For the most part, Ms. Sera distracted the enemy and Reaper delivered the final blow. Lastiara and I, meanwhile, remained in the back, still in shock. Because battles kept ending without any trouble, we had nothing to snap us out of it. Somewhere in my heart of hearts, I was hoping for a scene where Reaper and Ms. Sera started struggling and I could jump in and go, “Guess I’m needed, huh?” but my turn on the stage never came.

By contrast, the two at the front were having fun chatting. Since Ms. Sera could hardly keep donning the maid outfit over and over again, she was just wearing a large overcoat for the time being. Her transformation ability was kind of hard to look at, so I’d provided her with a mantle from my inventory that she could fight in even after transforming. As a result, her and Reaper’s outfits ended up kind of similar. With two otherwise naked girls fighting in cloaks, it was a scene right out of a captured-footage crime show, but I wasn’t feeling the energy to tell them to stop.

“That’s quite something, Reaper,” I heard Ms. Sera say up ahead. “How’s your

scythe constructed?”

“It’s just a part of me. As long as I have the magic energy, I can take it in and out freely! It’s like big brother’s inventory, though it only works for the scythe!”

“Count me jealous. I wish I had a bevy of special abilities like you do, little one.”

“You can become a doggo, can’t ya?! I’m super jealous of *you!*”

“Doggo? I don’t turn into a dog. I turn into a wolf.”

“Huh? That form’s a *wolf*? That’s a really small wolf, huh?”

“Actually, I’m on the large side even among my clan.”

“Wait, huh? Really, miss?”

“If possible, I’d like you to call me a wolf. Calling me a ‘doggo’ makes me feel...embarrassed. And it doesn’t fit me anyway.”

“That’s not true, miss! You’re so cute! It does fit you! You’re a cute doggo!”

“Stop. You don’t need to say that. It’s embarrassing even if I’m not actually cute. Cute is what people call individuals such as yourself and milady.”

“I’m telling you, that’s not true! Back me up, mister!”

Maybe she threw it to me out of consideration for our not being included in the conversation, but I couldn’t have asked for a more dangerous subject matter.

“Reaper, why’re you asking me *that*? Look! She’s glaring at me!”

If looks could kill...

Ms. Sera addressed me matter-of-factly. “Be truthful, Kanami. You’re the child’s guardian now, aren’t you? It’s your duty to clearly state whether things are true or false.”

“Er, uh, hmm. Cuteness, huh?”

Truth be told, I did think Ms. Sera could be categorized as cute. Unlike her other aspects, she was feminine in the way she liked things that were themselves cute. Plus, the way she was never upfront about how she felt deep

down was a bit like a little kid, which was another point in the cute column. She did have a side to her that tended to be fastidious, but still, she generally had a pretty good head on her shoulders. In all honesty, if you asked me, she and Dia were rivals for first place when it came to “cute.” Lastiara and Reaper, on the other hand, were the opposite of “cute” in that sense of the word. On the inside, they were too similar to swashbuckling guys for me to be comfortable calling them cute. But I couldn’t say all of that out loud.

“I’d say you’re more on the *cool* end than the *cute* end of ladies, Ms. Sera. Though I do see what Reaper’s saying too, a little bit. I think you’re a lady who’s got both cute and cool sides to her.”

There, I didn’t pick either one. The safe answer.

“Y-You damned knave! So that’s how you’ve *beguiled* so many sweet and tender girls thus far! You fiend! You wretch!”

And I’d thought I was being diplomatic. That did *not* go over well. Maybe she’d wanted me not to mince words by shooting the idea down, but telling a woman to her face that she wasn’t cute was always going to be way too rude. This problem never had a solution.

Ms. Sera turned away and moved on. At a guess, she was feeling half irate, half embarrassed. Honestly, I thought anything I said would have offended her anyway, so I could only conclude I’d made the best available choice. I continued walking behind Ms. Sera, who was forging ever ahead, dragging Reaper by the hand.

It was around then that our excitement gradually returned, and Lastiara and I finally began participating in battle. We felt like if we didn’t fire ourselves up again, we’d lose sight of the reason we were even around. Our party of four frontline fighters brute-forced its way through the floors. However, the path we were taking was different from yesterday. Reaper didn’t head straight for the stairs, instead wandering around the Dungeon.

“Where’re you going, Reaper? You know the stairs are over there, right?”

Through *Dimension*, I’d grasped the location of the staircase leading down to the next floor. Given the proximity, Reaper should have picked up its location as well.

“Yeah, I know. But something over there’s caught my interest!”

“What sort of something?”

I expanded my senses to cover the ground her *Dimension* was covering and saw what she meant. There was an altar out in the sea of sand. I remembered something similar; it looked exactly like the altar Snow and I once encountered on Floor 24. The altar where we’d found the cursed sword Rukh Bringer. And this altar, too, had a blade stuck into it as though offered as a sacrifice.

“Looks interesting, don’t ya think? Using the Dungeon to collect stuff while we’re at it doesn’t sound bad, right?” Reaper rushed ahead like a toddler who had found a playpen, forcing us to chase after her.

The altar was shaped like a trapezoid, like someone had sliced off the top bit of a desert pyramid. Reaper was in front of it, staring at the sword with blushing cheeks. Before she moved, I used Analyze.

【RAKED BLADE】

Attack Power 5

+1.50 to Mind Taint.

“Wait! Don’t touch it!”

“Huh? Why?” Reaper’s hand had been *this* close to the hilt.

“I’ve bumped into cursed swords in the Dungeon before...and it looks like this one’s no good either.”

It didn’t get much more disturbing than “+1.50 to Mind Taint.” Warily, I used *Dimension* to investigate it in greater detail. Like a chemical reaction, that caused it to spew forth a thin but eerie mist.

“Whoa! It’s leaking magic energy outta nowhere! The thing was tricking us!” Reaper sprang away from it like a scared cat.

“Item’s defective. Let’s destroy it.” I readied my blade.

Reaper reluctantly agreed, but not Lastiara. “Wait! Wouldn’t it be, like, kinda

cool if we could use a cursed weapon?" This time it was she who was as sparkly eyed as a kid in a candy store.

"Whoa, don't go there. Don't even *joke* about that shit."

"It happens in every hero tale. The cursed weapon plot. I enjoy it when the protagonist frantically saves the ally who ends up equipping it. Hey, anybody wanna try holding it? It's okay; I'll save you!"

"So you wanna cause a problem just so you can be the solution? Yeah, no. Thing goes bye-bye."

"But, like, what if you hold on to it and then, like, overcome its curse? Then it'd turn into a crazy strong sword, don't you think?"

"No, because then it'd just be a sword with a rap sheet."

Much to my chagrin, I did give it a moment's thought. The fact that I somewhat understood Lastiara's lust-for-adventure viewpoint disgusted me. I took a sideways swing at the sword, and Lorwen proved far superior as a weapon, snapping the Raked Blade with ease.

"Ugh, what a waste. If only it wasn't for your bloody Analyze ability!" Lastiara complained.

"Without it, we would've been in trouble."

"Gotta say, though, the fact that you can even see if something's cursed makes your item appraisal abilities really handy. Your other abilities, you can explain as extensions of dimensional magic, but I can't even guess what's behind that one. What's the formulation of that magic, I wonder?" Lastiara touched my face lightly; she was checking my eyeballs in case she could see *something* in them.

It had been on my mind this whole time as well. Why did I have this oh-so-convenient menu-sight power to begin with? And for that matter, what was up with the way I was able to use ice and dimensional magic from the jump? Why was I furnished with such a high APT stat? How did all of this work, and what were the reasons? I got the feeling that if I just figured that out, I could solve a ton of other questions on a fundamental level. And I was beginning to see the answer right on the horizon. During my life in this world up to now, I had

collected enough information to be able to get there. I did possess the faculties necessary to accurately process that information. However, the answer I was starting to reach was just so...

“But you know what? Reaper’s got the right idea about collecting items! How about we keep looking for them?” said Lastiara.

“Yay!”

“Let’s grab some weapons and power up!”

We were still in the Dungeon. It would be remiss of me to lose my concentration. Sure, I could speculate with the information I had now, but I couldn’t be sure of anything, and if I was just going to be speculating myself in circles, I’d best spend my time making some steady Dungeon progress.

I shook my head free of such brooding thoughts and followed my merry friends. It seemed the plan was to hunt for more altars. Since it would let us level up nice and deliberately, I had no objections. I’d let them do as they pleased.

In this fashion, our party progressed through Floors 31, 32 and 33, searching for altars all the while. Our policy was to simply ignore Floor 32’s flying monsters. Those things could call for reinforcements if given the chance, but it was also easy enough to give them the slip thanks to Reaper’s darkness magic.

When it came to fleeing, her magic truly showed its worth. Against *Nightmension*, the spell that allowed her to cloak us in darkness and calculate the optimal escape route through dimensional magic, the monsters had no means of giving chase. We battled only enemies that were easy to take down, escaping from the more annoying ones without engaging them. Reaper harbored the most essential abilities with regard to Dungeon diving. By battling and fleeing, battling and fleeing, we managed to spot several other altars. Yet there wasn’t a single decent item among their offerings.

【COAL OUTERWEAR】

Defense Power 6

+1.20 to Mind Taint.

【ARLECON FACE】

Defense Power 4

+.050 to Mind Taint. +1.00 to Confusion.

【BLOODSWORD】

Attack Power 4

When it absorbs blood, it receives a temporary boost in Attack Power.

+0.50 to Mind Taint. +1.00 to Excitement.

“Hm. So...they’re all cursed.”

“Kanamiii, let’s try equipping some! It’s okay! If this is a hero tale, then as the hero, I can overcome a silly little curse, no sweat!”

Not only was the stuff we found generally cursed, but they all conferred Mind Taint. While Lastiara whined beside me, I silently destroyed the offending items. Even so much as touching them was dangerous without a solid way to dispel the curses, so it couldn’t be helped. For the time being, I froze the broken shards, which could no longer confer Mind Taint, and threw them into my inventory. Maybe I could reuse them in the future.

Every now and then, we found something that wasn’t cursed, but it wasn’t anything to write home about. Those items contained no magic energy to speak of; they were just decorative. We were lucky if one in ten of the items we found was useful.

A few hours into our dive, we finally found a decent weapon. It was a milky white sword with a winged design.

【TWIN BLESTBLADES OF THE HELLVILLESHINE CLAN, UNPAIRED】

Attack Power 2

Having lost its counterpart, this blade no longer possesses its former might.

I told the party what was written in its menu.

“This one’s not cursed. Looks like we’ve got an old Hellvilleshine Clan item here.”

“Yes!” shouted Lastiara, who was wearing an ornamental diadem we’d found along the way. “Finally!”

“But it’s only one of a pair. It’d be stronger if the other one was there too, but there’s no point to it like this.”

“Look for it! Look for the other one!”

Reaper deployed *Dimension*. “I found another altar right nearby, sis!”

“Then off we go!”

Ms. Sera and I followed as they dashed off as fast as they could. Once we reached yet another boring old altar, Lastiara stood there in a daze, her eyes on its center. She was staring at the traces of where a sword used to be.

“It... It’s empty!”

“Yep, nothing there. Maybe the other sword used to be there?”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?! I got my hopes up super high!”

“I didn’t cuz I figured you wouldn’t believe me unless you saw it with your own eyes anyway. I let you dream as long as I could!”

“Well, it was a nice dream! Thanks, Reaper! But ugh! Dammit!”

I broke out in a cold sweat as I stood next to the two who were so clearly enjoying life. If you asked me, an empty altar was a good one. It didn’t bother me that there was no trace left, but it was weird that there were still marks from where the sword had been stuck into it. This was Floor 33, and supposedly, no other Alliance diver had ever gotten past Floor 30, which was why all those other altars were untouched. In other words, we had company, this deep in the Dungeon. Someone had visited Floor 33 before us and pulled out the sword from the altar.

“Is there really nothing?! Really?!” Lastiara searched the vicinity.

“Lastiara, enough already. Trying to collect items in the Dungeon was a fool’s errand to begin with. At this point it’ll be less of a waste of time to just hunt monsters.”

“Urgh... But I love it when they turn things around during a treasure hunt...”

“You’ve had plenty of time to make that happen. Now let’s be serious and venture deeper.”

Through Thought Streams, I’d finished making my guesses as to who could be this deep in the Dungeon, and my body was braced for a fight. The first possibility was Mr. Glenn, the strongest dude operating in the Alliance, but I didn’t think that was very likely given our conversation the other day. Another was the Blademaster, Fenrir Arrace. Maybe the Seven Celestial Knights could hack it as a united party. And then there was Palinchron Regacy—the schemer with the power of a Guardian. It was no stretch to think he could advance past Floor 30 on his own power. I didn’t doubt Mr. Rayle’s assertion that the bastard was now on the mainland portion of Vart, but the possibility was there. In any case, my overwhelming will to fight spurred my legs forward.

“All right, we’re heading to Floor 34. Reaper, if any enemies look like trouble, run interference for me.”

“Kay, got it. I’m getting tired of collecting nothing but trash. Guess we might as well go deeper.”

Taking Lastiara as she sulked, we headed for the stairs. Via Reaper’s darkness magic, we made good time keeping any approaching monsters away, allowing us to make a beeline for the next floor.

“Treasure hunt...” muttered a depressed Lastiara, listing off typical plotlines. “Turning a cursed sword into a holy sword... Finding the key to turn the tables...”

“You’ll never have to search for an altar again!” said Reaper encouragingly. “Let’s go deeper and deeper! ’Cause as we all know, the *real* pleasure of Dungeon diving is fighting strong enemies! Let’s go take down a boss monster!”

And with that, Lastiara was right back on her feet. Of course, her comeback was utterly exasperating in my eyes. She was riding the wolf-form Ms. Sera,

having the time of her life as she pointed onward. But I couldn't keep up.

"Stop! Don't leave me behind!"

The layout of Floor 34 made traversing the Dungeon a different beast from before. The formerly crystal corridors were now stone, and any scenery that might remind me of Lorwen had decreased dramatically. These corridors were submerged in water up to our knees, making it extremely difficult to walk. Lastiara and Reaper were riding Ms. Sera, who made it look easy, but trudging through this water was greatly consuming my stamina.

"Ms. Sera, you're too fast! Could you slow down a bit?!"

"You heard him, Serry. Kanami's slow, so dial down the pace for the poor guy."

Ms. Sera only obliged after her liege requested it. Then she glanced my way and snorted as if to say *pathetic*.

Sorry if you're a giant quadruped and I'm a bipedal human here. Obviously there was going to be a speed gap, but she'd rushed forward with no consideration for me, so I was the only one feeling the strain. And her line that she could only carry two people at a time sounded like bullshit. I had a hunch that really, she only wanted cute girls to ride her. That was the attitude she was exuding.

"Ms. Sera, are you *sure* you can't carry three people?"

The wolf nodded "yes" instantly. From the look in her eyes, I sensed that she had no intention whatsoever of letting me ride her. I was pretty sure she was letting her personal feelings get in the way of business, but I didn't want to force it in case it ended up impeding combat. I had no choice but to put my strength in my legs and proceed through the shallows.

"C'mon, Kanami, we're going slower, so look for a boss!"

"A boss? If possible, I'd prefer going the safe and steady route..."

"Heh. First I get my spotlight stolen by Dia and Mar-Mar, then I fail to show off the fruits of my training, and then I get hoodwinked by Dungeon items. Please, salvage this for me..." Clearly, Lastiara had quite a bit of pent-up

frustration following the events of the past two days. Moreover, if Maria and Dia participated in future dives, it would make opportunities to test her mettle against powerful enemies a rarity. She must be regarding this as her last chance.

“Fine. Can’t hurt to look.” Weighing the pros against the cons, I reluctantly agreed. Boss battles were certainly dangerous but the returns were juicy, the main prize being the magic gem. I knew firsthand that the gems they dropped were higher quality than normal drops.

Since I’d just acquired the Smithing skill and was thinking about new equipment, obtaining a premium gem might allow me to forge a weapon on the level of the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. Besides, experiencing a boss battle as a group wasn’t a bad idea. Our party’s composition let us excel at speed and disruption tactics, which made escape a cinch too.

“Aha! You’re looking! You said it, so no takesies backsies!”

And more than anything, I liked seeing a smile on Lastiara’s face. I didn’t want to see her down in the dumps if I could help it.

“That’s right. I’ll search us up a boss, so wait a moment. *Layered Dimension*.”

Through the sheer range of *Layered Dimension*, I spotted the nearest boss monster in a blink. It was a dark gray jellyfish, about three meters long, with around a hundred tentacles swaying about.

【MONSTER】Gulflood Jelly: Rank 35

Small fish that were probably the boss’s minions were flitting through the shallows. I figured it was a suitable enough target.

“There’s a jellyfish thing over that way, so let’s try tussling with it. Of course, if it ends up being a pain in the ass, we retreat,” I suggested.

“All right, let’s go! Let’s go *now*! This time, I’ll show you what I can really do!” Lastiara cried.

I exchanged looks with Reaper and Sera. “Ms. Sera, if something happens,

make her retreat even if you've gotta drag her outta there."

"I know that. I'm prioritizing milady's life—no, everyone's safety above all else. That's what the might of my beast form is for."

After gaining a bit of experience exploring the Dungeon, Ms. Sera thoroughly understood her role as a diver. After seeing her and Reaper give a hearty nod, I decided to fight to take to the boss.

"All right, Lastiara, why don't we show it what we're made of? This is the perfect chance to hit it with some new magic."

"Huh? New magic?"

Lastiara was so excited that she hadn't realized what a great opportunity this situation presented.

"We're gonna seize the initiative through the spell we practiced, *Ice Aegis*. This time, let's combine *Wintermension: Frost* and *Freeze*. I'll use magic to signpost what spots I want you to target, and then you use *Freeze* to rein it in."

"Ah, gotcha... Sounds like a plan! Let's go with that!"

With everyone on board, I wasted no time explaining the strategy I had in mind. While we'd eventually be forced to chop up the enemy together, there were still tricks we could devise. We'd work our way closer and closer to the Gulflood Jelly and maneuver to the position most suitable for a surprise attack. We'd then maintain the distance where Lastiara's and my magic could reach it without it noticing us and begin crafting our spells. The water in the Dungeon didn't conduct magic energy very well, but that wasn't to say it didn't conduct it at all.

I rolled up my sleeves and then Lastiara and I touched the water on the ground with both hands. Our ice-element magic energy resonated, and we made it slowly creep toward the boss. The moment I saw that the energy had reached far enough, I muttered an incantation.

"Spellcast: *Wintermension: Frost*."

"Spellcast: *Freeze*."

Lastiara's spell followed mine, and our resonant spell was complete.

“Resonant spell: *Ice Aegis*.”

“Resonant spell: *Ice Aegis*.”

Normally, *Wintermension: Frost* would only just be able to knock the enemy off-balance, but with the boost Lastiara supplied, it evolved into a greater spell. The first victims were the fish minions swimming in the shallows, which stopped moving. Needless to say, we didn’t freeze the entirety of the shallows. Instead, I inconspicuously and carefully observed the monsters and, relying on my knowledge of the fish in my world, froze the body parts necessary for swimming to immobilize them. Their stiffened bodies rose to the surface, no longer moving in any way.

Seeing that we’d neutralized them without resistance, I realized how lucky I was. Since they were monsters, it would have been understandable to ignore their fishness and treat them as standard enemies, but it seemed these minions were a different story. Maybe they were monsters that specialized in speed or were weak to magic attacks.

Next, I spread the energy over to the big boss itself, but as anyone could have seen coming, I couldn’t freeze that giant jellyfish. As you might expect, the magic resistance of bosses was on another level. All that was left was to set the stage. In order to create footholds, I froze one circular ice pad after another. I’d have liked to have made the shallows into one large skating rink if possible, but the water didn’t conduct the energy well enough for that. Making those circular footholds was all I could manage.

After making a road out of the stepping stones of ice, our preparations were complete.

“All right, let’s do this!”

“Chaaaaarge!” said Lastiara.

“Let’s go, Sera!” said Reaper. “Doggo time!”

Lastiara and I raced across the ice pads, and Reaper rode Ms. Sera right behind us. Ms. Sera had dutifully responded to Reaper’s “doggo time” remark with a quiet “woof” before transforming. I knew I’d heard her right since she looked a bit embarrassed. Just how indulgent was she with cute girls?

The party was faster than the swimming speed of the fish. We closed the distance in the blink of an eye and attacked the Gulflood Jelly. *Ice Aegis* had granted us the initiative. With its minions unable to move, the boss was all stiff, overtaken by confusion.

Lastiara cast a spell, the results of yesterday's training. "Bloodspell: *Imitation Lorwen Arrace!*"

I threw a new spell into the mix myself. "Spellcast: *Quartz Flamberge!*"

Much like *Ice Flamberge*, the spell coated the sword in crystal. I was doing this to practice how freely I could use the *Quartz* spell.

Lastiara's sword sliced the jelly, not deep enough to bisect it but deep nonetheless. Despite the considerable damage it must have taken, the monster launched a heated counterattack without hesitation. Countless tentacles attacked Lastiara, which I rent asunder with my crystal sword. It was a fearsome number of tentacles, but not too many for me to handle.

To add to the onslaught, Reaper came in and slashed it with her sickle from behind. The jellyfish tried to block the blow by bundling its tentacles together, but the scythe sliced through them all with ease. This monster's defense power was pathetically low. However, the dismembered tentacles and the places where it had been slashed were wriggling, healing in no time at all. What it lacked in defense, it made up for with its powerful regenerative capabilities.

"Keep hacking away! It might have a core!"

I'd fought a boss with similar abilities in the past, and that experience enabled me to swiftly issue instructions. Everyone concurred and began cutting into the giant jelly's body as if digging for gold. As we dodged its tentacles and stuck it with our blades over and over again, we spotted a glowing stone inside.

Wow, what an easy boss.

I reached out for the magic gem with my sword, but just then, the Gulflood Jelly's magic energy swelled. It must have sensed its impending death, because now it was using all its tentacles for defense as it began to wrap them around its core like flower petals. But if it wasn't actively attacking, we could slash it to our hearts' content. If this one-sided offensive was allowed to continue, it

would only be a matter of time before we destroyed the core. Unfortunately, it used the modicum of time it had bought by focusing on defense to hit us with a distinctive counterattack.

It was a form of counterattack that I'd never experienced before. The jellyfish's body trembled, and its under-mouth unleashed an explosive roar infused with immense magic energy. We had no choice but to instantly cover our ears. Yet the monster didn't capitalize on the huge opening it had created. It did nothing, continuing to hide within its own tentacles as a shield.

I immediately realized the purpose of that roar; an earthquake-like rumbling could be heard in the distance. *Dimension's* perception field detected a flood breaking out in a distant corridor. The roar had been to gather all the water in the vicinity to this area. Evidently, the Gulflood Jelly's cry had the magic energy to summon water.

"Wha?! Oh... Oh shit, guys!"

I turned pale and checked everyone's positions. Among them, only Reaper, a fellow dimensional mage, grasped the situation. She was shaking her head frantically, the same look on her face as on mine. She dematerialized her scythe right away and clung to Ms. Sera's neck. That could only mean one thing—the one-year-old didn't know how to swim!

"Lastiara! Ms. Sera! Retreat!!!"

"Huh? But we're this close to killing—"

The flood reached the room, walls of water rushing in from all directions. In mere moments, the chamber would be entirely underwater. There was nowhere to run. Nothing we could do. I, along with my allies, the Gulflood Jelly, and its minions, was swallowed up by the water. The monster had changed the battlefield on us, the raging torrents incapacitating us. It had thrown us into a veritable blender, unable to tell right from left, up from down. Only *Dimension* and Responsiveness kept me aware of the situation. I could see that the ice binding the minion fish was coming undone due to the impact of the flooding.

By immersing itself in water, the Gulflood Jelly resumed its regeneration, thoroughly reenergized. The water reached the ceiling, robbing us of air. It was plain to see that if we didn't clear out of this boss area, we wouldn't even be

able to breathe. This was not a battlefield for humans to be fighting aquatic creatures. I'd told everyone we'd be retreating if it turned into a pain in the ass, but this situation went beyond that. It was downright deadly.

Once the flow of water had calmed down a bit, I turned my gaze to Reaper first. Her cheeks were puffed out as she held her breath, clinging to Ms. Sera for dear life. It couldn't have been clearer that she couldn't swim. Fortunately, Ms. Sera had heard my command and moved back quite a distance. She was managing to swim underwater in a sort of clumsy dog paddle. Our enemies wouldn't attack them before attacking me.

Next, I turned to look at Lastiara. Gone was her usual sky-high confidence and gallant demeanor. The girl I saw was flailing around in a panic. I was faced with the same sad reality again. *You telling me this three-year-old can't swim either?!*

Things were just getting worse and worse. I was the only one who could move worth a damn, but the monsters resumed their offensive without mercy. The enemy vanguard of minion fish rushed at us like bullets, making their sharp, pointed heads lethal weapons not unlike a storm of throwing knives.

I hurried toward Lastiara and readied my sword. Embracing the flailing girl with my left arm, I cut down the boss's minions with the sword in my other hand. The minions didn't know how to do anything but charge forward, but their sheer numbers were a problem. There were so many that they must have been hiding someplace earlier, and they were swarming us from everywhere. As if that weren't enough, the Gulflood Jelly was approaching from behind too. With the battle's difficulty level having precipitously increased, a sense of crisis racked me. At this rate, if things went wrong, we could very well die. That was how bad the situation had gotten. And because I realized I might die, ??? came creeping toward me.

I shook my head and kept ??? at bay. *I don't need a skill like that!* I screamed internally. *I've got plenty of other strong skills!*

With Thought Streams, Responsiveness, and Dimensional Magic, I pinpointed all approaching threats. My movement was slower due to being underwater, but it was still possible to cope. I was confident I could slice them into sushi—but that was only if I had enough time.

A bubble of air spilled out of Lastiara's mouth. The look on her face sent a shiver down my spine; I nearly gasped for air myself. Since *Dimension* had warned me about the flood, I'd taken a deep breath just before being submerged, so I still had air in my lungs. Not so for Lastiara. She'd been so caught off guard that she was suffocating fast. My knowledge of such accidents in my world communicated to me the gravity of the situation; if I didn't get her some oxygen quickly, she might even suffer brain damage. Wiping out a bunch of fish wouldn't do a damn thing for us.

To me, Lastiara is someone I need.

I could tell that Thought Streams was in full swing, and the gears in my head ground out a solution I had no choice but to jump at. There was no time to wonder why, no time to scrutinize. I knocked my forehead against Lastiara's, and she opened her eyes. She couldn't speak, but I locked eyes with her, telling her with my expression that I wanted her to believe in me. She didn't hesitate either, relaxing her body instantly. She trusted her comrade and left everything to me.

I put my lips on hers without a moment's pause. Then I transferred all my air into her. This was the best, most rational move that Thought Streams could come up with. I knew that my face was red with embarrassment. I told myself that it was just artificial respiration and there was nothing to feel guilty over, but it was impossible to suppress the flush, and that probably went for her as well. She understood that I was just supplying her with oxygen, but the redness of her face betrayed her emotions, and the sight of each other's beet red faces sped up our respective heart rates.

The plan had been to subdue my emotions and resume combat right away, but I'd been naive. That just wasn't possible; we were both more worked up than I'd anticipated. It was like time froze, and chemicals flooded my brain as if a dam had burst.

It was only after our lips had touched that I finally realized—in the end, no matter how hard I suppressed it, it was only a matter of time before ??? activated again. I'd reached my limit a long time ago. Over the past few days, Lastiara and I had shared a hug, gone on an adventure together, undertaken intensive training together, and even horsed around together. No, it went

beyond just recent events. It had all started when I'd whisked her out of that cathedral. Even though circumstances had kept us apart since that fateful day, she'd still risked her life to fight for me. Then we'd joined forces to overcome the Brawl before finally reuniting as promised and Dungeon diving together again. This was merely the result of that mounting tide.

It was all so obvious. Though ??? had removed my feelings for her on the eve of the Day of the Blessed Birth, it hadn't removed the reason I'd fallen for her to begin with. My attraction to her was inevitable, inescapable. I would just keep falling for her over and over again, and ??? would take those feelings away from me over and over again. That was always bound to be the case. It was my destiny from the very beginning...

It felt like what I'd been trying so hard to keep veiled this whole time was now escaping through my mouth. I was assailed by a pleasant sensation—the sensation of absolutely everything crumbling, of being riddled with more and more holes. And then, into that empty space slunk ???.



I had no way of fighting it. I failed to sort out my thoughts, and it triggered on me.

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion. +1.00 to Confusion.

This was the second time I'd lost my feelings for Lastiara. And because it was the second time, I distinctly felt the sensation of a chunk of me being pulled away, unlike the first time, when it had happened unbeknownst to me. ??? had been robbing me of my panic, fear, irritation, sorrow, and other emotions besides, almost like the skill had a will of its own. Activating when the threat of death reared its head made it seem like a cold and calculating machine, but for whatever reason, whenever it took my feelings of *love* away from me, I could sense a strange sort of *human touch* to it.

That human touch was ephemeral, perceptible for a mere moment before ducking back into the recesses of my mind. My brain was scrubbed clean, left blank and free of the doldrums. I lost all that hindered my survival—my infatuation, my panic in the face of death—and ideas for how to break myself out of this underwater battle sprang to mind one after the other. It was a sensation I'd long forgotten.

Augh...I've done it now...

Expressionless, I took my mouth off Lastiara's. With my clarity of thought having been forcibly restored by ???, my mind whispered the appropriate advice: *If you craft the strongest spell using the best magic energy, you can prevail. Cut into your life points right now. Losing a bit of HP is nothing compared to dying outright.*

It was a logical proposal. And it was true; if I cut into my Max HP to juice *Wintermension: Frost*, I would doubtless be able to flee without anyone else's help. I knew that. It was the thing to do. The safest means of survival. If, that is, I intended to save *my* neck. But no. I'd already decided I wouldn't choose what was easy over what was right, and I wouldn't dance in the palm of anybody's

hand either. That was what I'd vowed after all my battles in the Alliance. I was going with my own solution, not the one ??? fed me.

I wasn't going to fight alone to escape alone. No. We would fight as a party and we would survive as a party.

I gripped Lastiara's hand tightly and chilled her bright red cheeks a little. Taken aback by the sudden cold, she opened her eyes and turned to me. Next, to ask the confused girl for her cooperation, I activated a weak spell that had no meaning on its own.

The light of understanding dawned in her eyes. She swallowed her emotions and combined her own freezing spell with mine. Since we were underwater, I couldn't tell her the name of the spell, but we activated our resonant *Ice Aegis* despite that. The moment we successfully crafted the spell, both the Gulflood Jelly's tentacles and the boss's minions attacked. Though we lacked the connecting curse-link that I had with Reaper, we knew what we wanted out of each other regardless.

With the enemy right before us, Lastiara relaxed and closed her eyes. Trusting in me, she devoted all her attention to the ice spell. Loath to disappoint her, I swung my sword underwater to guard her, keeping her wrapped in my free arm as I fended off the approaching fish with my sword. At the same time, *Ice Aegis* worked to freeze them solid, little by little.

That would dispose of the small fry, but not the Gulflood Jelly. Its tentacles weren't slowed down by being underwater, and they were coming for us. What I did first was communicate with Reaper through our functional telepathy. I put all my emotions into it, screaming for her within my soul, and she immediately picked up on my silent summons.

Still clinging to the giant wolf, Reaper hastily forged another curse-link, this one with Ms. Sera, before sending me the combined magic energy of two people. My amount of magic energy increased, albeit temporarily. Unsparingly consuming the magic energy of all four of us, I powered up *Ice Aegis*.

The spell permeated the surrounding water with magic energy, causing a number of icicles and ice pillars to form underwater. From those structures stretched ice branches, increasing the number of footholds to allow me greater

freedom of movement. Naturally, the enemy's tentacles could easily crush the ice, but that was okay, because that would just cause fragments of the stuff to spread, and all that mattered was that our ice particles ruined the home field advantage the boss had set up for itself.

The water gradually turned whiter and whiter, like we were caught in a snowstorm. I moved through it by kicking off against the ice footholds, using the floor to run at times. Needless to say, I wasn't moving as fast as the aquatic creatures, but the jellyfish was slower now too. The ice particles floating in the water had the same effect as *Blizzardmension*, obstructing the enemy's movement. We were back to an even playing field.

The jelly and I faced each other, and then I fought all out, as though it were a Guardian. The water solidified like a slushy sorbet, and my sword, its blade extended by Magic Power Freezing, slashed the entire field, slicing through all of the approaching tentacles and then freezing the wounds closed and preventing them from regenerating.

Lorwen's swordsmanship instructed me in how to efficiently hack away at the Gulflood Jelly's huge form. I swung my sword countless times in a short span, tearing apart the tentacles and slicing at its body, which was around three meters long until I shredded it into less than a tenth of its original size. After being chopped into pieces and eroded by ice magic, the monster was left with no means of protecting its core. As pathetic as it now looked, I swung my sword emotionlessly, and the ice blade sliced the defenseless core in half.

【TITLE UNLOCKED: PASSING ARMADA】

+0.05 to AGI.

The notification accompanied the jelly's death as it faded into light. The water level abruptly dropped, and the chamber was no longer filled to the ceiling; I swam up to the surface with Lastiara in my arm and allowed her to breathe. She gasped for air, coughing and wheezing and filling her lungs. In the distance, I saw that Ms. Sera and Reaper had emerged, and relief washed over me as I took some deep breaths.

That had been a close shave. The battle had been so tight that I might have been forced to dip into my life force, but I'd shown ??? how we could achieve a flawless victory. I was positively elated that I'd gotten an even better outcome than what the mystery skill had suggested.

"You wanted me to lower my Max HP?! Well, I ain't relying on you anymore, asshole!" I shouted, dressing ??? down as if it were human.

Then I snapped out of it. It was true that I'd sensed something *human* to ???, but it was still tomfoolery to treat it like an individual and shout abuse at it. I steadied my breathing and calmed down before looking at all of our menus. I'd only been using magic at full power for a few seconds, but more than half of everyone's MP was depleted, and most of the magic energy I had gained thanks to Reaper had been spent. Our four-person resonant spell had been powerful, but it had also been extremely inefficient.

While I was checking my surroundings, the water level dropped all the way back down to shallows-level.

Lastiara's breathing was back to normal as well. "I... Sorry, Kanami... It's all because I got so carried away..." She seemed to think I was angry with her due to my foul language earlier.

"No, that's okay. I didn't shout like that cuz I was pissed at you or anything. It's just, that emotion-erasing skill activated on me...and I got a bit annoyed with it, you know? You did a great job helping out with the resonant spell in a pinch like that. You really saved us back there."

"Huh? That skill activated? Oh damn, it's true. Your Confusion's gone up." Her Pseudo-Divine Eyes let her look at my menu.

"Not gonna lie, using the question-marks skill in a place like this stings a bit, but oh well. It's not like it affected me too much, so you don't have to worry about it."

"Well, that's good and all, but...more importantly, we, uh...when we couldn't breathe, a second ago..."

She was all red in the face. Responsiveness and my dimensional magic were too perceptive; I could tell what she was thinking, the subtleties of her

emotions. And at the same time, I was filled with feelings I couldn't dispel. The situation I'd feared had come to pass—Lastiara's emotions were in a heightened state due to that kiss, but here I was, unable to share in them with her. While Lastiara was so embarrassed that she could break into a run this very second, I was as calm as a cucumber, as if I were remembering an event that had transpired decades ago. ??? had given rise to a hopeless emotion differential.

Worst of all, I was beginning to calmly focus on how best to sort the matter out. I'd figured that my feelings for her notwithstanding, I wouldn't be able to walk the same path as her, but then it had actually happened, and it was even more tragic and woeful than I could have imagined. To be honest, if I thought about it in purely logical terms, I'd have rather liked to pretend that the kiss never happened to begin with. Just like when she and I hugged the other day, I'd have preferred to write the whole thing off with a flippant little "Ugh, circumstances conspired against us again!" But I could never be that heartless. Maybe that would fly with a hug, but this was a *kiss*. No amount of explaining it away as nothing more than artificial ventilation could disguise that fact. I'd pressed a girl's lips against mine, and for that, I had to take some measure of responsibility. The values of my world were admonishing me so. My mind was going in circles, and I was at a loss as for how to respond.

It was then that another voice cut in. "Kanami, you knave! I was watching! I saw you! During the fight, you...you took milady and..."

An indignant Ms. Sera was now approaching me, splashing across the shallows. She was this close to manhandling me. Her righteous wrath was really saving my bacon at the moment.

"Ms. Sera, I only did that to save her life. I did it with the purest of intentions. I swear it," I replied, utterly cool. My response was so nonchalant that it surprised *me*, and that I could be so cold about it made me frown.

Lastiara saw my expression and heard my reply. She understood my situation. "Yeah," she agreed. "What he said."

Aware of just what sort of emotions ??? had taken from me, she looked down at her feet, still blushing.

“If saving lives made kissing okay, I’d do so myself!” shouted Ms. Sera. “How could I possibly believe you had pure intentions?!”

I honestly wished she would knock me into the air, but sadly, she didn’t go that far.

Lastiara, however, was able to drown her feelings without the help of a skill like ????. “Serry! He only did what the battle forced him to, so you shouldn’t pay it any mind.”

How pathetic of me. I was putting all of the burden on her shoulders.

“With all due respect, milady! You may tell me to pay it no mind, but that’s far too—”

“Let’s pretend it never happened. It was artificial ventilation, that’s all. The battle called for it. Nothing more, nothing less. Am I clear?”

“There’s no earthly way I can pretend that didn’t happen! I, Sera Radiant, cannot and will not tolerate such dishonesty!”

“C’mon, Serry, calm down already. That tiny peck was more of a hello than anything else.”

She gave Ms. Sera a small kiss on the cheek in an attempt to put an end to the conversation.

“Wh— Woof the?! Milady?!”

The apple of her eye had just kissed her, sending her into utter confusion as Lastiara continued to brush it all under the rug through excessive physical contact.

“I’m telling you, it’s no big whoop. See? I’m doing just fine.”

“I’m sorry, milady, but that’s not exactly what I’m talking about. That is, er...”

“Don’t *worry* about it, Serry. Hey, you wanna do some artificial ventilation with me?”

“N-No, that’s not what I mean either!”

Vowing inwardly that I’d definitely repay Lastiara’s kindness once ??? was gone, I quietly observed from the sidelines. From the look on Reaper’s face, I

could tell she'd sensed my situation through our curse-link.

"Sorry I wasn't any help... It's my fault that dumb thing—"

"No, Reaper, you did great back there. It's thanks to you we were able to construct a max-power ice spell."

"Okay. But starting with the next boss monster, let's not let our guard down, yeah?"

"Yeah. We all let our guard down with this one."

The biggest mistake we'd made was engaging the boss without really giving it much thought. When we wanted to collect high-purity magic gems, we could just obtain some from the bosses on lower-numbered floors, where it was easy.

"Next time you won't be so lucky!" said Ms. Sera, whom Lastiara had essentially forced to accept what had happened. And with that, the dive resumed.

Lastiara was already back to her usual self. "All right, Kanami, shall we?"

"Yeah, let's go."

Owing to ???, I was also back to my usual self. We smiled and laughed as we all started walking at the same time after wringing the water out of our clothes. Our energy was running low, so we evaded enemies as we progressed, and it was perhaps thanks to that change in policy that we ventured deeper by rapid strides.

After significantly less than an hour of walking, we found the Floor 35 staircase. While that was great, we had no choice but to stop in our tracks.

At first, Lastiara looked vexed, but then her face brightened up. "We made it to Floor 35," she murmured. "But wouldn't you know it? I got a vague feeling it'd be like this when we hit those shallows earlier."

Ms. Sera's expression was gloomy by contrast. "Well, this is a problem. At this rate, we can't go any farther."

I reached for the stairs with my hand and splish-splashed the water. "I could go in alone, I guess."

The stairs were fully submerged. Time for a strategy meeting.

“Lastiara, you can’t swim, right?” I asked.

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but that is correct!”

“And you can’t either, Reaper.”

“Nope, I can’t either!”

“Thanks for the spirited replies, you two. Ms. Sera, your swimming’s more doggie-paddle level—”

“Call me a dog one more time and you’re dead.”

“I’m *not* calling you a dog, but okay.”

Ms. Sera had been in a good mood from all of Lastiara’s physical contact earlier, but her mood soured instantly. I thought I’d just been laying out the facts, but I guess I could have phrased it better. In any case, the situation made me realize the value of PE as a subject. It was surprising that Lastiara, with her supreme athletic ability, didn’t know how to swim. Then again, maybe that was normal for someone who’d grown up without the sea or any bodies of water, and chances were good that the three waiting on the ship weren’t so different from her in that regard.

“What say we call it a day? You guys must be tuckered out from the boss fight, right? Let’s tackle the Dungeon after some swimming practice.” We’d just decided not to let our guard down during that boss fight, after all.

Boy, today’s dive was pretty shit, I thought as I turned my back to the stairs and tried to make a *Connection* portal at the end of the corridor.

I was solidifying my dimension-element magic energy and constructing the gateway when it happened. I heard a splash behind me. At the moment, all three of my comrades were in view, so I turned around to see who or what had caused that sound.

“Is that... Is that a *person*?” I muttered.

Standing there was a girl I’d never seen. She’d just surfaced from underwater and was buck naked. The fact that there was anyone besides us this deep in the Dungeon was already surprising, but I was *not* expecting that person to be a

young girl. She had her white hair in a ponytail, and likely because of her extremely fair skin, it was difficult to tell where her hair ended and her skin began. She had light-green eyes and lips of a faint cherry blossom pink, but apart from that, she was dyed a solid white, as though she were some art piece. Her nude form reminded me of untrodden snow on a midwinter morning, but at the same time I sensed imminent danger, as if her very presence meant I'd be trampled and flattened.

Her state of undress made it all the clearer how abnormal she looked. There was just too little meat on her bones. She was as emaciated as an invalid, and from a certain angle, she looked like nothing but skin and bones. However, that didn't tarnish her looks. If anything, it only enhanced her decadent beauty. But it wasn't her *body* that took me aback. It was her face. I gazed at it, captivated. Her features were so attractive, in keeping with the rest of her—and then I felt a sudden sense of déjà vu that had my heart racing.



The girl of white and I made eye contact. She looked surprised to see me.

“Huh?” she muttered. “C-Could it be? The boy? And the girl too...”

Her voice was gentle. Taken aback though she was, she sounded soft and mellow. I could tell from her manner of speech that she’d had a good upbringing. Her voice, too, gave me that same sense of déjà vu that I just couldn’t shake. What on earth was causing it?

I couldn’t help but ask, “Uh, sorry, but have we met somewhere before?”

“Somewhere? That’s...” she stammered, flustered by the sudden question.

When I saw her reaction, I realized how foolish it had been of me. That was not what one said after bumping into somebody in the depths of the Dungeon. It made it sound like I was hitting on her or something. Why had *that* been the first question out of my mouth when there were more pressing things to ask? The unidentified impetus surging up from deep within me left me bewildered. Not knowing what to say, we stared at each other for a moment before blood suddenly started dripping from her nose and mouth.

“Huh?”

Her knees buckled. She placed both hands on the ground. “Hff, hff, hff...”

Clearly, something was wrong. I called the name of the ally who could use healing magic. “L-Lastiara!”

“I’ve got this!”

Despite the sheer sketchiness of the situation, Lastiara approached without hesitation and cast her healing magic on the girl. I appreciated her decisive personality in times like these where every second counted. Yet the girl’s symptoms only worsened. She was coughing and wheezing intensely, and she collapsed after vomiting copious amounts of blood. I blanched at the sight of it.

“Gimme some space here, Kanami. Blestspell: *Full Cure*.”

Lastiara’s magic spread through the girl, who looked like she might die any second now, and a warm white light filled the corridor. Gradually, as the light grew brighter and brighter, the girl’s expression turned more peaceful. The bleeding from her mouth and nose stopped, and her panting gave way to

normal breathing. But the look on Lastiara's face remained grim.

"Lastiara, is she gonna be all right?"

"I think she'll be okay for now," she said, sweating. "I'm pretty used to healing people in *her* condition."

I didn't understand what she meant by that. She must have seen the little question mark above my head, because she muttered, "Kanami, take a good look at her skills. She's a jewelculus like me."

I did as directed and used Analyze to read the girl's menu.

【STATUS】

NAME: Wyss Hylipröpe

HP: 289/352

MP: 172/512-200

CLASS: None

LEVEL 31

STR 15.46

VIT 15.77

DEX 15.72

AGI 16.93

INT 16.77

MAG 29.72

APT 3.25

INNATE SKILLS: Dimensional Magic 1.79, Ice Magic 1.03, Wind Magic 1.77, Holy Magic 1.24, Bloodknack 1.01, Swordplay 2.52, Optimal Moves 1.02

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Doll Body 0.49

Oh shit!

Her name was Wyss Hylipröpe. What struck me first was how she was a higher level than anybody else in the party. The second was how she had Lastiara's Doll Body skill.

"Those symptoms were most likely the same problem jewelculi have all the time," explained Lastiara. "It happened to me too in the past, so I'm used to healing this."

"Then can we rest easy for the time being?"

"Well, I dunno about 'resting easy,' but..."

It wasn't often she said anything less than definitively like that. Going by what I saw on the stranger's menu, I'd figured she was no longer in critical condition. Sure, she could maybe have magic energy deficiency due to all the blood loss, just like Dia had once suffered, but at least she wasn't about to die, right?

"Lastiara, give it to me straight."

"I don't think she's got long to live either way," she replied. "Her insides are so crazy beat up that 'she's always had a weak constitution' doesn't cut it as an explanation. I'd say she's got half a year left at best. Jewelculi live short lives at the best of times, so why's her situation gotta be this harsh? I don't see any defects in her. It's almost like..." A solemn look on her face, Lastiara kept staring at the girl.

Something else was bothering me about her. "Hold on a sec. You're one of those jewelculus people too, right?"

That meant that the girl who was now asleep wasn't the only person with a short life to live. The cruel math equation was evident. Jewelculi didn't live long. Lastiara was a jewelculus. My voice was quavering, but she shook her head no.

"I'm a masterpiece, so I'll be all right... Yeah, *I'll* be okay."

"And... And you're not lying?"

I'd become too distrustful to take her at her word right away. I wanted to know if she was just being brave.

"Unlike everybody else, I don't lie when it comes to these things. I make

honesty my motto!”

She smiled nonchalantly. She seemed cool and composed enough to dispel my suspicions, so I decided to trust my comrade’s words.

“All right, I won’t ask again. So, about *her*...”

To put it bluntly, the girl now sleeping in Lastiara’s arms was just too suspicious. Given the déjà vu I’d been experiencing, plus the info provided by her menu, a possible explanation was coming into view. Could she be some kind of trap?

“Hey, mister,” said Reaper. “If we don’t hurry, she’s gonna catch a cold, ya know? Let’s pop back a second.”

She was inviting the girl onto our ship without a shred of suspicion. Ms. Sera, who was standing beside Reaper, expressed her agreement. In our party’s eyes, the option to abandon her to the Dungeon because she was a rival diver didn’t exist.

“You’re right... We were about to hit the ship again anyway. Let’s bring her with us and nurse her back to health. Plus, there’s lots I’d like to ask her.” I took a blanket out of my inventory and put it over her.

Lastiara got on her feet with the girl still in her arms. “That would be best,” she said. “Quick, Kanami, the gate.”

“Right. Spellcast: *Connection*.”

I completed the construction of the magic portal that I’d left unfinished and together we returned to our base of operations, the *Living Legend*.

Thus concluded our second dive. To be honest, unlike the first time, this one had been no great success. Being in a sizable party had made us careless, and I’d allowed ??? to activate on me. While we’d been able to reach Floor 35, I had plenty to reflect on. As for our spoils, we’d gained some EXP, some Dungeon items—and one girl of pure white.

We brought the enigma named Wyss back to the ship with us.



The sleeping girl was carried to the bed in Lastiara’s room, after which yet

more healing magic was carefully applied. Thanks to Lastiara's treatment, which easily exceeded the abilities of ordinary doctors, the girl made a complete recovery, continuing to doze with a peaceful look on her face. We'd taken all the measures we could, so Lastiara and I left her behind and exited onto the deck of the ship.

Reaper approached me worriedly. "Big brother, is that girl gonna be okay?"

"Lastiara managed to save the day. She's sleeping peacefully right now."

"Gotcha. Glad she's okay..."

For some reason, Reaper was dripping wet. The mantle she was wearing was drenched, and she smelled like the sea.

"So, Reaper, what exactly were you up to while Lastiara and I were nursing her?"

"What do you mean? I just went for a dip." Her expression screamed, *Isn't that obvious?*

She headed for the railing at the edge of the deck, atop which a lightly dressed Maria was sitting.

"It seems we're learning how to swim, Mr. Kanami," said Maria.

"Ah, I see."

I leaned over the railing and looked down; Ms. Sera was in the sea, swimming in a doggie paddle. It was a bit comical, watching her doggie paddle in her human form. Reaper jumped in and clung to her back. The knight looked low-key happy to have her, and together they swam. In the small span of time I'd taken my eyes off her, Reaper had gotten the hang of moving in the water, albeit not too gracefully. Talk about a quick study.

"By the way, Mr. Kanami, I heard that you brought a girl home from the Dungeon," said Maria coldly.

I understood the significance behind her tone through Responsiveness and the like. "It was a state of emergency... No, but really. Honest!"

She heaved a slightly exasperated sigh, as if to say, *What's the point of getting worked up over the usual?*

“I’m not angry, so please don’t give me that look. I’ll ask you for more details after that girl wakes up. More importantly, is it true that there’s an ocean inside the Dungeon?”

“Yeah, it’s true. Floor 35 is totally underwater. It doesn’t look like anyone who can’t swim can make it through.”

“Well, that’s not good...”

“I’m guessing you can’t swim either?”

“Nope. In Fania, where I’m from, there weren’t many rivers or lakes, let alone the sea...” She hung her head apologetically, and a drop of water fell from her hair. She must have tried her hand at swimming with Reaper, though it seemed she hadn’t taken to it quite as easily.

“Then it makes sense you can’t swim. Nobody’s born knowing how, so don’t worry about it. I’m sure if we all practice together over time, it’ll even be fun, so let’s take it nice and easy.”

“Okay. Please be a gentle teacher, Mr. Kanami.” She smiled placidly. In her head, my teaching her was a done deal.

Then Snow rocked up from behind. “I heard you guys were having some fun! By the way, I can’t swim either! ’Cause I was raised in the mountains and the city!”

It seemed she’d come out from inside upon hearing our cheerful chatter.

“You really only ever come out when stuff’s *fun*, huh, Snow?”

“Tee hee hee.”

“Uh, I dunno why you’re giggling at that. If anything, I’m on the pissed side.”

“Huh? But... But why?” She truly didn’t understand a thing, this girl.

Ignoring Snow, I shot a glance at Lastiara, who’d been watching us from behind. Maybe all that med magic had tuckered her out, because she was being uncharacteristically quiet. Just as I was about to suggest she should get some rest, I was interrupted by her cheery voice.

“You know what? It’s not every day this happens, so I need to clear my head!

All right, ocean, here I come!”

She didn’t need a saving throw from me; she recovered her own spirits. I did detect a pinch of lonesomeness in her show of strength, but I didn’t object. Our second dive had been a string of blunders, but we could hardly stay in a dark mood forever, so I took after Lastiara’s example and tried to shake it off myself.

When I saw that Lastiara was starting to take her clothes off right then and there, however, I got flustered.

“H-Hold on. What’re you doing, stupid?! C’mon, don’t undress. Don’t undress here. I’m telling you, stop! Would you stop already?!”

“Huh? Why would you not be naked for a swim? Hey, Mar-Mar, wanna swim together?”

“I would rather die.”

“Say what?! I thought we were into each other as of late, Mar-Mar! Is the honeymoon period over?!”

“It’s just...Mr. Kanami’s here, so as you might expect, showing my skin would be...”

Lastiara was trying to disrobe Maria, who was vigorously keeping her away with both hands. The nudity ratio of the ship was increasing, causing Ms. Sera to cry out from the waves below.

“N-Naked, you say?! You mustn’t, milady!”

“Please stop, Lastiara,” I said. “Look, Ms. Sera’s expression’s turning downright criminal.”

“Who’re you calling a criminal?! You’re the only knave here!” shouted Ms. Sera. “What grudge do you bear against me to be spouting such gibberish?! Milady will get the wrong idea!”

“I mean, it’s because it’s made you wanna bite my head off that I’ve *got* to say it, you know. The way you look at Maria and Reaper sometimes...”

“That’s just me watching over them because of my maternal instincts, that’s all!”

More like because of another of your instincts, I thought, but saying that aloud wouldn't move the needle. Rather than attempt to persuade Ms. Sera or Lastiara, I ought to devise a more fundamental solution. "All right, I'm gonna make you some simple swimsuits, so everybody wait a sec."

"Swimsuits? Oh, like a suit for swimming?" said Lastiara. "Now that you mention it, that's an idea!"

The culture gap between my world and theirs was still there. In my world, one didn't really go into the ocean without a swimsuit, while in this world, there were two options: lightly dressed or naked.

"Mr. Kanami, you can make those?" asked Maria. She looked surprised.

"If they're simple ones, yeah," I replied calmly.

Thanks to my experience doing housework back in my world, I was well-versed in domestic skills like knitting and sewing. It was a hobby I rather liked, so it would serve as a nice change of pace. Moreover, I was confident that I could further develop those skills now. With *Dimension* on my side, I needed no help taking measurements or making technical illustrations, and I didn't need to use a ruler or make any marks. I could visualize the three-dimensional image without any difficulty whatsoever. Plus, after coming to this world, I'd also become proficient with knives, so cutting the cloth shouldn't pose a problem either.

"Now then, I'll be back with some fresh-made suits for ya."

I turned my back and headed for the interior. After acquiring smithing skills, I'd awakened to the joy of making things. I wanted to use this opportunity to obtain another new skill. The sensation of getting stronger and stronger by picking up skills was damn enjoyable.

"Wait, don't you need to take our measurements first?"

Lastiara's blunt question stopped me in my tracks. And who could blame anyone for thinking it was weird if I went to make their swimsuits just like that? It was akin to declaring that I knew their measurements already.

"Oh, uh, oh yeah...you're right, I should—"

“I don’t think you need to,” said Reaper. “You’ve got *Dimension*, so you already know down to the millimeter, don’t ya?”

Wow, didn’t waste a second before revealing my secret, huh, Reaper?

“Uh, could we maybe keep our mouths shut, Reaper?”

“Hee hee, quick, go make ’em! I’m super looking forward to the swimsuits you make, mister!”

Clearly, she just wanted her new clothes on the double, but her offhand comment had delivered a fatal blow.

“I wanna make ’em fast too, but thanks to you, they’re all glaring daggers at me.”

Every set of eyes was on me. Snow was the only one who seemed embarrassed; Maria’s and Sera’s gazes, by contrast, were utterly cold. Lastiara, on the other hand, didn’t really seem to mind.

“Hmm, interesting,” said Lastiara. “So, whose boobs are bigger, Snow or Serry?”

Not only did she stir the pot, she’d done so in the most dangerous possible way. She’d salted the wound and then some. I’d expected backup, but that impish smile on her face told me she was enjoying this.

“You can be the one to take their measurements. Figure it out yourself.”

“But I can just ask you, can’t I? Besides, I wanna ask you for everybody’s numbers. I’m curious about the difference between Mar-Mar and Dia, for one. Could it be they’re smaller than Reaper?”

“Thanks to you, I’ve got a chill down my spine.”

Behind the immensely curious Lastiara, Maria was sulking. It would be kind of adorable if it stopped there, but her magic energy made the picture not so cute after all. Her blazing heat power undulated—the ship might catch fire at any moment.

Seeing that my legs were legit shaking, Lastiara noticed the displeasure of the girl behind her. “Ah...Mar-Mar? Are you angry? Look, it’s okay! I love your body, Mar-Mar! You’re just the cutest thing! Right, Kanami?!”

“Uh, yeah! Of course! Maria’s cute!” What was I supposed to say, “no”?

At that, Maria looked away, still pouting. I could tell through *Dimension* that her face was slightly red. It seemed she was tad embarrassed. Yet her hair-raising magic energy hadn’t subsided. My legs wouldn’t stop shaking, so I wanted her to do something about that before anything else.

“Right, I’m gonna go make the swimsuits real quick, so wait for me!”

I couldn’t take it anymore; I fled into the ship like a bolt of lightning. The deck had become strangely difficult to breathe on, so I didn’t want to stay a second longer. On the way to my room, I passed by Lastiara’s and Dia’s rooms. Just like the jewelculus dozing in Lastiara’s quarters, Dia was sound asleep in the middle of the day. I briefly checked on them via *Dimension* and saw they were both whispering in their sleep, as if they were talking to somebody in their dreams.

Since peeping on the girls as they slept for very long probably wasn’t the coolest of things to be doing, I dispelled *Dimension*. Right now, I needed to focus on swimming practice. I wanted to finish making the swimsuits by the time Dia woke up. If we all went for a nice swim in the sea, maybe it would brighten our moods, which were starting to turn gloomy due to the Dungeon. At least, that’s what I hoped as I quickened my pace and entered my room.



“Done!”

I’d successfully made eight swimsuits before sunset. Not to toot my own horn, but I reckoned I did so crazy fast too. It wasn’t something I particularly noticed during everyday life, but when I compared it to my world, the freakiness of it became apparent. After all, by all rights, I shouldn’t actually be able to create multiple outfits from scratch in the span of a few hours, and it was all thanks to the blessings of my overpowered stats and skill suite.

I put the needles, thread, and assorted tools scattered around my room back into my inventory. Originally, I’d bought them because I’d thought they might come in handy in the Dungeon, but they proved useful in a way I couldn’t have predicted.

I put the completed swimsuits in my inventory too. They were simple, plain

swimsuits with no frills, but I was confident in their overall craftsmanship. Slipups weren't a thing for me anymore, likely because now that I'd reached a certain realm of the mind through the art of the blade, my powers of concentration and contemplation were beyond the ordinary. My hands now moved faster and more accurately than even a machine.

Then there was *Dimension*, which could measure the distance between swords in units smaller than millimeters. It could also measure the area of cloth to the same level of granularity, obviating the need for tools like rulers. And since I could visualize three-dimensional conceptual drawings in my head, illustrating it in advance wasn't necessary either. Plus, I was able to do all eight of them simultaneously even as my hands moved thanks to Thought Streams, saving myself a tremendous amount of time.

The materials, on the other hand, gave me a bit of trouble. From what I knew regarding modern apparel, rubber was indispensable, but this world had none. I was sure I could find something similar to rubber if I searched for it, but in any case, I had no real substitutes in my inventory at present. After some trial and error, I ended up going with old-fashioned swimsuits fastened with strings. That said, they were all definitely the perfect sizes, so that shouldn't be too much of a problem. I'd prioritized function over form, so they'd never come off during a swim. I'd wager my life on it.

"Phew. I worked up a sweat, but I guess the results were worth it."

After I finished packing everything into my inventory, I looked at my menu.

【SKILLS】

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimensional Magic 5.25+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Thought Streams 1.47, Magical Combat 0.72, Swindling 1.34, Knitting 1.07, Sewing 0.68, Smithing 0.69

I'd gained a new skill in the form of Sewing. Now I could say with confidence that making clothes was a strong suit of mine. I'd always loved making things, so the fact that my menu was essentially assuring me of my talent was

gratifying. Once all this was behind me, it wouldn't be a bad idea to work a job that pertained to clothes. Seeing my skills increasing little by little, I grinned. I felt a nice sense of accomplishment, like a completionist grabbing every possible item in a video game.

I promptly headed for the deck to show off the fruits of my labor. The others had been enjoying themselves with a fishing tournament to kill time while waiting for their swimsuits to be done, and the moment I stepped back out, they came over. Apparently, the time limit for the competition had been "until he returns with the clothes." Snow, who had caught the most fish, was in the center, pumping her fist skyward in joy. The others ignored her as they looked over the articles I'd laid out on the deck.

"They're finally ready, huh?" said Lastiara. "But it's got you written all over them. They're so *plain*..."

She came to pick them apart right out of the gate. That grated on my nerves a little, so I was about to argue back, but then I glanced around and saw that most of the girls were wearing sour looks on their faces.

Ms. Sera took one of them in hand and shook her head. "Kanami. Don't worry about mine, but remake the others."

"Huh? Is... Is something wrong with them?"

"They're too crude. Go make milady and Her Grace Dia more dignified clothes, and make Maria and Reaper cuter ones."

Such unreasonable demands. Creating eight swimsuits in such a short amount of time was my upper limit already, but it seemed they wanted designs on top of that.

"But, like, you can swim in them, so... Besides, are they really even that bad?"

There was more than a little cloth to them, but they were still bikini-type swimsuits. If you asked me, that alone made them pretty stylish.

Upon hearing my reply, Ms. Sera looked at me like I was an imbecile. "They're terrible. We're blessed with a whole group of girls who are *this* cute. Obviously, making clothes befitting that cuteness is common courtesy."

“You’re joking...”

Just like that, my confidence in being able to land a job in the fashion industry went up in flames. And it made a lot of sense—no matter how good at sewing I became, it didn’t make the designs any more appealing.

“They’re all wrong. You’re skilled, but you have no flair. Why did you make all of them brown? Are you looking down on us, bastard?!”

“I had a lot of brown cloth on me, that’s all...”

“So in other words, you saw fit to throw milady and company your leftover scraps.”

There was no convincing her now. Lastiara was the light of her life. I had no choice but to seek salvation from the others.

Lastiara picked up on my distress signal. “Now, now, Serry. Let’s wear them for the time being. We can wear cuter swimsuits starting next time, don’t you think?”

“But milady, rags like these aren’t worthy of you! Gah! If only this were the cathedral; we could arrange the finest of silk for you!”

“But we’re not in Whoseyards. We’re aboard the *Living Legend*. Now that we’re adventurers, we’ve gotta make do with what we’ve got,” Lastiara countered.

“That may be true, but...”

“Hmm... Oh, I know!” I could practically see the light bulb over her head. “Why don’t you help him next time, Serry?”

“Good idea,” I agreed. “Her fashion coordination during the Brawl was pretty solid. Next time around, I’ll leave the designs to Ms. Sera.”

“Hrm... In that case, I’ll bear with these today,” said Ms. Sera. “Kanami, I hold you to your word.”

“Yep, I won’t forget.”

After getting through that small quarrel, they each grabbed one of the swimsuits spread out on the deck, even Dia, who had been sleeping through the

daylight hours earlier. It seemed like he'd woken up while I was still making the swimsuits. But he froze in place with his outfit in his hands.

"Ah, hey, Dia. You're finally up, huh?"

"Yeah, I woke up a second ago. So, now that I'm up, I figured I'd drop by the deck, but..."

While the others were heading inside to change, he alone hadn't taken a single step.

"That's yours, so you can wear it. No need to hold back."

"Well, it's just..." He was trembling all over. "Kanami...this is ladies wear..."

"I mean, yeah."

"I... I won't wear anything but menswear!" Dia shook his head as he quivered, clutching the swimsuit.

Seeing him like that, I understood what he was so anxious about. But it was something I'd thought was resolved ages ago. I was reluctant to ask, but ask I did.

"Say, Dia...are you gonna keep wearing guy clothes like that? Isn't it about time you stopped?"

He turned beet red. "Wh-What're you talking about, Kanami?! I'm a guy, so obviously I'm gonna wear guy clothes!"

Rehashing that old topic, are we?

"C'mon, that excuse isn't gonna work anymore...as you oughta know..."

If I validated the sentiment, it would stunt his growth. I set about convincing him, though at an unhurried pace.

"I saw you in a dress at the cathedral, and I saw you wearing girl's clothes in Laoravia too. At this point it's pretty clear you're a girl—"

"That meant nothing! It was cross-dressing! I was just cross-dressing!"

"Cross...dressing?"

"I needed to cross-dress in Laoravia! And at the cathedral, it was, uh, you

know... It was the priests foisting their tastes on me! They're the worst, those jerks! They got their kicks forcing me to wear girls' clothes!"

"Yeah, that sounds far-fetched..."

He was lumping the adults of Whoseyards together as a band of perverts who loved it when boys cross-dressed.

"I told them I hated the idea, but they forced girly clothes on me! And back then, I was in no position to fight back, so I had to swallow my tears and put them on!"

"Please take that back, because otherwise I'm forced to think all those priests are sexual deviants..." If I let Dia's story continue to escalate, it would greatly imperil the good name of Whoseyards.

Just then, Maria exited the ship's interior in her swimsuit. She was as quick about her tasks as ever. Clad in her revealing bikini, she stretched her long, slender limbs. Although she was a little thin, her ribs showing a tad, she was getting plumper and curvier thanks to her recent healthy eating habits. It was night and day compared to when I'd first met her. But because I'd designed the swimsuit to be so plain, it spoiled her charm. Come to think of it, it *was* a wasted opportunity to make a lady wear something so overly functional. It made me wish I had taken the time to embroider a flower on it or something.

"Dia is a girl, Mr. Kanami. I saw it with my own eyes when we entered the baths together."

"Hey! Mariaaaa!"

Dia blushed and drew closer to Maria. It seemed like the two were always fighting when they were together. On the other hand, Maria did say she'd bathed with him. Were they on good terms or not?

I stepped between them to mediate. "Dia, let's not continue this charade. I don't wanna see you lie like that. If there's a reason you need to dress like a guy, tell me. I'm here for you."

"Kanami!" He started muttering, flustered. "I... I mean, you allowed me by your side because you thought I was a guy, right? If you were looking for a guy ally your age, I couldn't possibly come out and say I was only pretending. I

figured if I stopped being a guy, it'd upset you...so that's why..."

"Uh, I never actually believed you're a guy from the start."

"Wait, what?! But I told you I was a boy swordsman, didn't I?!"

"When I first met you, your hair was long..."

"You mean that fateful night?! But back then, I kept my hair hidden in a hood!"

"I've got *Dimension*."

"Oh yeah, duh!"

It seemed Dia was so innocent that he'd honestly believed he'd been deceiving me. Really, the fault was mine. It was all because I'd been putting off the problem, scared I'd lose him otherwise.

"I've decided I won't keep any secrets anymore, so let me be honest with you. This whole time, I've thought of you as a girl who's being weird by asserting up and down she's a guy. I'm sorry, Dia."

"Waaaaaaaaaagh! Lastiaraaaaaaaa!" he shouted, tears in his eyes.

His sudden wailing made my body lock up. To put it simply, it had provoked a trauma response in me. It took this little for me to start falling into an abnormal state of fear, but I held steady and stemmed the tide.

In response to Dia's weepy scream, the door to the interior slammed open.

"I overheard! Stop bullying Dia!" Lastiara had clearly been waiting for her cue to appear.

"Hey! No eavesdropping!"

She was wearing the same swimsuit as Maria, but the impression it left me with couldn't be more different. The way the shabby fabric marred her youthful and vibrant form, it was like putting a masterwork of fine art in a shoddy frame. It was practically sacrilegious. What caught one's eye wasn't the swimsuit, but her body itself. To my annoyance, Lastiara was such a culmination of feminine charm that it made a mockery of all the blood, sweat, and tears I'd put into my work.

She hugged Dia to her chest and stroked his head. “There there, there there. You’re so cute. To think Kanami would ever bully someone as cute as you. You should just burn him to cinders.”

“L-Lastiara...he said he never once believed I was a guy...”

“Ahh, that dumb, stupid Kanami. What a dirtbag. How could he doubt the words of someone so cute?! He’s a disgrace to all guys everywhere...though if I’d been in his shoes, I’d have come to the same conclusion he did.”

“I... I knew it! Ugh, I *knew* it!”

Dia started slapping Lastiara’s chest, but due to the rapidly increasing strength granted to him by all his level-ups, what would previously have been a cute and harmless hissy fit was now a brutal assault. Struck right over the lungs, Lastiara was left choking.

Dia’s tantrum was getting out of hand, so Maria cut in, her voice calm. “Frankly, I think your assertions of maleness were just too much of a stretch.”

“A stretch?! How?! I *look* like a guy, don’t I?!”

“No, you look like a girl.” Maria’s calm words spurred me to speak too.

“She’s right. I’ll say it as many times as I need to—you don’t pass for anything but a cute girl, Dia.” I steeled my heart and told him outright. I knew that if I compromised now, there would be aftereffects later.

“No... No way!!!”

“Um, Mr. Kanami? I don’t know if that’s how I’d put it.” Maria sighed. “You’d be better served if you didn’t drop all pretense all the time... In any case, Dia, let’s hear what everyone has to say. That way, you’ll get a good idea of how much of a stretch it always was.”

The rest came out from inside one after the other. Since they were all wearing their swimsuits, I felt a bit awkward being there too. At the same time, I also felt a certain hollowness seeing them all wearing such crude brown outfits. Now I understood what Ms. Sera had told me on a deeper level.

Reaper called Dia’s name spiritedly. “Big sister Dia!”

Ms. Sera and Snow replied too, reading between the lines.

“Your Grace, you do look female,” said Ms. Sera.

“If I recall, the Apostle Sith was female...wasn’t she?” asked Snow.

Dia was quaking, mouth agape. While he had been interacting with his allies thinking they thought of him as a boy, none of them had thought of him as such. Stricken by that harsh reality, he fell to his knees. Lastiara looked on with a radiant smile, bringing a swimsuit over to him.

“All right, Dia! Wanna wear your swimsuit now? That way we all match!”

“D-Dammit all...”

Enervated, he faced my way as he staggered to his feet and averted his eyes a bit, a brooding look on his face.

“Hey, Kanami. Even if I stop being a guy, will you treat me the same as always?”

“What? Dude, yeah. Obviously.”

I’d only *truly* viewed him as a guy for a short time. If he started comporting himself as a girl, I’d accept that without feeling it strange in any way.

“For real? So even if the boy named Dia was a fabrication, you’ll still call me Dia anyway?” he asked, looking cornered.

Is he worried about what we’ll call him? While it was a trifling matter to everyone else, it appeared to be important to Dia.

I put on a smile to do what I could to clear up his misgivings. “You’ll always be Dia. In my eyes, the Dia I know is the real one.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then...I’m fine with that.”

I thought I’d said something that would put his mind at ease, but he still looked pale.

“It’s okay, Dia!” said Lastiara, no longer able to look on in silence. “Everybody here sees it just like he does!”

Dia saw his comrades’ kind eyes. “Thanks, guys...”

“Sweet! Now that that’s settled, let’s get you changed! At times like this, it’s best if you switch moods real quick-like! No doom and gloom allowed!”

Dia smiled faintly, and Lastiara started walking him inside.

Before they left, I asked, “Ah, one more thing. Can you swim, Dia?”

He wiped the tears from his eyes. “No, I can’t.”

“Then you should practice alongside Maria and the others. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

“Yeah, I will. You’re right, it’ll be fun...I’m sure.”

With that, he went inside with Lastiara, leaving the five of us on the deck.

Snow pulled on my hand. “Er, so that thing’s over now, right? In which case, I was thinking, I’d maybe like you to teach *me* how to swim first. Can you, Kanami? You can, right?”

“Hey, don’t pull me into the water. I haven’t changed into my swimsuit yet.”

“Then once you’ve changed, show me how—”

“I’m teaching Maria first. I already promised her.”

“I’m sorry?!”

Snow staggered back, flashing Maria a look like an abandoned puppy.

“Y-You can give me that look, but it won’t do you any good. You’ll get your turn, Ms. Snow.”

Maria distanced herself from Snow, fleeing her supplicant gaze. In the newfound knowledge that no amount of buttering up would get Maria to give up her place in line, Snow went to sulk in a corner of the deck.

You’ve only got yourself to blame when you behave so poorly so often.

Later on, I went into the ship just as Dia came out in *her* swimsuit. After I changed as well, we began our friendly seven-person swimming practice.



We took to the waves, and after about an hour of swimming lessons, my stamina was giving out. The others were doing peachy because they were taking breathers, but I was in the ocean the whole time, on constant teaching duty. My legs felt close to cramping from fatigue.

I finally sat in one of the chairs on the deck to take a break, putting a mantle over my swimsuit to keep warm. To be honest, I didn't want to take another dip today if I could help it, but maybe my efforts were bearing fruit, because none of them were at instantly drowning level anymore. Even the most hopeless case among them, Maria, was now able to at least keep from sinking. As one might suspect, the two rear-guard fighters had a tough time grasping how to swim; Dia not only had just one intact arm, she was also really bad at all things athletic and a shaky swimmer at best. She violently kicked her legs, barely managing to keep her head above water. Maria, meanwhile, seemed out of her depth in the water, simple as that. On land, she could move as quick as a cat, but in the water, she didn't seem to know what to do. It didn't help that she couldn't know what was happening underwater due to the way she used her fire magic as sensors to make up for her blindness.

Right now, Lastiara and Ms. Sera were the ones teaching Dia and Maria, who were still fretting over their swimming skills. Those two had a nurturing side, and both Dia and Maria seem to be having fun playing in the water. Just watching the beautiful girls frolicking in the sea was a feast for the eyes. That made the frumpiness of their swimsuits even more of a crying shame. Once again, I'd come to appreciate what Ms. Sera had told me. It wasn't every day we got to go swimming in the sea, so slapping such painfully plain swimsuits on everybody was something of an affront. It was like having the highest-quality ingredients but ruining the dish through crappy cooking. I vowed to myself that if I ever got the chance, I'd learn about this world's design sensibilities and make them the greatest swimsuits they'd ever see.

It was while I was thinking about such silly feel-good fluff that it happened. Six of us were in the sea, and I was resting on the deck. That was all seven of us. But then *Dimension* detected an eighth person was stirring. It was the girl of white who was sleeping in Lastiara's room. She sat up in bed and started scanning her surroundings.

After grasping the situation, she immediately used her vast stores of magic energy to start constructing a complex spell. Then she held her head and canceled that spell midway through, opting for a simple one using a somewhat small amount of magic energy. Judging by the motion of the magic energy in

her body, I could tell she'd given up on one spell and settled for another. According to what *Dimension* was telling me, the air inside the ship was shifting quite a bit. We probably had a wind spell on our hands. Her menu did say she could use wind magic.

After casting that spell, she didn't hesitate to go on the move. She ponderously got out of bed, exiting the cabin and walking straight toward the deck. She was making a beeline for me, so she was clearly intending to engage. I got to my feet and braced for battle. While it was apparent that her body was failing her at the moment, her stats said she was a powerhouse on par with us. Accounting for the possibility of impending combat, I put more juice into *Dimension*.

The tension in the air was moderately thick when she stepped out onto the deck. She was wearing Lastiara's clothes. She had been beautiful without any clothes on too, but she was exhibiting a different sort of beauty now that she had donned silk clothing that stood out against her snow-white skin.

The girl smiled at the sight before her eyes; she seemed truly content. "Ahh...looks like fun...you guys..."

Those were the first words out of her mouth, removing all suspicion of hostile action. I could also tell that she viewed us fondly from the look on her face. The wistful way she was gazing at the girls swimming down below...it hit with me another bout of déjà vu.

I stood up from my chair as calmly as possible and replied, "Good morning. We were just getting in some swimming practice as a group. Floor 35's completely underwater, see."

She faced me again. "Hello. Good morning. Swimming skills will certainly be necessary. The inexperienced will find their stamina depleting very quickly. It's why I failed so terribly at that floor."

She was awfully calm given she'd passed out in the Dungeon and woken up on an unfamiliar ship out at sea. It was as if she'd known from the beginning that we'd help her and bring her to the *Living Legend*.

"It's nice to meet you. My name's Aikawa Kanami. And I guess you could say I'm a Dungeon diver by profession, more or less."

“Nice to meet you. My name’s Wyss Hylipröpe. And I suppose you could say the same for me, maybe.”

We shared a chuckle over our doubt-laden introductions. It gave us an odd sense of unity, and the wariness I’d felt initially was pretty much gone now.

“I think ‘Dungeon diver’ works as an identifier for someone who’s aiming for the deepest level. Is that also your goal, Ms. Wyss?” If not, why would she have been as deep as Floor 35?

After a moment’s hesitation, she answered unhurriedly. “The deepest level... I’m aiming for it at my own pace. And yes, lad, I know that makes me your party’s Dungeon rival.”

She stared at me with the kindest eyes. Though she’d dubbed herself our rival, there was respect and admiration in her gaze. Yet again, I felt that mysterious nostalgia toward her, and I wanted to know why.

“Ms. Wyss, may I ask you a question?”

“Yes, of course. I don’t mind.”

“Forgive me, but I looked at your stats while you were asleep. Your name, your skills, your spells...plus your manner of speech and your calling me ‘lad’...they all remind me very much of an old acquaintance of mine. You resemble him so much, in fact, that I can’t call it a coincidence.”

“I know. You’re referring to Sir Hine Hellvilleshine of Whoseyards, are you not?”

A pause. “Yes.”

She had acknowledged her uncanny resemblance to Mr. Hine, the knight specializing in wind magic who had assisted me in rescuing Lastiara from the Whoseyards cathedral—and the man who had given his life to save us. That cleared up why I was getting déjà vu.

I waited for her to say more. She was holding her bangs in her fingers, only speaking after giving it some thought. “I’m sure you’ve picked up on why by now,” she said dispassionately. “It’s only natural that I resemble him. After all, his body was used as one of the materials I’m composed of. I’m a failed attempt

at resurrecting the entity known as Hine Hellvilleshine. A defective jewelculus, if you will. That's why I know as much as I do about you all."

I'd had a vague hunch. Based on what I knew, it wasn't implausible. I had an idea who might have "sired" her too. I'd last parted ways with Mr. Hine after we lost the battle in the cathedral. The bastard in question had held Mr. Hine's severed head aloft and called it "materials." It could only point to one man—as loathsome as that fact might be.

"That son of a bitch!"

It was Palinchron. He'd done as he pleased with Mr. Hine's corpse, and I was seeing red.

"Yes. A few weeks ago, I was created by, as you surmised, Palinchron's hand. Only, I'm a failed creation. Instead of resurrecting Hine Hellvilleshine, he succeeded only in affixing the man's memories into me. That's how I became the jewelculus Wyss Hylipröpe. I owe my existence to everyone's mistakes."

I leaned forward so suddenly one might think I was about to grab her by the collar and shake her. "Ms. Wyss! Where is Palinchron currently?! I've got a whole hell of a lot to say to that prick! There's something I've gotta do, and I wanna go see him right now! Actually, no, let's go together! If you've inherited Mr. Hine's memories, I'm sure you've got lots to say to him too!"

Still recovering physically, she stumbled backward. She'd have fallen to the floor had it not been for Lastiara, who had drawn near at some point, stepping in to grab her. She held a palm out to me and said, "That's enough of that, thanks."

I calmed down and looked around; while I'd been talking to the jewelculus, the girls had climbed back on board. Lastiara grabbed my shoulder and pushed me into my chair, then helped Ms. Wyss take a seat before taking another nearby.

"Lastiara..."

"Kanami, don't get so worked up. Look, you upset her. So let me go before you. I've got some questions for her myself."

She was in the right. I couldn't object. Just catching sight of that odious

villain's shadow had afflicted me with severe tunnel vision. It might be better to leave this discussion to Lastiara, who was familiar with magic-gem homunculi like her and could talk about this topic with presence of mind. I slumped in my chair.

"Mr. Kanami," said Maria worriedly from behind, "is this the girl you..."

"Yeah. She's not looking for a fight, so watch over her as warmly as you can. She's our guest here."

"Okay. Understood."

Maria had been ready for battle, but she let her magic energy dissipate. Then I realized this wasn't the time to be focusing solely on her. I elected to follow Lastiara and Ms. Wyss's conversation too.

"Baton pass! I'm Lastiara. Call me whatever, Wyssy!"

"You're..." she muttered, staring at Lastiara with some fondness. "You're the girl from back then..."

"That reaction! So, despite being a failed creation, you've got Mr. Hine's memories? From what I can see, you're *special-made*—it looks to me like they used Mr. Hine's blood for you. How much do you remember?"

"Yes, I'm 'special-made.' Consequently, I have a great deal of the integrant's memories, though of course, my recollections are full of holes, so it's far from perfect."

I didn't know much about jewelculi, so I was having a little trouble following the terminology they were bandying about.

"You were custom-crafted to mimic Saint Tiara's resurrection, but it failed. Palinchron, with all his talents, failed. And with lots of holes in your memory to boot..."

"As you guessed, Ms. Lastiara, during my manufacture, something very unexpected occurred. That is, they tried to make up for the corpse's deficiencies by using the blood of Siegfried Vizzita. That was where all the calculations fell apart."

"Hm. If they were going for a resurrection, it's kind of weird you're not a guy."

“Hine Hellvilleshine’s corpse had lost too much blood. The moment they compensated for that by mixing in a little of Siegfried Vizzita’s blood, I began skewing toward a female body for some reason. You can’t really call it a proper resurrection from that point on.”

“You went from male to female? It’s true; that’s just too different from the intention... So in other words, while you have memories from Mr. Hine, you don’t think of yourself as him. Or am I mistaken about that?”

“I’m my own person. Palinchron, a friend of Hine’s, also lamented that I’m just too different from him. He immediately lost interest and discarded me. Ever since then, I’ve been acting of my own volition, and as a result, I started Dungeon diving.”

“Uh-huh, gotcha, gotcha. In any case, I’m sure that body’s been giving you some bumps in the road as well, so I get it if you’ve got a ton to think about. Personally, all I can tell you is, it’s all okay.”

“Yes, I’ve faced a lot. Truly, I have. But I don’t let it get to me anymore. I intend to push on with my life my way.”

“I see! You’ve come to terms with it, huh? You’ve achieved such an equilibrium I wouldn’t think you a failure. Normally, you’d get more volatile, and it would lead to a great big mess...”

“It must be because the *knight* and the *lad* I’m made out of are such excellent people. That’s what I like to think anyway.”

Thanks to their calm back-and-forth, Ms. Wyss’s origins and temperament were becoming clearer. I’d flown right into talking about Palinchron without even stopping to ask for this basic information first, which was cause for introspection later. That being said, something felt off about her story. For some reason, Ms. Wyss, who spoke with a smile plastered on her face, came across as a little—and I do mean a little—suspicious. It wasn’t that she was outright lying, but she was hiding vital information. I couldn’t help but come away with that impression.

The two continued to talk while I mobilized all my skills to get to the bottom of it.

“Okay, Wyssy, I get the gist of the circumstances surrounding you and the late Hine. So, what’s got you tackling the Dungeon?”

“I’m doing it for a friend. To be straight with you, as a failed jewelculus, I don’t have long to live. Yet I’ve vowed to use all the time I have for that friend.”

Ms. Wyss spoke readily of the brevity of her own life, but at the same time, she showed us a fine example of how to live one’s life. Her strength of will shone like the sun to me. She’d been called a failure and thrown away, and she was a jewelculus deprived of the lifespan and health that others took for granted. I reckoned it was like her life had been stripped from her at birth, and I honestly wasn’t confident that I’d be able to carry on and keep moving forward if I were in her shoes.

“Wow,” said Lastiara. “You were born yesterday, but you’ve already got a friend. I’m guessing they’re your friend the same way the Seven Celestial Knights were mine?”

“My friend is Palinchron’s niece, Sheer. After I was cast aside, she empathized with me, worried about me. It’s thanks to her I can even be who I am. I would like to make her wish come true, so I’m helping her by tackling the Dungeon. That sort of thing. By the way, Sheer is the leader of my diving party.”

Wait. Palinchron’s niece?

That nearly got me up out of my chair again. I didn’t *want* to discriminate or be prejudiced on the basis of blood, but reality reared its ugly head. I could hardly help it—just by saying she was related to Palinchron, my expression turned grim.

Seeing the look on my face, Ms. Wyss added, “You needn’t be concerned. Palinchron is an anomaly. The rest of the House of Regacy is perfectly normal, and Sheer is a kind and considerate young woman. All I can say right now is that you’ll understand when you meet her.”

“I’ve bumped into her in the past,” said Lastiara. “She did seem like a pretty normal girl. You’re saying she’s the leader of a party now? And if you’ve got a party, are there more members?”

“Yes. Please don’t let this startle you, but my party contains none other

than...the Guardian of Floor 40, the Thief of Wood's Essence."

"Huh?! You've got a Guardian?! In that case, could it be you've ventured deeper than us?!"

"While you were all focusing on the Brawl and Lorwen Arrace, I was pushing myself a bit past my limits and diving past you. The Thief of Wood's Essence, by the way, is named Ide. We call him Doctor."

That was also a surprise, but I didn't get up out of my chair at it. I wasn't too flabbergasted, given that the Thief of Earth's Essence, Lorwen, had basically been part of *my* party. It wasn't implausible that she could have reached Floor 40 and befriended its Guardian.

"As for the other members of our party," she continued, "we have two other girls who were born as jewelculi like me and...oh, right, Liner Hellvilleshine joined the other day too."

Liner? I could hardly believe it. He was the boy knight who was hunting me and Lastiara down to avenge his brother, Hine.

"Holy moly, Liner too?" said Lastiara. "What a weird bunch you are!"

I'd intended to shut up and listen to their conversation to the end, but when Liner entered the conversation, I just couldn't keep quiet. "Hold on. Liner's in your party? Where did you pick him up?"

When the Brawl had concluded, I'd told Liner we'd meet on the mainland. I'd never thought for a second he had it in him to ignore my provocation. In all likelihood, compared to his past self, he was...

"Nothing gets past you, lad," said Ms. Wyss, smiling wider. "You've thoroughly ascertained my skills and spells, I take it? I met Liner not in the Alliance but on the mainland. He arrived there by tracing the shortest distance overland, not by taking a leisurely boat ride. As you've surmised, I can use the spacespell *Connection*, and just as you've made a ship your base of operations for Dungeon diving, we've made a certain estate on the mainland ours."

I'd spotted Dimensional Magic among the skills in her menu. It seemed that because my blood had been used to make her, she could use the same spells I could.

“You have a portal up on the mainland?! Then you’re more than able to transport us to the mainland from here, right?”

“If it was that simple, I would, but...I’ve lost too much blood, so I’m suffering from magic energy deficiency at the moment. And that’s on top of my preexisting conditions. I don’t think I can successfully cast a large-scale spell on the order of *Connection* right now.”

Connection wasn’t really a “large-scale spell” to me, but that was probably due to my Dimensional Magic skill number, which was more than 5.00 compared to her less than 2.00. Little wonder she’d perceive it differently from me. As for whether it was true about not being able to cast magic due to her poor health, I left that for Lastiara to determine and shot her a glance.

“To be honest, Wyssy,” Lastiara started, “from where I’m standing, I’m shocked you’re able to move around at all with such a neutral expression. Drawing on my medical knowledge, I’d say your situation’s graver than *just* magic energy deficiency. You’ve got an even more severe ailment too. No, but for real though, your insides are all beat up...”

The CONDITION section of her menu bore that out. Listed there were loads of status afflictions I’d never seen before, like Magic Energy Depletion, Internal Bleeding, and Anemia. She was definitely telling the truth, and once she saw that we believed her, she offered a proposal.

“I don’t have the strength to return to my home base. Frankly, even now I’m so dizzy I might collapse. Would you mind doing a wee favor for me? Consider it a request from one Dungeon diver to another.”

Now that she had allowed herself to voice that small complaint, her expression turned a tad darker. She’d been keeping a smile on her face so as not to worry us, but that could only last so long.

“Please,” she continued, “escort me to Doctor Ide. To our base on the mainland. Using his power as the Thief of Wood’s Essence, he can restore me to normal when normal doctors can’t. And in exchange, I can grant you what you so eagerly desire. How does that sound?”

“What I eagerly desire? You mean to say—”

“I promise I’ll guide you to Palinchron’s location. To be clear, I don’t know where he is at the moment, but our party leader, Sheer, assuredly does. She and her uncle are in communication, so if I ask her, his whereabouts will come to light. I’ll talk to her about it.”

I couldn’t have asked for more. I hadn’t been about to abandon her anyway, but being able to save her and learn Palinchron’s precise location at the same time? Two birds, one stone. I gave my surroundings a small scan, checking everyone’s reactions. Nobody was shaking their heads, so I agreed to her proposition.

“Okay. We’ll take on your request. I’ll level with you; I had no idea where to start searching for him once we reached the mainland.”

“Heh heh, thank you. If you had abandoned me now, I would have died a dog’s death,” she joked, sweat still beading her forehead.

“It’s fine. We would never do that to you,” I replied with a glum look.

She smiled, staggering to her feet. “Now that I have some peace of mind, please allow me a little rest. I’ll use a bed in an available cabin.”

You wouldn’t know it from her expression or tone, but she was in no shape for anything short of total bed rest. She about-faced, keen to convalesce as soon as possible, but while I felt bad keeping her, I had one last question that I simply had to get off my chest.

“Wait one second, if you would, Ms. Wyss. I know it’s rude of me to ask, but...might you be hiding something important from us?”

That stopped her in her tracks. She turned around, the look on her face one of slight distress. “Am I hiding something? Well, let me think. If I had to say, I suppose I’m hiding the fact that I don’t resent Palinchron the way you folks do. While he did discard me, he didn’t treat me terribly apart from that.”

Just like that, she admitted that our ultimate objective wasn’t aligned with hers. But if she knew the grudge we bore against Palinchron, why had she promised to guide us to him so readily?

“When I cross paths with him...it may well lead to a battle to the death. Are you okay with our agreement despite that?”

Ms. Wyss had been kind enough to be candid, so I extended that same courtesy by divulging my will to kill Palinchron. If she bore no grudge against him, she couldn't let me meet him, could she?

"I don't mind. If anything, I welcome it."

Now I had no idea what was going through her head. I raise my eyebrows, lost for words.

Seeing my reaction, she continued to look vexed. "I just want you all to triumph. To beat your *destinies*, the circumstances of your birth..."

That was very vague and abstract as a statement. Everything she'd said up until then was grounded and easy to understand, but all of a sudden, I failed to grasp her meaning. Our destinies? The circumstances of our births? Yet somehow, those words churned me up inside. I couldn't laugh off something so cryptic, so I dwelled on it, and when Ms. Wyss saw me so deadly silent, she smiled.

"Let's just say it's a hunch of mine, if things keep going this way. Please keep this a secret until the time comes when you understand what I just said. If, that is, you would oblige me."

With that, she turned her back once again. I reached for her, but the instant the meager amount of magic energy leaking from within her made contact with my outstretched hand, my body stiffened up. The energy felt *heavy*, as though it had scraped a chunk off my soul. Racked by a peculiar sense of wistful nostalgia, the image of someone else overlapped with her in my eyes, albeit only for a fleeting moment. I recalled the wind knight whom I'd once battled alongside.

A phenomenon akin to vertigo attacked me as I watched her go. But since she'd requested head-on that we let her keep her secrets, I couldn't hound her about it either. I stood there on the deck, motionless, unable to sort out my thoughts on what had just happened.

Lastiara was closest to me. "What do you think?"

"She's an odd duck. And I guess she's got a bit of a preachy side to her? Must be 'cuz she's got Mr. Hine's memories."

But that wasn't what I'd meant when I'd asked that question. "No, but like...is she even really *herself*? Because if you ask me..."

I figured that what she was hiding lay at the very heart of her being, and I wanted to know what that was.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but did you see her in your head as Mr. Hine just now? I just don't think that's possible. I mean, any dummy can see the resurrection attempt failed. Sure, her choice of words is similar to his, maybe because of the influence of his memories, but her appearance and vibe are totally different. Besides, if you think about it, there's no way the Saint Tiara resurrection spell is that easy to replicate."

"I dunno, man..."

I didn't think they were as dissimilar as Lastiara made them out to be. They might have been different people in the end, but there were traces of Mr. Hine in her. For one, I always found myself speaking in the polite register to her in spite of the fact that, if she was to be believed, she was the youngest of all of us. I just couldn't drop the "Ms." when referring to her.

"The girl's a jewelculus who's forced to manage life with Mr. Hine's memories in her. What she isn't is Mr. Hine. Trust me."

"But she said she's got most of his memories. If you have that much of a person's memories, doesn't that basically make you them?"

"Huh? Memories aren't the be-all and end-all, ya know."

I'd thought I had a pretty good point, but apparently, Lastiara saw it as a separate question. She was a jewelculus of the highest quality and a spellcasting specialist too. From her well-informed point of view, I was fretting over trifling matters.

"You think so?"

According to the values of the people in my world, memories were extremely precious by nature. Some even believed them to be proof of one's existence, of one's very life. Something you saw all the time in sci-fi novels was the idea that if you perfectly transplanted your memories and personality into other vessels, you could become "undying." But it seemed this world lacked that concept.

“It’s normal to think so, Mr. Kanami,” said Maria. “The most important things that make someone who they are are their blood and soul.”

The soul. An outmoded concept. Though on second thought, it was probably suitable to the times in this world. If something like *magic* existed, then maybe the existence of the soul was a given, and maybe it was indeed an essential component of one’s selfhood.

“Righto,” said Lastiara. “That’s why ol’ Saint Tiara was so careful about the transfer process for the blood and soul. So, like, that Wyss girl’s blood and soul are both different animals entirely from Mr. Hine’s.”

Unable to follow along with the logic and sensibilities of this world, I couldn’t argue back. As one last gasp, I decided to ask for Dia’s opinion. She was a magic specialist on par with Lastiara, after all.

“How about you, Dia? You see it the same way?”

She was standing in the distance, and when I called her name, she raised her eyes with a start. “Huh? Um...I wasn’t really paying attention, sorry. I’m a bit sleepy...” She flashed me a wry smile as she rubbed her eyes.

“Sleepy? Actually, yeah, you’re kinda pale. Looks like you could use some rest.”

Maybe all that swimming had worn her out. She was hardly used to it. Her menu’s HP bar hadn’t changed, but it seemed she was very spent physically.

“Yeah, I’mma get some shut-eye. Sorry, Kanami.”

“No need to apologize. I basically forced that swimming practice on you, so.”

“Yeah... I don’t gotta apologize, do I?” she said, using her usual male pronoun for herself.

She smiled faintly as she went inside. She seemed smaller, somehow. The already petite Dia looked smaller. She was in a swimsuit, so I could see the tiny, adorable white wings on her back. They were so diminutive that you wouldn’t know they were wings at all unless you examined them closely. Back when I’d told everybody my life story, Dia had told us a little about the Apostle. Since she was born with those wings, the Church of Levahn treated her as the second

coming of the Apostle. She also said that she was no different from other humans apart from her magic energy being on the high side, and that even though she had wings, she couldn't fly. I'd decided to treat her as a fellow human being, in accordance with her wishes. To me, those wings were a slightly unusual fashion accessory, nothing more. However, just as Dia was about to disappear inside, the wings I'd viewed as ornamental seemed to quiver a tad.

When Dia left to take a break, the others also began doing their own thing too. I wanted to talk about Ms. Wyss more, but Lastiara and Maria seemed too convinced of their own thoughts on the matter. They went right back into the sea and resumed swimming practice with the rest of their friends, leaving me alone on the deck to ponder the newcomer.

Then I stopped myself; it was a bad habit. "On second thought, that's enough of that."

I shook those thoughts out of my head. Maybe my increase in stats and Thought Streams were to blame, but as of late, I got the feeling that I was pointlessly thinking about stuff on a subconscious level. That was the trouble with your thinking and senses getting *too* sharp. No amount of rumination would result in a satisfying answer, after all. Besides, whether she was Ms. Wyss or Mr. Hine, the fact remained that she was no enemy of ours. If anything, she was a cooperative ally, so what would regarding her with suspicion get me?

I joined up with the others in the water, teaching everybody how to swim for pragmatism's sake. We had a Dungeon to clear. Naturally, it wasn't something one mastered that easily, so the practice continued until sundown, and with that, another day at sea came to an end.

I looked back on a day full of trials and tribulations. Because I'd let my guard down a little, the distance between me and Lastiara had closed, only to grow once again. Having to trigger ??? again was a painful mistake. And then, as if things needed to get even more complicated, Ms. Wyss had entered the picture. The homunculus whose very presence stirred me up inside.

After swimming practice, I returned to my room and plopped into bed, dead tired. The fatigue that had been building up fell on me like a sack of bricks even as an ineluctable drowsiness suffused my brain. This voyage must have been

wearing me out more than I'd anticipated. I immediately concentrated in order to reduce my exhaustion, and little by little, my world turned black. My consciousness was ebbing, and I didn't fight it. I accepted slumber with open arms. Down I fell, down, down into the realm of dreams.

Eventually, I landed at the deepest depths. I was asleep. And I dreamed. It was a very nostalgic dream too.

It was a dream of the only family I had...



I was floating inside an infinity of black mud. That was the sensation.

The stagnant world of pitch-black extended as far as the eye could see.

Through an empty world I drifted, when I heard a muffled voice, resounding from nowhere in particular.

Damn, it said. It ended up hitting the mark!

The voice sounded remorseful. It was hoarse, and it trembled such that I wouldn't have been surprised to hear whoever it was cough up blood.

It went past the boundary line those two established! It's entered the realm beyond human limits. Augh, at this rate, it'll start all over again... The tragedy will repeat itself! That mustn't occur. An outcome that horrible... It mustn't come to pass! Well, it won't. I won't let it happen again. I refuse to allow it. I swear it. I swear it, I swear it, I swear it! Do you hear me?

Then the voice disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness. I couldn't comprehend what any of that had meant or whose voice it was. I dwelled on what significance the words might hold but soon realized how meaningless it was. I was wrapped in the darkness now. Where this darkness was, I knew not.

I understood that this was a dream. And what one heard in a dream was as good as gibberish. The chances were high it was just a random string of words without any deeper meaning. When I realized it was a dream, I relaxed my body and entrusted it to this world of mud. Trying my best wouldn't do a thing. I calmly concluded that it was more important to get some rest.

But the dream wasn't about to let me be.

After the voice vanished, what played in the darkness was a certain scene. It was Lastiara's cabin on the *Living Legend*. The girl of white, Wyss Hylipröpe, was dozing in the cabin's bed, and Lastiara and I were conversing nearby. Serious looks on our faces, we were tending to Ms. Wyss, assessing her symptoms.

The scene looked familiar. It was likely a scene I'd experienced earlier today.

I recalled what I knew from life in my world. I got the feeling I'd heard from somebody that dreams served as the brain's way of processing memories. Maybe that was what this was. Once I was sure that was the case, an assortment of memories from across time and place lined up one after the other. The time just that day when I met Ms. Wyss. The time I spent at the Brawl. The time I rescued Lastiara from the cathedral. The time I battled alongside Mr. Hine. The time I first stumbled into this world.

The time I spent in *my* world.

Serenely, I watched one scene play into the next. If watching this memory train took even a little of the burden off my mind, I was happy. If anything, I wanted even more memory consolidation. But I soon came to regret that wish, because it resulted in a memory I never saw coming.

It was only a dream, and yet my heart panged with pain. Before my eyes was a girl whose lot in life was much like Ms. Wyss's. Her limbs were also white, so white as to be unhealthy. Her face was pale, her frame sickly. Unlike Ms. Wyss, however, her long hair was blacker than shadow.

It was Aikawa Hitaki. My little sister.

The scene I was watching now was in a certain hospital room, and she and I were talking. These were memories from my world. Memories from my life in modern Japan. The life of Aikawa Kanami.

The memories started from the time she became ill. It was because of me that her health had declined. The onus was on me after she grew sick. Science couldn't prove the fault lay with me, but I believed it anyway. Or rather, I'd done something so horrible to her that I couldn't doubt that that was the case if I wanted to.

I'd vowed to live my life in atonement, after which I'd wound up separated

from my parents. From then on, we'd lived alone, just the two of us.

I did all of the chores and took unfamiliar new part-time jobs. I tried everything I could think of, doing my level best to create an environment where Hitaki could live a happy life. But no matter how hard I worked, there was only so much a single kid could manage. Naturally, cracks started forming in short order.

Hitaki's health only deteriorated with time. I had no idea why. And as I visited hospital after hospital, introducing her to the staff and speaking on her behalf, my health waned as well. I was so busy that those days were truly a struggle. Yet a part of me found some satisfaction in that fact—a part of me I loathed. It was as though the fact that I was suffering for her sake eased my spirit in a way. That was why I never gave up; it was for my own sake too.

Though the adults I sought help from kept telling me they could do nothing, I never stopped searching for a means of helping her. I searched for someone who would give me a “Yes, I can save Aikawa Hitaki.”

I searched and searched and searched...

I searched and searched and searched and searched and searched...

And in the end, where should I arrive but...

Just then, a new scene came to the fore. I saw the great hall of a castle. Countless candle-laden chandeliers hung down from the too-high ceiling and countless giant windows lined the sides. It resembled historic landmarks from the West, but this great hall was too gorgeously immaculate to be called “historical.” The ornate designs adorning the whole chamber were still unchipped and unmarred, and all of the furniture looked brand new. My gut told me this was another world. One that wasn't modern Japan.

There were three people there. I was able to see them from a bird's-eye view. One of them nodded, while another, an adult with androgynous features, shook her head, her dark blonde hair swaying through the air.

“I can save Hitaki. Or I suppose it would be more correct to say that I know how to,” replied the woman clad in a white piece of cloth to the man wearing the strange mask.

Who... Who are they? No, the first question should be, where is this?

Why would my search for a doctor have led me to this old-timey castle-like place? Even for a dream, that was just weird. Had I begun fabricating memories within the dream? That would certainly explain this bizarre state of affairs. A hall right out of a medieval European castle? A masked man with a sooty cloak asking a girl of fairy-tale beauty about my sister's treatment? This had to be the stuff of dreams, not a memory.

But I couldn't take my eyes off the scene. I couldn't totally write it off as a memory, incoherent though it was, because I got the feeling I'd seen this whole scene before. The castle, the women, that mask. All of it, at some point, somewhere.

The woman continued, "But that treatment method is extremely difficult. First of all, you'd need to perfectly comprehend this world's poison at a *minimum*."

"Poison?" replied the man. "Oh, if you mean this world's *magic energy*, we can control it better than anyone else! Right, Tiara?!"

He'd called the third of them, the girl, "Tiara." That was the name of the saint of the Church of Levahn.

Tiara put her hands on her hips. "That's right!" she said, puffed up with pride. "Who do you think saved this country, huh?! There's nobody who can control magic energy better than me and my mentor, okay?!"

She closely resembled Lastiara. Then it dawned on me that that wasn't the only resemblance. The beautiful woman looked just like a grown-up Dia, and the masked man's tone of voice and gesticulations were just like mine.

"Ah, come to think of it, what was it you called it? Magic energy, was it?" said the dead ringer for Dia. "Heh heh, magic energy...and magic energy conversion, right? I like the ring of it. I suppose that's what I'll call it from now on too."

"I'm confident I can make your plan a reality!" said the man. "So please, you've gotta save my sister!"

I couldn't see his face behind the mask, but the way he was fighting so frantically for his sister's sake meant he could only be me.

“That’s what I like to hear. Only, I’m not sure you should be taking this so lightly. This is a pact. And it’s no ordinary pact either. It’s a pact with the Apostle, I hope you realize?”

“I’ll forge any pact! I’ll do whatever you like. If it’s for Hitaki, I refuse to hesitate anymore! I won’t choose wrong again!”

The woman just called herself “the Apostle” and the man just referred to Hitaki by name. In other words, we had here the saint of the Church of Levahn and its Apostle. And “Aikawa Kanami” too, I supposed. I felt a distinct disconnect from my sense of reality with the unscrupulous characters before me. This had nothing to do with memory consolidation, that was for sure. At a guess, I was mixing up a bunch of disparate elements I’d heard into one scene, and the allies close to me in life were showing up in my dream as historical figures. That was the most sensible theory. It happened commonly enough with people’s dreams.

“Very well! Then I hereby recognize a pact has been forged between the Apostle Sith and the Founder Kanami! From this day forward, we’re sworn allies! And those are no empty words—our very souls are now connected by the threads of fate. No matter how far we drift apart, no matter how many times we’re reborn, the *curse* will make sure we cross paths again. And now, you two are destined for glory; to make a pact with the Apostle is to become a Saint, a hero who’ll save more than just a nation, but the whole world. No, a saint who will go down in history as a being transcending any hero! And by gaining some saints, I’ll be one step ahead of the other two Apostles! Ah, what a thing of beauty! Today’s a historic day! A stupendous moment in time!”

The Apostle was ringed by light in the background. No, that wasn’t it exactly. Rather, she spread the light-wings at her back, illuminating the man in front of her. That light was peculiar; it was so dense that it made a veritable wall of white. It was clearly laced with magic energy. I could tell at a glance that it was something close to magic in and of itself.

But the man didn’t take a single step back in the face of that hyperdense light. “I couldn’t care less about any of that! Just swear to me you’ll save Hitaki!”

“Oh yes, I’ll draw on all the power of the Divine Apostle to heal your sister of

what ails her. Rest assured, I'll give her the treatment that suits her. Trust me, I'll save your sister, no matter what..."

The man and woman's eyes locked, and the distance between them slowly closed. But the girl behind them, Tiara, gripped the hem of the man's clothes tightly, frightened by the Apostle. She tried to hold him back with all her might so he didn't get swallowed by the light—or no, so as not to cede him to anyone else. But the man never noticed. He never picked up on the ill will of the Apostle Sith, who had the girl so transfixed. He let the light envelop him and took the Apostle's shining hand in his. Through this joining of hands, the pact was sealed. And then, the three, they...

They what?

My vision snapped to solid black. That dream was over, and I returned to the empty mud-world from before, floating in a daze through the murky darkness. I could but drift, my mouth hanging open. That dream had been so mysterious and fantastical that I couldn't say anything. I was too astonished. I had no recollection of any such scene taking place. That "memory" had to have been a cobbled-together chimera. I had no doubt it was just a dream. After all, I *remembered* searching and searching and searching for a doctor who could save Hitaki. And I remembered finding no one in the end. Therefore, the "memory" was false. It couldn't be anything besides a dream. I needed that to be the case.

I mean, come on. Saint Tiara was Aikawa Kanami's adherent a thousand years ago? I made a pact as Founder with the Apostle? The three of us were trying to cure Hitaki? It just couldn't be.

But...

But what if, hypothetically, it *was* true?

What happened to the Aikawa Kanami and Aikawa Hitaki of a thousand years ago? And who did that make *me*, the me living my life right now? If the Aikawa siblings were around a millennium ago, wouldn't we have long since died of old age? Did that mean the sister I loved so dearly died a thousand years ago? Did that mean that no amount of gritting my teeth and fighting on in this strange world would lead me to her?

No.

No, absolutely not. That was just a dream. It was a dream. A dream, nothing more. It was just a dream. A dream, it was.

It was a dream. It was a dream it was a dream it was a dream it was a dream it was a dream...

In the darkness, I repeated those words ad nauseam, rejecting everything I'd just witnessed and groaning on the verge of tears.

It *had* to be a dream. It was a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream!

"Wake up, would you?!"

A loud voice struck me like a blow to the head. Upon hearing those words, the darkness cleared, as if some force were tearing it to pieces. The light shone in, and my eyes opened as I calmly understood—this would allow me to escape from that dream. At long last, I was freed from that nightmare...



"Wake up, would you?!"

I threw off my blanket and sat up in bed right as my eyes opened. I immediately activated *Dimension* at full power and gathered information about my surroundings. I was in bed, in my cabin aboard the *Living Legend*. The light streaming through the window told me it was morning. The only people in the room were me and a girl—Ms. Wyss was standing beside my bed. She was probably the one who had woken me up.

I got the general picture of what had just happened. First things first, I had to express my gratitude to her for saving me from my nightmare.

"Th-Thank you, Ms. Wyss... You did me a favor, waking me up."

"I'm glad I'm not being a bother by getting you up. You were crying out in your sleep, you know."

She was smiling at me as gently as yesterday. As I thanked her for being next to me the moment I woke up, I put a smile on my face too.

"It happens all the time. Once I'm up, I barely remember a thing, but...I get scared for no reason, and it leaves me feeling weirdly anxious..."

“I know that feeling well.”

She gripped my hand before I could finish my sentence. I was trembling from a sense of forlorn helplessness and apprehension, but she looked straight at me and told me she knew where I was coming from. I had no reason to trust her word, but it filled me with a strange sense of security.

“From my experience, whenever you’re feeling anxious due to not knowing if you can keep being you, it’s okay to rely on others. In my case, every time I’ve had nightmares, my friend Sheer has helped me.”

Her words soaked into me like water sucked up by a sponge. I got the feeling that she actually did understand the sort of nightmare I’d just witnessed.

“You’re not alone, lad. Come what may, you’re no longer all alone. Now then, please, go to the deck. It’ll help you understand just how not alone you are.”

She tightened her grip and pulled me out of bed. Then, when she saw me on my feet, she gave me a little “good” and stroked my unkempt bed hair. I was still groggy, so I didn’t resist.

“Okay, I’m going to go rest again. I intend to rest and recuperate until Doctor Ide can treat me, so you can find me in my room if you need me.”

Ms. Wyss got me looking presentable before exiting the room, leaving me no time to stop her. It had been such a whirlwind; she’d been by my side before I knew it, soothed my anxiety before I knew it, and before I knew it, she was gone.

What a puzzle she is...

But I figured that at the same time, she was a lot like Mr. Hine in regard to her caring nature. Part of me wanted to follow her, not because I wanted to ask her about that, but so I could thank her again. But I hesitated a little to visit the room of someone who’d just told me she was going to sleep, so I chose to show my appreciation some other way some other time.

Having decided that, I shook off my gloom and flipped the switch inside me. I put on my jacket, slapped myself hard on the cheeks, and went out the door.

Today was another dive; it was time to make up for yesterday’s false steps in

the Dungeon. I crossed the corridor, climbed up the stairs, and reached the deck where the morning sun lightly stung my eyes. Squinting, I saw Maria and Dia nearby.

“Good morning, Mr. Kanami.”

“Morning, Kanami!”

“Morning,” I replied, looking out across the deck.

Everyone was there this early in the morning. Lastiara was teasing Snow, and Ms. Sera and Reaper were having fun chatting. Just like Ms. Wyss had told me, the scene before my eyes made it sink in that I really wasn’t alone.

As I felt the anxiety in my chest dissipate, I called out to my friends and comrades. “Gather ’round, guys. Let’s get ready to Dungeon dive, shall we?”

The gang assembled around the table at the center of the deck to discuss the day’s schedule. It was time for our third dive as a party. The problem at hand was the underwater area that was Floor 35. After asking everyone how confident they were in their ability to swim competently, I’d determine who could go. There was still time. All I had to do was stay on my toes, not rushing, not letting my guard down, and not making decisions hastily. Why dwell on anxiety and regret when I could work with everybody to move forward? If I just kept moving forward, someday my wish would come true. Someday, I’d even be able to see my sister.

That’s right.

As long as I keep putting one foot in front of the other, someday, I’ll...

Chapter 4: Break Time’s Over

It didn’t take very long at all for us to iron out our plans for the day’s dive, after which we turned everyone’s EXP into level-ups. I poured all of my bonus points into MAG to enhance my staying power in battle.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 369/370

MP: 520/920-400

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 20

STR 11.55

VIT 13.12

DEX 17.11

AGI 20.86

INT 17.12

MAG 46.44

APT 7.00

I’d finally reached Level 20. My stats were incomparable to my stats when I was first summoned to this world. Before, I was merely among the strongest humans alive. Now, my level was in the 20s, which could be called the upper bound of what humans were capable of. Of course, I had no intention of resting on my laurels. Given my position, I was forced to aim past human limits—past a level in the 20s. The Dungeon contained a hundred floors; I was only getting started.

“Doing good...”

I clenched a fist to test the might I’d gained. If I wasn’t mistaken, every one of my friends currently on the deck of this ship would grow past Level 30 one day. We were strong now. And we were more mature too. I was sure of it. We had advanced in life.

Just as I was telling myself that, Reaper shouted out while watching the waves. “Ship’s sailing smoothly!” she reported. “Only, we’re passing by more ships now than before! Maybe it’s cuz we’re closer to the mainland!”

She had a map unfurled on the deck’s table, measuring the distance between us and the mainland. It had also occurred to me that the surrounding seas were changing. The climate was stabilizing, and we were spotting more ships, which we assumed to be merchant vessels.

“You’re right, Reaper. But we’re getting ships that are trying to make contact with us, so warn the non-Dungeon crew.”

I brought it to Maria’s attention and gathered the day’s diving party together. Since our chief goal this time around was to get past the underwater zone of Floor 35, Maria, who was vulnerable to water, was going to stay behind.

Entrusted with our home, she replied with gusto, “It’s okay, Mr. Kanami. You can count on me to protect this ship. Whatever foes I may face, I refuse to lose anything again!”

“Uh, that’s... That’s not what I mean. It’s not just this ship I’m worried about. Just...try to be gentle with anyone who’s making contact, okay?”

With Maria around, I wasn’t worried in the least about losing a naval battle. The only scenario whereby the *Living Legend* would go down was if one of *us* went berserk. Let’s not mince words; it was Maria and company who were the enemies of the *Living Legend* if anyone, and I was more worried about the other ships than ours. What if they were merchant vessels that meant no harm? Who knew what would happen if Maria wasn’t in an understanding mood?

“But, Mr. Kanami, we’re close to a battleground, so I think pirate ships can be found in this area. And I won’t hold back against them. I’ll burn them to crisps, no questions asked.”

“No, I want you to go easy on ’em even if they’re pirates. Make sure there’s as little killing as possible...”

“You’re being naive. Nothing good can come of holding back against scoundrels and scumbags.”

I really, really didn’t want her sullying her hands, but having been born in this world, she was too tough-as-nails to have much of an aversion to killing. If I insisted, she’d just keep calling me naive, so I reluctantly dropped it and faced the *Connection* portal.

“All right, fine. So, today it’ll be me, Snow, Reaper, and Dia. The four of us will make it as far as we can.”

“Okay. Take care.” She saw me off with a smile.

Then we dragged Snow through the *Connection* gateway. She’d insisted on staying till the end (“I don’t wanna go!”), but nobody took her side—she was the strongest when it came to underwater combat, so there was nothing for it. We’d made quite the discovery after I had observed everybody during our swimming practice. Snow’s swimming skills far outstripped the others. I asked her why, and she replied that it might be because she had water dragon blood in her veins. Wasn’t that something? With a background like *that*, it was unanimous: *she* would be in charge of the underwater area. There were no grounds for leniency for the girl who’d been trying to hide how good she was at swimming.

We stepped through the portal to Floor 30. The plan was once again to avoid pointless encounters. Defeating normal monsters was a walk in the park, so we didn’t need to level grind at the moment. If we wanted to, it would be more efficient to do with easier enemies on Floor 39 or thereabouts, where they’d presumably yield the most EXP gains.

Using Reaper’s darkness magic to reduce our encounters, we reached the submerged stairs leading to Floor 35 in due time. As planned, we took off our outer layer of clothing, stripping down to the bare minimum: our swimsuits and our weapons. We would try fighting this way until the water became murkier or small aquatic creatures started appearing in droves.

Before venturing onto Floor 35, it was time for a final check.

“All right, we’re fully prepared. For the most part, I’ll be in front with Reaper as rear guard. Dia will hold on to Snow’s hand at all times. Snow, it all hinges on whether you can keep Dia from harm, so no slacking off, got it?”

Snow gripped Dia’s prosthetic hand with a gloomy expression. “Can’t exactly slack off in this position, even if I wanted to...”

If she let go of Dia’s hand, it could be life-or-death for the other girl, and she understood that, which was why she hated the responsibility. But now that she’d been entrusted with this duty, she’d definitely see it through. I’d arranged it this way because I understood that much. I intended to get her to pitch in by whatever means I could.

Dia, meanwhile, was acting mighty apologetic, probably because she needed us to defend her.

“Sorry, Snow... If only I was a better swimmer...”

“No... No, it’s...it’s fine, I don’t mind! If it’s for your sake, I’ll do my best!”

“Thanks, Snow.”

Clearly, Snow’s mindset had shifted into suck-up-to-Dia-to-get-Dia-in-her-debt mode. That only cemented my impression that as long as we dragged Snow along, she *would* do her job. Bringing her with us was a chore due to her laziness, but when it came to her sense of responsibility, she put in more effort than most. If that hadn’t been the case, she wouldn’t have felt as fettered by her ties and obligations to her noble house.

“Okay, guys, shall we?” I prompted them.

Our final checks complete, we each took a deep breath and jumped into the water. Down, down we swam, making headway through Floor 35. I made *Dimension* slowly expand in order to grasp our situation. Naturally, the water didn’t conduct magic energy very well, so the spell’s range was a tenth of what it normally was. After ascertaining that our surroundings were safe, I opened my eyes. Since my dimensional magic’s efficacy was diluted here, I’d probably have to rely on my vision more than a couple of times.

Floor 35 was annoyingly underwater, but apart from that, it was pretty normal. From the look of it, it was just an ordinary floor of stone corridors that

happened to be filled up with water. Said corridors weren't particularly wide or narrow, and the layout wasn't intricate in a three-dimensional way, which meant that we didn't have to swim; we could also walk along the ground.

We forged ever onward as I continually probed ahead with *Dimension*. During underwater Dungeon dives, nothing was more important than understanding how your allies were doing at any given moment. If even one of us ran out of air, that was it for our battle formation. I was forced to keep unceasing tabs on whether they were all following me. Periodically, I took leather bags filled with air out of my inventory to supply us with oxygen. I'd have no time to do so during battle, so I made sure that plenty of air breaks took place.

As we progressed deeper, Snow's absurd lung capacity really started to stand out. She paused for air once for every three times we did. And judging by her expression, she wasn't really pushing herself either. She was basically only taking any breath breaks because I'd suggested we be diligent about it.

At present, our time limit for no-breathing activity was around ten minutes. We could actively *swim* for ten minutes in that state, so it was no exaggeration to say that we were more than human on that front, but Snow was on a whole different level. I wouldn't have been surprised if she could swim for hours. I'd felt this keenly back in the lava zone too, but dragonewts like her were built differently from normal humans on a fundamental level. While we humans couldn't hack it underwater, I got the feeling that she could live right on volcanoes and icebergs, and, taking that logic to the extreme, even underwater or in midair.

That settled it—Snow was definitely going to be key during underwater combat. It also meant we'd expect her to put in perfect attendance for Dungeon dives starting tomorrow. Poor Snow; she probably thought that if she worked hard today, she could slack off tomorrow.

With our party centered around her, we progressed farther and farther. Eventually, we reached the point where we couldn't evade the monsters. I immediately looked around for a separate path, but it looked as though we would simply hit a different encounter if we took a detour. We had no choice but to brace ourselves for battle.

I couldn't speak underwater, so I used gestures to communicate the number of enemies to the others behind me as strange-looking fish approached us from down the corridor. Unlike the minions of the Gulflood Jelly we'd fought yesterday, these were flat like rays, and their side fins were sharp like knives. I could easily imagine getting sliced in two just by one of them passing by.

The battle had begun the moment I detected the enemies (not via *Dimension* but by sight). There seemed to be four of them. There were also four of us, but they had the home field advantage. I had readied my sword, determined not to let any of them pass, when...

"Spellcast: *Impulse!*"

Despite being underwater, a thunderous roar pounded my eardrums, the vibrations hitting my whole body. I promptly expanded *Dimension* to confirm that they'd been caused by Snow casting a spell from behind me. When we first met, Snow had told me that she was good at vibration magic, but since we had exceptional mages in Dia and Maria, I'd never thought of her as a magic specialist. Now, I was beholding a sight that made me reassess that impression.

The Dungeon was shaking, so much so that the world around me looked like a blurry photo, and the fish that had been swimming toward us so fast were in disarray, losing speed and their sense of balance, not unlike someone trying to walk during an earthquake. Yet for some reason, it had no effect on me. My vision was impeded a little, but that was all. The sheer precision of Snow's vibration magic left me astonished.

I promptly slew all four of the slowed-down enemies with my sword. Cutting them in two was a cinch when they were so hobbled, and they quickly faded into light. Still amazed at how much easier the battle had been than I'd anticipated, I picked up the magic gems they had dropped.

Just as I was about to praise Snow for a job well done, *Dimension* picked up on a fresh group of foes. Maybe the monsters here were the type to call for reinforcements. They were heading for us from all directions. I tried to apprise Snow of the looming threat, but...

"Uh-huh, I know. There are three coming in from over there."

Apparently, she was able to speak normally underwater, though of course,

not through her mouth. She was using vibration magic to convey the sounds directly through my eardrums. I gave her a befuddled look, my mouth agape.

“Hm? Oh, uh, if you’re wondering how...it looks like I know who’s where by way of returning sound waves. And maybe it’s also ‘cause of how super easy the magic is conducted underwater?”

That wasn’t what I was wondering. I just wanted to tell her, *If you can speak underwater, why didn’t you tell us sooner?!* I mean, imagine my surprise when I heard one of us start talking out of nowhere.

“Looks like they’re the same kind as before, so I’ll hold them off with vibration magic again.”

My disgruntlement wasn’t coming across to her. Only Reaper picked up on it via the curse-link; she was smiling wryly behind Snow.

I had no choice but to center my repulsion of enemy reinforcements around Snow’s support. As she’d said, vibration magic support was enormously effective underwater. The great variety of fish monsters approaching us were sliced in two one after the other. It was more of a slaughter than a battle. Since I could basically kill them instantly, they weren’t a hindrance to our progression, and we quickly succeeded in freeing ourselves of the enemies’ encirclement. The odd time one or more monsters appeared behind us, Reaper’s and Dia’s magic could deal with them. Reaper’s shadow-stuff perplexed the enemy while Dia’s holy magic barrier kept them at a distance. When it came to avoiding encounters, none were a match for those two.

We were advancing through Floor 35 without a hitch. At one point, I heard strange giggling from behind.

“Heh heh, tee hee hee... I never knew. Could it be I’m a star underwater?!”

It was Snow. She was beaming, swishing through the water like a mermaid. Her dragon tail functioned like a fish’s fin, so her swimming prowess was leagues above ours. You couldn’t ask for anyone better during underwater combat, there was no doubt about that, and not just because of how good she was at swimming, but also because of all the applications of her vibration magic. I turned around and nodded yes in reply to her.

“Heh heh heh. I am, aren’t I?”

I was happy a lazybones like her was feeling so enthusiastic, her cockiness aside. I nodded vigorously to inflate her ego, and she all but blushed. Then I gestured for *her* to be in the lead. That very instant, she went weak in the knees.

“Uh, actually, maybe I’m no good underwater after all? It’s really hard to move in, and I feel like I’m running out of air. Yeah, I can’t fight at all. I’m out of my element!”

Operation Get Snow to Work by Flattering Her was a bust. I’d have loved to have told her that if she could still make excuses, she was more than fine, but I wasn’t confident I could persuade her using only gestures now that she was being pigheaded. It would take too much effort, so why bother trying?

Now that Snow had settled down, I took her and the others even farther along the floor. This selection of party members was good at nonverbal communication, and our underwater excursion was progressing smoothly when I spotted a peculiar hole in one of the underwater corridors in the floor’s central area. From what I could tell through *Dimension*, there was no water in the space beyond that. Figuring that it might be a special area inhabited by a boss, I thoroughly probed it via *Dimension* only to find no danger, so I ventured through the side tunnel. It led to a dead end, but even so, the water was blocked off as if by an invisible wall. We could easily fit inside.

“What’s going on here?”

It reminded me fondly of when I was a kid; this phenomenon was a lot like when you submerged a bucket upside down into the tub and the air didn’t leak out. This space was similarly a pocket of breathable air, but why were we being offered something so convenient? And the fact that the water pressure and atmospheric pressure were in balance in a place like this? It had to be somebody’s handiwork. If my conjecture was correct, someone had purposely created a space to aid the Dungeon divers who tackled Floor 35.

Thought Streams affirmed my supposition. I could always awkwardly rationalize anything as “that’s just how fantasy-world dungeons operate,” but what Lorwen had told me in the past pretty much confirmed that *someone* had

had a hand in all this. I remembered how he'd said someone who was friendly toward humans had created the Dungeon. And that entity had definitely designed a resting point to make clearing Floor 35 a bit easier. That was the only explanation. I could practically see new puzzle pieces falling slowly into place.

"Hey, Kanami," said Dia, "if we're gonna take a break, you wanna make a fire?"

That snapped me out of my reverie. Look at me, distracted while on a dive. If I'd been attacked, they would have gotten the jump on me. What was I doing? Didn't I *just* get punished for lowering my guard during yesterday's dive? Time to focus on clearing this here Dungeon again.

"I dunno, making a fire in a place like this sounds dangerous. Let's take a breather, refill the bags with air, and get right back to it. If monsters attack us here, we'll have our backs to the wall."

"Gotcha. All right, let's make this break a quick one, I guess."

Dia helped me fill the leather bags I took out from my inventory, and before long, we jumped back into the water with a slightly tweaked formation. Reaper was now at the front and I was at the back in order to ease the enemy-radar burden on me. This way, we could avoid a situation where one of us was left running on fumes MP-wise. In all honesty, it was best to have Reaper in front if all we wanted to do was avoid encounters.

By making good use of her acumen with darkness magic, we headed straight to the next floor without any detours or side trips. Of course, we couldn't avoid *all* the enemies, and battles did occur from time to time, but thanks to Snow being so unexpectedly strong in underwater settings, they didn't give us any trouble. You could say that fish monsters were weak to vibration magic. Watching her fighting style reminded me of the illegal-in-my-world fishing method where you hit rocks together to immobilize the fish with shock waves. Maybe yesterday's battle against the Gulflood Jelly would have been a cinch if Snow had been with us.

Then again, I wanted nothing to do with boss battles anymore, no matter how much we might have the upper hand. Yesterday's ordeal had been too

harrowing. I figured I wouldn't do a boss battle during a first visit to a floor unless something big necessitated it.

Our caution and vigilance while traversing Floor 35 resulted in us finding the stairs to Floor 36. The staircase could be likened to a whirlpool. Unable to defy gravity, Floor 35's water was being swallowed up by the floor below it.

We jumped into the whirlpool and descended the stairs to be met with a floor whose corridors were *not* totally submerged. Floor 36's water level measured less than half of the preceding floor, making for a space that resembled the surface of a lake. Emerging from the waterfallesque staircase, we took stock of our surroundings. The fact that the floors weren't back-to-back underwater saved us a lot of trouble. Looking around, the environment was also different from before. Water was flowing from the side walls, and aquatic plants were in view here and there.

"I'll take this over being underwater, but it ain't exactly easy to move in either," I commented.

We began walking through the corridor, wading through waist-deep water. Dia and Reaper seemed to be having a particularly rough time of it. They simply weren't tall enough and were basically swimming. Snow alone looked unencumbered.

"Huh? It's hard to move in?" She was walking no differently than she did on solid land.

"Hey, Snow, if you're doing fine, you mind carrying either Dia or Reaper on your shoulder?" She definitely had the muscle power for it.

"Huh? Me, carry them?" she said, a troubled look on her face.

I knew she'd be resistant to the idea, given her personality. I thought about how to convince her, but then Reaper beat me to it.

"Please, big sister. I can swim, but it's tougher for Dia..."

"Uh, er, rrgh!"

"I know you're a lazybones, miss, so listen here a sec..."

Reaper made to whisper to Snow, so I hurriedly created a hole in *Dimension*

to avoid overhearing them. I wanted to be good about not eavesdropping on private conversations if I could help it, and I wanted to show Snow what *not eavesdropping* looked like too. If Reaper and I kept showing consideration for others, maybe she'd reflect on her past conduct and stop doing it herself. A man can dream, okay?

They finished whispering in each other's ears, and Snow's face lit up. "Okay, you got it! Leave it to me, Reaper!"

"Phew. Good..."

"All right, I'm carrying you both. It'll throw me off, so work together to maintain our balance."

"Right, thank you!"

Snow started walking, carrying them on her shoulders like two bags of rice. What would a stranger think if they saw such a scene? Snow was tall but slender. The sight of her carrying two girls despite her own thin frame was physically impossible in my world, and that wasn't taking her walking speed into account. She was practically taking a pleasure stroll through the water, so light on her feet that someone might think she was carrying styrofoam rather than people. What a clear demonstration of the high specs of a dragonewt.

In any case, this would certainly help reduce fatigue for the party's pair of shorties. While Dia was thanking Snow, I conveyed my own gratitude to Reaper with my eyes. Through our thought transference, she understood completely what I wished to say, making her a mite bashful.

"Now we don't have to worry. Let's keep going."

We proceeded through Floor 36 with me in the lead. Exploring this floor wasn't different from a normal floor, just a tad more exhausting. The enemy's average level was going up, but so was ours. We found the stairs without much trouble, but then...

"Ugh, not again..."

The staircase leading to Floor 37 was submerged in water.

"What do we do, mister?" asked Reaper. "We've still got energy to spare..."

From what I could see, they could still swim on thanks to Snow's help. I looked at their respective menus and gave it careful consideration.

"Nah, let's call it a day," I replied. "It's enough that we know the path through Floors 35 and 36 now."

We couldn't naively assume that the next completely underwater level would be structured the same as the previous one. It would be better to take the shortest route to Floor 37 next time so as to arrive in less of a state of fatigue. In addition, we'd discovered that we needed more bags filled with air. Lastly, I just wanted to take things carefully after reflecting on yesterday's mistakes. That was the confluence of factors that led me to my judgment call. Dia seemed a little dissatisfied, but due to having to be literally carried, she couldn't really object. Snow, on the other hand, was overjoyed that she'd be able to return sooner than expected.

"Yay! We're going home early!"

After glaring at Snow to shut her up, I created a *Connection* portal nearby. And so, after completing our third dive, we passed through the magic gateway and stepped back onto our ship.

What awaited us when we arrived was the stupefying sight of a sea of fire out on the deep blue ocean. A ship that wasn't ours was sinking in flames.

"Huh? Uh, guys?"

Gray smoke was billowing, the other ship burning like so much firewood. The sails were scorched and torn, and the mast was clearly about to crumble. The blaze was so intense that I was pretty sure that if nothing was done, the vessel would sink outright.

"Wh-What're you doing?"

I was only able to maintain my composure (albeit barely) because it wasn't the *Living Legend* that was on fire, but some other vessel. An unknown ship, burning right before my eyes. My heart began to race with anxiety as a scene that was one of my trauma triggers played out.

"Heh heh heh heh heh heh!"

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

The sight of Maria and Lastiara cackling and watching gleefully as the ship burned was unhinged. I mustered the courage to yell at them.

“Hey! You two! What’re you doing?!”

“Ah, Mr. Kanami. Welcome back!”

“Welcome back, Kanamiiii.”

They greeted me casually, smiles on their faces. But those smiles were scary enough to have the opposite effect.

“I told you to go easy on ’em, didn’t I?! Why’s there a burning ship right by us?!”

“Heh heh heh. Those scalawags must be cursing their stars that they came for us when yours truly happened to stay on board!” said Lastiara theatrically.

Never mind her, I concluded instantly. I opted to address the maid-costumed semifer in the corner. She was wearing the same grim expression as me.

“Ms. Sera! Why didn’t you stop them?!”

“I did urge her not to torch it...but the enemy being who they are, well...I couldn’t insist too strongly to milady, you see...”

Ugh, Ms. Sera’s useless when she’s paired up with Lastiara!

I looked at the ship, which was crumbling as we spoke. This was really, really bad. There were problem children and then there were *them*. I’d had no choice but to become a criminal in the Alliance, but in other lands, I’d have wanted to be an upright adventurer who was clean as a whistle. And now that aspiration was falling to pieces along with the burning boat.

“Hold on, Mr. Kanami!” said Maria defensively. “There were extenuating circumstances! Kind of!”



“What circumstances?”

“Initially, that ship approached to negotiate with us under the guise of a merchant ship, but...the moment their representative saw me, a child, they shifted gears and attacked.”

A pause. “Really?”

“Yes, really!” said Maria, raising her voice. It seemed she was more than a little shocked by my lack of trust.

“They were those sea dogs called ‘pirates,’” said Lastiara. “We’re closer to a war zone now, so it’s only natural we get more such winsome folks. Mar-Mar did keep her word to you, you know—with the people who attacked us this morning; she made them turn tail by threatening them with fire. But around noon, a different pirate ship came for us. I’m guessing the ship we scared off leaked intel on our position to their buddies. Since they assumed we’d ‘take it easy on them,’ they’d have kept attacking us. Especially since the only crew on our ship was three young girls. Anybody would think we were prime prey. Doing as you told her put poor Mar-Mar in a fix, so I made the call to give her permission. ‘Let’s burn the ships of any future bozos who come for us,’ I said! ‘Make an example out of ‘em!’ Mar-Mar agreed to that suggestion wholeheartedly! Her frustration was piling up, see. So that’s what happened!”

“You guys have got scary amounts of grit if that was all it took to start burning ships, but...I get it. Your hands were forced.”

I didn’t need Thought Streams to pinpoint what had caused this. It was all because I’d been so naive. Maria had tried to follow my unrealistic orders to the best of her ability, forcing Lastiara to step in to protect her. Ms. Sera had also come to the conclusion that Lastiara’s orders made more sense than mine. I might have been right in strict moral terms, but when it came to everybody’s safety, I’d been dead wrong. That was all there was to it.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you two. I was in the wrong, not you.”

I’d reacted as though there was no way I could have been in the wrong. What a fool I was. I found myself hanging my head a little.

“Ms. Lastiara!” said Maria. “You need to break it to him more gently than

that! Don't you know him?! He'll get it in his head that anything and everything is his fault!"

"But them's just the facts...and that *was* me breaking it to him gently."

"No, I heard everything you said. You emphasized 'take it easy on them' to trip him up with his own words. That definitely wounded him; he's sensitive like that."

"I mean, if I don't make it clear enough, he'll never learn from his mistakes. This is *Kanami* we're talking about..."

How pathetic must I have seemed in Maria's eyes for her to fuss over me like that? Actually, I was even more shocked that this was what they thought of me. It seemed Maria was concerned about my tendency for self-flagellation.

I didn't want her to worry about me and replied accordingly. "Thank you, Maria. You don't need to defend me. It's true I messed up, and I'll reflect on where I went wrong, but I won't torment myself over it, so don't worry." Still, for the sake of balance, I also chided them. "That said, you guys should reflect on setting fire to that ship. Anybody would get bent out of shape if they got back with everything reduced to a crisp."

"Ah, right. I suppose torching it was going too far after all," said Maria meekly. "There're a lot of other ways to make sure they can't stay a-sea."

Lastiara, by contrast, was the same as always; after seeing that the mood in the air had lightened a little, she tried to make the atmosphere cheerier still. "Nice," she said jovially, "that's settled! And I'm thinking back on my past actions too, a little! So, how'd the Dungeon treat you guys?"

"We reached Floor 37, but it's underwater too, so we came back before we tuckered ourselves out."

"I see. Then maybe we can make it to Floor 39 tomorrow?"

"I think we can probably make it there, yeah."

Soon we'd arrive at Floor 39, where we planned to do some level grinding. Plus, the ship was drawing quite close to the mainland now; it might even make landfall tomorrow or the day after.

Lastiara listened to the progress report with a sober look on her face. “Smooth sailing, huh? Then I’ll join tomorrow’s diving party. I’ll be there for the finish!”

She was upbeat and forward-looking to the core. I’d been striving to be like her, but it seemed I was no match for the OG font of positivity. The slightest bump in the road never failed to put me in a negative mood. With a sigh, I course-corrected my thoughts just like Lastiara had.

We’re doing great. We’re forging ahead smoothly. We’re legit doing great...

I repeated that mantra in my mind. Then we decided we’d rest early today and prepare for the next day’s dive. Snow seemed addicted to fishing now; she’d cast a carefree line alongside Reaper. Meanwhile, Lastiara was helping Maria and Ms. Sera with the housework. And once again, Dia went to bed before the sun had even set. She was dozing quietly, just like Wyss in a cabin not far from hers. Maybe voyages at sea were too unfamiliar and she was getting exhausted faster.

Perhaps all the Dungeon dives day after day were taking their toll on me too, because I also turned in early that day. As I descended into the pit of slumber, I dreamed that same dream.

Another night of dreams. Another night of memory consolidation, operating as smoothly as clockwork.



The morning after the burning of the pirate ship, before the sun was even up, Lastiara’s cries echoed round the deck.

“Ugh! They just keep on coming!” she griped, pouting like a little kid.

She then sat in a seat on the deck and whammed her forehead onto the table. From her demeanor, I could sense she was quite determined not to let it happen again, and I could hardly blame her. Anybody would get frustrated and annoyed after being roughly roused in the morning.

I was in much the same boat; I wasn’t *tired*, but I was groggy and a bit sluggish for it. As for why we were up while the sky was still dark? Pirates. Pirates had launched a surprise attack and fired cannonballs at us. Lastiara and I had had no

choice but to drive back the approaching ship even as we rubbed the sleep from our eyes.

Maria poured some black tea in front of the slumped-over Lastiara. “Thank you for your hard work, Ms. Lastiara.”

There was a beautiful tea set spread out on the desk. *Since when do we have a luxury tea set on the ship?* They’d probably swiped that stuff from yesterday’s pirate ship.

Enticed by the smell of the tea, Lastiara lifted her head. “Bloody hell,” she said, her vulgar words belying the dainty and elegant way she put the cup to her lips. “Is this happening ’cuz we’re close to a war zone?”

“It must be,” replied Maria. “I think the closer we get to the mainland, the more of these scuffles we’ll have.”

“If they’re gonna keep waking us up, maybe we oughta change course.”

“Or maybe I’ll serve as the night watch from now on?”

“No, I don’t wanna do that to you, Mar-Mar. It’d be bad for your skin.”

The two were discussing what to do about the night attacks with serious looks on their faces. Meanwhile, I lacked the fundamental knowledge necessary to contribute to the discussion.

“Uh, remind me, the mainland we’re headed to right now’s currently at war? That’s why there are lots of bandits?” As somebody from another world, I couldn’t avoid asking the most basic of questions.

“Mr. Kanami...I *know* you can’t help it, but it’s just so pathetic to hear someone ask that,” said Maria, aghast at my ignorance.

It seemed even small children knew what I didn’t. “F-Forgive me. I didn’t wanna ask about the war if I could help it since I don’t want anything to do with it. That’s why I don’t know much...”

“That’s an understatement. You don’t know the first thing about it, more like,” Maria fired back, admonishing me for being so choosy about what I learned.

“I mean, I was planning to stay within the Alliance, so I figured I didn’t *need* to

know...”

“You really hate wars, don’t you, Mr. Kanami? But you’ll be treading mainland ground now. You’re *going* to hear about the war whether you like it or not. Wouldn’t it be wise if you received a briefing about it ahead of time?”

“All right, in that case, why don’t I ask you to fill me in? So, uh, what’s the scale of the war they’re fighting, and where’s it happening? I honestly don’t even know *that* much.”

Astounded though she was, Maria was conscientious in her explanation. “The ‘mainland’ we’re headed to, the formal name of which is Varences, Birthland of the Founders, is the largest continent in the world. It’s split between north and south, and the largest war in the world is being waged between them. Actually, Vart proper is right at the forefront of the battleground.”

The largest war in the world? If I didn’t know a thing about affairs that big, I couldn’t be surprised if folks regarded me with contempt.

“What’s driving the war? Is it your usual racial conflict between humans and demons or something?” That was what it was a lot of the time in fantasy fiction.

“No, there’s no racial component to it. It’s a territorial dispute between humans: the army of the alliance where Levahnism is the main religion versus another, different confederation of countries. Nowadays people just call the forces of one ‘the Southern League’ and the other forces ‘the Northern League.’ On the streets, they call it what it is—‘the Border War.’”

“So it’s Levahnites versus other countries? Does that mean it’s a religious war?”

Hearing it was humans fighting each other saddened me a little. Sure, that was how it was in my world too, but for some reason I’d wanted this world to be different in that respect.

“No, religion isn’t one of the causes. There are Levahnite countries in the Northern League too. There are no clear-cut causes for the war. It basically just started one day, and then the grudges and resentment have kept it going. In reality, all of the countries involved are in it for their own interests. That’s, I suppose, the long and short of it.”

Their own interests, huh? If anything, that only made the war even more hollow and pointless.

“Or at least, that’s how it’s *generally* understood,” said Lastiara, former holder of a key position within Whoseyards. “It looks like the Alliance top brass have been wanting a specific area of land in the Northern League for ages and ages. Apparently, they’ve been picking a fight with the Northern League since a thousand years ago to get their hands on it.”

Here she was, leaking the strategic aims of the allied forces of the Southern League like it was nothing. She must have had occasion to talk to the higher-ups on account of her position. It sounded like a state secret that would get you assassinated if you learned about it, but it was something else she’d said that caught my attention.

“A thousand years ago...”

To me, the motives fueling the Alliance or its wars were almost entirely somebody else’s problem. I was more fascinated by the idea that all this had been going on for over a millennium. That meant it probably had something to do with the birth of the Dungeon or its Guardians.

“Yeah. I’m told there was a battle not unlike the Border War a thousand years ago, and that started it all. Pious Levahnites *really* know how to hold a grudge over it, let me tell ya. The war they’re waging now might be something like an extension of that one. But when you talk about history a thousand years back, the details get passed down to the present day in the form of what’s all but myth and legend. Reading literature from a thousand years ago is wild; we’re talking ‘such and such cracked the ground with a finger flick’ level.”

“So there’s no accurate documentation of stuff that happened because it was a thousand years ago, huh?”

It was the same as when I’d hit the books to learn about “the Reaper.” The texts I’d found were so absurd as to be untrustworthy.

“Actually, it’s not so much because it happened a thousand years ago. Apparently, it’s more because the war didn’t end so favorably. The winning move a thousand years ago was the magic circle the enemy side’s Apostle used. And because that circle swallowed up living things across the whole continent,

very few people know the details. Let's see... If I recall, the death toll on both sides was ultimately around ninety percent, I think."

"Wait, *ninety* percent?"

Ninety percent killed. No normal war would ever yield a death toll that insane. The war would end before it ever reached such extreme numbers.

"Ninety percent's a lot, right?" she continued. "That's, like, world-collapse level. That's when they say the Apostle of truth and justice, plus Saint Tiara, took down the enemy Apostle who wanted a global collapse. War ends, everybody's happy, hip hip hooray. Or so the story goes."

That was how the end of the war a thousand years ago was recounted today. If that didn't sound suspicious, I didn't know what did. And if that story was to be believed, these 'Apostle Sith' and 'Saint Tiara' people raked in a total victory, after which Tiara founded a whole-ass religion before attempting to resurrect herself. Judging by her intention to cling to life, I didn't feel like she would have represented history very accurately. If anything, it made me think that what actually happened was that they chewed through ninety percent of their own forces in order to force a win. And what if even that figure was underselling it? Could it be that "ninety percent" was painting a rosier picture than the reality? I had a hunch that the war a thousand years ago ended not with ninety percent dead, but a hundred percent. That is, absolutely everybody died apart from Saint Tiara and the Apostle Sith, who twisted history to suit their needs.

Lastiara saw the grim look on my face and inferred what I was thinking. "I get why you'd think that, Kanami," she said with a wry smile. "But Levahnites believe this version of history from the bottom of their hearts, so don't pick it apart too much, okay? To the people of this day and age, the Church of Levahn's a well-crafted religion to abide by."

Levahnism *had* to be worthy of respect if Lastiara, whose life had come this close to being forfeit due to its teachings, was talking it up. In fact, were it not for having to rescue her from it, I might have come to that conclusion myself. After all, back when I'd first stumbled into the Dungeon and was about to die from poison, it had been Levahnite knights who'd saved my life. Moreover, judging by how Mr. Hine had lived his life and how Ms. Sera lived hers, the

religion's teachings couldn't be all that bad. In addition, none of the allocutions I'd heard forced anybody to do anything. Rather, they stated what they felt the proper path in life was.

"That may be true, I guess..." I didn't have any grounds to argue back, so I reluctantly accepted her remarks.

"Now, normally, the details of how the Church came to be and the truth behind what happened a thousand years ago would be lost in the shuffle...but not *this* time! Because who should we happen to have with us but a great and learned scholar who knows about the state of affairs from back then! Take it away, Professor Reaper!"

Reaper had been in a nearby seat nodding off. She snapped to attention with a start. "I dunno. I was playing with Lorwen the whole time, and before I knew it, I got swallowed up by the earth, so I don't know much! Come to think of it, that was a war, huh? I just realized, thinking back on it. The end!"

"That's a shame! Thank you anyway, Professor!"

I wasn't ready to drop the subject. There had to be more I could ask her. It would derail the conversation even more, but this was my chance to ask. "Hold on, wait a sec. Tell me, Reaper, have you heard any of the following four names before? Tida, Alty, Tiara, Sith."

"Hm, no, never heard of any of them."

"None of them? Even though Tiara, at least, should have been famous a thousand years ago?"

"In both the north and the south, some person I've never heard of was on the throne. At the very least, I don't think I've ever heard a name like *Tiara*."

A discrepancy in the legends surrounding the Church had come to light. Leaving enigmas like Tida and Alty aside, it was weird that she'd never heard of such eminent figures in the Church's history like Tiara or Sith.

"Okay then, were there any notably strong people besides Lorwen? They might show up down the road as Guardians."

"They flung me at Lorwen the moment I was born. I really don't know

anything. Sorry, mister.” She clasped her hands apologetically.

“Nah, *I’m* sorry. I’m asking unreasonable questions.”

It seemed she, too, understood that if she had more memories of that bygone era, they might prove handy in Dungeon diving. She grimaced, trying to remember something useful. “Ah! I know who was strong—the caster who created me! If they do end up showing up, it’d probably be as the Thief of Space’s Essence.”

She was speaking of the dimensional mage who had created the Reaper curse. The mage who had decided Reaper’s fate, creating her specially to engage Lorwen in a fight to the death.

I couldn’t say I had a very good impression of this individual. “What kinda person were they?”

“They had a short fuse, and they were real scary. About the only other info I know is they were a dimensional mage like you. They had a mask and stiff clothes, so I don’t know what they looked like.”

A mask? That word made my blood run hot. I got the feeling that I’d seen someone similar in a dream the other day.

“A mask... Do you at least know their name?”

“No, they launched me at Lorwen before I could ask, so I dunno.”

I dropped my shoulders in disappointment.

“I don’t know of any masked figures appearing in Whoseyards’s traditional history,” said Lastiara. “If *you’re* saying they’re strong, Reaper, then I’m sure they must’ve been a cut above the rest. I guess those in power really will bend history to suit their purpose given a thousand years of time, huh?”

And now that twisted version of history was taught in this world as general education. I needed to learn more about this stuff before we reached the mainland.

“Lastiara, could you tell me more about this ‘traditional history’? If the war a thousand years ago is connected to the current one, I’d like to know about it.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind, but considering what Reaper’s told us, you realize the

info's got, like, zero legitimacy, right?"

"I just wanna hear what people 'know,' so that's fine."

"Huh. All right, then; I'll blitz through all the important bits." She cleared her throat and started rattling off the narrative like she was reading aloud. "Our story begins when two shady-sounding beings called Apostles descend from the heavens to lead the world to peace. The continent sees more and more prosperity thanks to these two, but then for some reason one of them turns traitor, working with the mad monarch in the north to make the world all messed up. So the remaining Apostle of justice, Sith, works with Saint Tiara to unify the people of the south and present a united front against the Northern League. That's the main thread of the lore."

The second she'd said they'd come down from "the heavens," I figured it was pure myth, but I kept listening patiently.

"The Northern League was up to their eyeballs in monsters. They had treefolk so huge they could trample a country underfoot, undead whose throngs could cover the continent like dark clouds, ice snakes that could freeze all they touched, *et cetera et cetera*. But Saint Tiara was so strong she could knock those things out with a fingertip. What's more, her moral character was so sickeningly virtuous that, for some reason, everything she beat up ended up becoming friends with her."

The scale of the enemies had to be a joke, and no saint powerful enough to defeat such monstrosities could be human. If I'd heard all this back when I'd first arrived in this world, I'd have snorted at the idea. But not anymore. This wasn't somebody else's problem, not when I knew the monsterified Lorwen and Alty, among others. If, hypothetically, it had been the Maria or the Dia I knew today, I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd shown up in this story.

"So Saint Tiara kept making allies out of the enemies who barred her way and drove the forces of the Northern League to the wall. Then she defeated the mad monarch and tried to persuade the traitor Apostle Diplacura to give in. The traitor was a bad loser, though, and she sacrificed her life to activate a fiendish magic circle in order to lay waste to the whole continent."

The magic circle that had supposedly swallowed everything up. That had to be

behind Lorwen and Reaper getting thrown into the present era, right? Lastiara's tale did line up with what Reaper had said here and there, as if the story itself were insisting it wasn't a lie.

"That magic circle drew the war to a close. Although many precious lives were lost in the struggle, the great Saint Tiara and the Apostle Sith did their best to reconstruct civilization on the continent. Saint Tiara laid the foundations of magic and founded Levahnism. The Apostle Sith, meanwhile, brought together the heroes she'd fought alongside as she traveled far and wide, working miracle after miracle for the masses. Thank you, oh, thank you so very much, Saint Tiara, Apostle Sith! Hip, hip, hooray!"

Lastiara's explanation was pretty broad, but I got the gist. Before I could convey my thoughts, she continued.

"Whaddya think? Ludicrous enough for ya? And that was me making it more digestible too. If I got into the nitty-gritty, you'd hear stuff like how Saint Tiara used a single finger to slice through a tree so giant it pierced the heavens."

She seemed to be having fun telling me all this. The tales passed down the centuries were a hit with her.

"It certainly ain't serious," I replied.

Clearly, there were tons of stories about Saint Tiara being superhuman, which was understandable—who else but a superhuman could defeat all those crazy monsters from a thousand years ago? But in my honest opinion, those weren't the only "monsters" in the stories. Saint Tiara and the Apostle Sith were plenty monstrous themselves, and I reckoned that had implications for us too. If we continued to grow stronger at this rate, there was a good chance we'd reach the same heights. I didn't think becoming stronger was a bad thing, but the idea that we could level up just by fighting lots of battles in the Dungeon was so...

A voice from behind suddenly said, "It's written all over you, lad. You're thinking, *What's this mean for me?*"

I turned around to see that Ms. Wyss and Dia had emerged from inside. *You don't see that pairing every day*, I thought to myself as I stared.

"I'm good at holy healing magic too, so I felt like looking after her. Plus, I

asked for her advice on a bunch of stuff,” Dia explained.

Lastiara wasn’t the only one aboard the *Living Legend* who could patch someone up. Dia was also an expert at magic. Lastiara had probably asked Dia sometime the day before to check up on Ms. Wyss. I could also see why Dia would ask for her advice; Ms. Wyss did exude a mysterious sense of security and wisdom. It was the same sense of security you got when receiving the counsel of a venerable and honorable knight a generation older than you.

Now that I understood why they were together, Ms. Wyss picked up where the conversation had left off. “What are your impressions of the story Ms. Lastiara just told you, lad?”

“My impressions? Well, I thought it was a bit too ridiculous. I can’t believe all that happened...”

“I don’t doubt it. I don’t believe those tales either, but I’m sure you in particular don’t want to.”

She’d changed my “can’t believe” to a “don’t want to,” a small but meaningful smile on her face. How was I supposed to take that remark except as a “I see how anxious it makes you”? That anxiety that if we kept on getting stronger and stronger, we’d eventually turn as downright inhuman as those legendary figures from history.

She smiled reassuringly. “It’s okay, lad. What happened a thousand years ago won’t happen now. It’s not the same; I know it.”

I could tell from her expression that she said that out of consideration for me and that she meant no harm. But at the same time, I figured that was awfully precise wording. It was like she knew everything there was to know about both now and back then. I wondered what she was hiding, and I ended up slightly narrowing my eyes at her in a bit of a glare.

She gently changed the topic. “Now then, lad, I hear you’re tackling the Dungeon again today. Are you making it to Floor 40 soon?”

She must have had no intention of talking about it until the time came, so I figured pressing her would be pointless.

“Yes. We’ll probably reach Floor 40 soon. Possibly today.”

“Then I suppose I’ll tell you everything I know. You should be able to get there relatively quickly that way.”

“Are you sure? You’re Dungeon diving rivals with our party, aren’t you?”

“That’s all right. Cooperation is vital in all things, after all.”

She whipped out a brush, some ink, and some parchment paper, then explained the information she had on the floors up to and including Floor 39. All of that information was gleaned from her own experiences, and it was nigh priceless.

“Therefore,” she continued, “Floor 39 is definitely where you’ll have the easiest time monster hunting. And it’s great that you can make Floor 40 into a rest zone on account of Doctor Ide’s absence. It’s a pleasant, grassy field, so you could even have a picnic there...”

She went as far as giving us her suggestions for the optimal place to carry out our objective (level grinding), as well as information on Floor 41.

“That’s the extent of what I’ve seen, so that’s about everything I can tell you. You’re better off with good swimmers in your party for that section. Oh, but I can’t come, mind you. Even after getting a day’s rest, I only recovered enough to be able to walk around and hold a conversation.” Ms. Wyss had a certain air that communicated that she *would* have helped out had she been in fighting shape.

I took her advice to heart and considered who to take with me. Dia raised her hand to cut in.

“Sorry, Kanami, but I can’t come today. Lately, things have been getting me all exhausted, and I’m weirdly sleepy. Besides, somebody should be around to treat Wyss in case something happens to her.”

“Gotcha. Yeah, of course. That works. Spend the day relaxing on the ship.”

From the members of yesterday’s party, Dia had the most trouble swimming. Underwater Dungeon diving when you only had one nonprosthetic arm must have been extremely draining.

“Mr. Kanami,” said Maria, “I’m no good at swimming either, so I’ll stay too.

Please leave any hostile pirate ships to me. I'll drive them away *politely* this time."

"Makes sense. You shouldn't have to strain yourself by joining the dive when we're going through the underwater section."

With those three out, that limited my options. Lastiara, who was right beside me, was champing at the bit to participate, but I wanted two other people. I deployed *Dimension* across the whole ship, searching for the dragonewt who hadn't even come out when the ship was attacked—or should I say, the dragoNEET. It was making me waste MP before the dive, but the cooperation of someone who was strong in underwater battles was indispensable. I caught her running from place to place before sunup and added both her and the kindhearted and hardworking Reaper to the day's party before activating the *Connection* portal leading into the Dungeon. This marked our fourth dive since the sea voyage had begun. Maria and Ms. Wyss saw us off from the deck, and the four of us passed through the gateway.



As we were grasping the tendencies of the Dungeon more and more, we were able to explore it more efficiently, and this underwater zone was no exception. The basic battle strategy was simple: lean on Snow, who was formidable in underwater battles, and make use of Reaper's magic to avoid encounters.

We spent the morning making it back to the point where we'd finished our dive last time and entered the next underwater segment, Floor 37. We were fully prepared this time around—I was less fatigued and had twice as much air in my inventory today. Furthermore, I knew where to go thanks to Ms. Wyss's information, and perhaps our careful and conscientious preparations were paying off, because we were able to swim through Floor 37 completely safely.

The only difference compared to Floor 35 was that there were more obstacles caused by aquatic plants. As we descended to Floor 38, we were first surprised by the changes in the corridors. Similar to some of the earlier floors, the corridors were submerged in shallow water, but plants were growing in clusters on the surrounding stone walls, not unlike a tropical rain forest. The sheer impact of having to go underwater had dazzled me, but the number of plants

had certainly increased a handful of floors ago, and it was that proliferation of plant life that was the most conspicuous feature now. I hadn't seen an area with a lot of greenery in the Dungeon since Floor 1.

With a new world sprawled before us, Lastiara was hyped up. "Wow! It's chock-full of plants I've never seen before! Wonder what kinda monsters we'll run into?!"

I admonished the girl who'd probably stray out of sight the moment I took my eyes off her. "Lastiara, don't touch the plants. And no wandering around. Also, we're not making any detours. We're following the route Ms. Wyss told us to."

"I know, I know. The plan is to train on Floor 39. I can hold off on adventure for one measly floor."

I was relieved to hear that. "All right, good. Now then, let's go with the usual tactics for this floor too."

A cursory *Dimension* scan told me that the number of aquatic monsters had decreased and the number of plant monsters had increased. Plant monsters generally had poor mobility. In terms of simply avoiding enemies, you could say that Floor 38 was easy street. Even if we did bump into a surprise encounter somehow, we had Reaper's darkness magic to easily get us out of such a jam. Consequently, we reached Floor 39 without a hitch.

On Floor 39, the greenness was brought to the fore even more; it was a small forest now. The number of plants had doubled, while the water level at our feet remained the same. Almost everything was a deep, dark green, and vines and ivy lay every which way I looked.

"Phew. We're finally here. All right, let's hunt us some monsters, shall we?"

"Let's GOOO!" Now that she could go hog wild, Lastiara drew her sword with enthusiasm.

Before she started running, Reaper and I scanned the surroundings for enemies. The structure of Floor 39 was quite similar to the special subarea of the very first floor, except there were fewer insect-type monsters than expected. The lion's share of monsters were plantlike. There were flowers that scattered poisonous pollen, others with gaping, Venus flytrap-like mouths, and

trees that dripped with viscous sap, in addition to a wide variety of other plants that were wriggling...and walking.

It was a strange sight. Of course, some of the things didn't move, probably the types of monster to disguise themselves as harmless-looking flora to strike the unsuspecting. Even with the observational power of *Dimension*, it wasn't possible to see through their mimicry so easily. These monsters looked to be nuisances for sure, though the ones that concealed themselves were a good matchup for me. With my menu-sight, I could never mistake a monster for a normal plant, so as long as I spared no effort, the danger was close to zero for me.

"Okay, so, let's do as we planned and find out how strong each species is and how much EXP it yields. You guys take down the monsters; I'll handle the enemy detection and tallying."

"Yes! It's slaughter time!" cried Lastiara.

"Uh, right!" said Snow.

"Let's do it!" Reaper agreed.

Our first encounter was against a huge red flower reminiscent of a rafflesia. The monster's name was Stru.

"Everybody, hold your breath while fighting it!"

The Stru spread its pollen as soon as it saw us. Its movements reminded me of the Poison Salamanders of Floor 24, so I instructed everybody to avoid breathing in the pollen. The Stru then adapted by swinging its vine, but it was a bad matchup against us. The three enemies it faced all specialized in close-quarters combat, and its vines were sliced to pieces in the blink of an eye, allowing us to approach.

Unable to respond to the slashes coming at it from three directions, the Stru's petals were torn off and its stem snapped at its base. Up until now, monsters would fade into light and disappear if we crushed its head or heart, but it was difficult to tell whether the plant-adjacent creature had been defeated. It was no longer intact, but it was alive enough to keep spreading its pollen. Only after it was chopped into more than a hundred pieces did the Stru finally turn into

light and vanish into nothingness. It had fought valiantly, but the battle was over before it began. It was probably a monster that weakened its enemies with its pollen before attacking, and unfortunately for it, I'd been able to spot it beforehand with my menu-sight, preventing it from playing to its strengths.

Ms. Wyss had been right: Floor 39 was a fantastic hunting ground. It was a high-level floor, so all the monsters were strong in their own right, but most of them specialized in camouflage and surprise attacks, and my detection abilities could negate those strategies.

"Not bad, not bad. What say we keep on hunting monsters here? Let's find out what the easiest prey among them is and kill them in droves."

My companions all seemed to be thinking the same thing, so they were down for that. They slew one plant monster after the next. Another great thing about this floor was that enemies didn't gather together or mob you when you defeated one. Though that made our pace slower, it also made for risk-free level grinding. I thought Lastiara would complain about the systematic nature of it all, but not so. She looked fairly happy about getting a chance to fight so many different kinds of enemies.

We'd already spotted the staircase leading to Floor 40 but continued to fill in the map, searching for our ideal hunting grounds. Needless to say, we avoided bosses via *Dimension*. Even the battle-loving Lastiara didn't get out of step, possibly because her mistakes while fighting the Gulflood Jelly still stung.

We spent several hours slaying monsters. Having eaten through both our stamina and magical energy with the continuous battles, we decided to aim for Floor 40 to take a breather, just as planned. While hunting, we'd filled out most of the map of the floor, so we arrived in front of the stairs in no time.

"According to Ms. Wyss, there's no danger, but let's not let our guard down getting there."

We carefully descended to Floor 40, staying cautious all the while. The farther down the stairs we walked, the more the deep-green color of the walls faded, going from dark to normal to yellow-green. The dense forest was displaying brighter and brighter hues.

And the world that greeted us beyond those stairs?

It was a great plain. There were no obstacles in sight, and blades of grass dozens of centimeters high lay beneath our feet. It did feel a little humid, but that was about it. This was a world devoid of any threats.

A cool breeze caressed my cheeks, making me feel at ease. It was an extremely different vibe from the scorching hell of Floor 10 and the gemstone flower garden of Floor 30. There truly was nothing here. Nothing and no one. You could easily grasp the entirety of the chamber from end to end with a single sweeping glance. The Guardian of Floor 40 was nowhere to be found either. The place was deserted.

“Urgh,” said Lastiara. “Looks like it’s true—Wyss did awaken the Guardian before us.” She sighed. “Damn, they beat us to it. I’m a bit disappointed.”

“Well, I welcome it. There’s no reason we need to defeat all the Guardians to get to the deepest level. That other party can keep the Thief of Wood’s Essence as far as I’m concerned. That way, I can take things easier.”

That was my honest opinion. With both Alty and Lorwen, I’d had to run around like an errand boy to clear their lingering attachments. I wanted to focus on Palinchron at the moment, so this turn of events suited me just fine.

“It does make things easier, but still...” she replied, long in the face.

Of course, there was no shortage of downsides—for example, the Guardian’s magic gem. If we obtained the magic gem of the Thief of Wood’s Essence, we could acquire a power potent enough to shake the world. Then again, overcoming a Guardian’s trial and laying hands on one was no mean feat.

For some reason, I got the feeling that this was okay. I didn’t know why, but my hunch was that in the end, clearing up the attachments of the Guardians was my duty. I also figured I had to go out to meet the lord of this great plain. I was the one who should lend an ear to his desires first. The idea clung to my mind and wouldn’t let go.

I shook off those bizarre thoughts and called for everyone to take a breather. “Don’t fret over it, Lastiara. It’s going according to plan. For now, just think about resting up.”

Taking Ms. Wyss’s advice to heart, we made something of a picnic out of it. I

retrieved the snacks Maria had made us from my inventory, and we sat down on the grass and partook together.

“Ah, hey, mister,” said Reaper after a while. “It just occurred to me—if you and me aren’t on the ship, maybe it’s gonna veer off course?”

For the most part, she and I handled the management of the ship, so it seemed a low-key sense of responsibility had formed within her.

“I checked this morning, so it should be fine. If it does veer off, we can course-correct. I asked Maria if she could look at stuff while we’re gone, so...if nothing goes awry, we’ll probably reach the mainland tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, huh? We managed to get to Floor 40 already, so I guess we really are on track.”

“Yeah. We’re on track,” I repeated. “The plan’s working.”

We were happy that the voyage and Dungeon diving were going well. I broke into a smile, then I caught myself and focused my mind once more. I was keenly aware that it was at times like this, when everything was working out, that we had to be the most vigilant.

Once we finished eating, we exercised caution and made the most of our time, going back to Floor 39. Today, we planned to level grind as much as time allowed. I suffused the corridors with *Dimension* and searched for slow-moving plant monsters, which we slew carefully and discreetly in turn. We did get attacked several times with status effect-inflicting moves, but Lastiara’s holy magic could always heal us barring anything crazy happening.

As a result, hunting on Floor 39 only required a smattering of *Dimension* and holy magic. Combined with the menu-sight and Swordplay skills we had on hand, we needed nothing else. We were able to continue hunting like clockwork for a long time with minimal magic energy consumption. Whenever we got tired, we just took a break on the utterly deserted, threat-free Floor 40.

Our party hunted, hunted, and hunted monsters. Our cue to wrap it up was a slight drowsiness; when Reaper yawned adorably, we came to the conclusion that everyone’s concentration was waning.

“Let’s call it a day, guys. We’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

I placed a *Connection* gateway at random, and we passed through it and returned to the deck of the ship, where the sky was dark and the only light was provided by the moon and stars. It was night already. After everyone on board enjoyed a nice dinner, I returned to my cabin as usual and went to sleep as usual. All that would differ from the norm was our plan for the next day. I would sleep, I would dream, I would wake up, but this time, when I woke, I'd be on the mainland: a fresh new battleground.

I was sure that society there would be completely different from what I was used to with the Dungeon Alliance, but I was able to fall asleep peacefully nonetheless. We had used our time during the voyage well, exploring plenty of the Dungeon and thoroughly preparing. The personal growth that accompanied the realization that everything really was going smoothly washed away my anxiety.

I would be able to face that fateful day in the best possible way I could think of.



Early the next morning, I woke up and came out onto the deck of the ship by myself. I wasn't up so early because I couldn't get any sleep; if anything, you could say I was in top form because I had slept so soundly. Far from languid, I was feeling positively light on my feet.

"There it is."

Under the sky, the sun's rays were just beginning to radiate out. I hit the edge of the deck, spotting a landmass far in the distance, which traced a thin, jagged line between the calm blue sea and the placid white sky. Those had to have been the continent's towering mountains. As the ship drew closer, the jagged line grew thicker, bigger, until gradually, we were close enough that I could call it a proper block of earth as opposed to a mere hint of one on the horizon.

We were finally here.

Breathing in the fresh early morning air, I clenched my fists. Just the thought that the enemy lurked somewhere on this continent made me tense up. Soon we would meet our nemesis. Soon we would meet Palinchron.

I stared at the continent floating on the horizon, the fight that awaited us weighing on my mind. Then I tightly gripped the hilt of the sword hanging at my waist and vowed to myself that I would *not* lose.

Afterword

Long time no see. Volume 7 is finally here. Allow me to apologize; in the afterword for volume 6, I said that in volume 7, they would reach the mainland...but our protagonist and his party have yet to set foot on those new lands. Instead, volume 7 centered around the voyage and Dungeon diving, featuring nothing but the interactions between our stable of heroines. The tone was so light compared to the heaviness of the story up to this point that one might mistake it for a side story. Of course, there were important events that affected the main plot too, but for the most part, it was all kissy-kissy, lovey-dovey. Before I sat down to write it, I'd thought we'd get to the mainland with time to spare. I'm sorry my powers weren't up to the task.

Beginning every afterword by asking your forgiveness is practically an established practice at this point, but I can't let myself get too used to it, so I'd like to make the *next* one something nice and refreshing. Next time, I will. I swear it!

Our main cast took a short break during volume 7, but that's over now. I plan for the mainland arc to begin in earnest starting with volume 8. Expect a new Guardian, the showdown against Palinchron, Kanami's backstory, and more of Hine's jewelculus. I'd go so far as to say this next arc will form the backbone of *Dungeon Dive* (which isn't to say it'll mainly take place in the Dungeon, mind you).

Lastly, I'd like to express my gratitude to all those who have cooperated and supported me in publishing this seventh volume. Thank you so much for the gorgeous illustrations, which are always so exquisite that I can't help but feel guilty for imposing. In addition, I'm using the many comments I receive on the web version as a reference for my work. And to the editor, publisher, and everyone involved in the making of this book, I say thank you very much. See you next time!



DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

7

By Tarisa Warinai Illustrated by Saki Ukai



"YOU'RE
NOT ALONE,
LAD. COME
WHAT MAY,
YOU'RE NO
LONGER ALL
ALONE."

Wyss

Bonus Short Stories

Elmirahd Pens a Hero Tale

“And so I have been tasked with laying out the events of this year’s Brawl in the form of a play,” announced Elmirahd Siddark upon marching into the office of a rival guild.

In the face of his sheer bluntness, I, Epic Seeker submaster Tayly Linkar, had no choice but to reply through my disorientation. “Uh, huh... Naturally, I don’t mind cooperating, but are you really going to make Kanami the protagonist?”

“Yes. The calls from citizens who missed the matches the champion fought in are staggering in number. Swayed by the demands of the masses, Laoravia is spearheading the making of a play, and I was chosen as project leader. And just so you know, if I’m to be doing this, I intend to do a flawless job of it.”

“Wait, I’m sorry? Are you really making it yourself, Lord Siddark?”

“Something the matter with that?”

Yes, obviously. It’s just weird. But I resisted the urge to say that aloud, staring at the face that could be said to belong to the number one handsomest man in the nation. As always, he had a dignified air about him, the very image of a noble. For a noble among nobles like him, wasn’t a play something he would watch and enjoy as opposed to something he would *make*?

That was why I thought it strange. I contemplated what reasons Lord Siddark, illustrious member of the four leading noble houses of the Alliance, might have to take personal action. Then I remembered how our guildmaster had defeated him in the Brawl quarterfinals. Maybe he held a grudge and was out to tarnish the poor kid’s reputation.

There’s no doubt about it. The moment he heard Kanami’s courage and grit would be immortalized as a play, he pulled strings to cut in. All to have his revenge!

“Er...if that’s the case, we at Epic Seeker don’t mind handling it ourselves. There’s no need for you to bother yourself with something this trifling, Lord Sidda—”

“It wouldn’t be fair to leave it all up to Epic Seeker. We will compile the facts and present them to the public. Know that I’ve come here to fulfill that aim.”

“Uh, right, of course.”

I was trying to defend Kanami’s honor, but he ruthlessly cut through my opposition. He wasn’t giving an inch, and there was no one who could stand up to the eldest son of one of the great noble houses.

“By the way, I intend to take charge of the script, the composition, the direction, and everything else. In order to complete the script as soon as possible, I want to interview you lot about his everyday life before the Brawl.”

“What?! You’re doing everything yourself? But...why?!”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m aiming for perfection, and I’ll brook no objections.”

Just as I surmised, the chances seemed higher he would interfere. Kanami’s standing in the Alliance from this point onward was subject to the whims of the man who had taken full authority for the project into his own hands. Well, I was determined to safeguard our hero’s good name by hook or by crook.

Lord Siddark sat himself haughtily down on the office sofa, and the interview (or should I say cross-examination?) began.

“Now then, do tell me everything you know. Start from the beginning.”

Left with no other choice, I picked my words carefully and explained how Kanami had gotten started as guildmaster. “The boy was a new recruit when one of our members, Palinchron, brought him in from I don’t know where. My apologies, but in point of fact, nobody in the guild knows where he came from.”

“Hm...as I thought, he’s been shrouded in mystery since before joining Epic Seeker. Go on.”

“Right after, that numbskull Palinchron said out of nowhere that he would make the boy guildmaster. Needless to say, we all objected, and as a result, we conducted mock battles, him versus everyone else. Our resident numbskull

proposed that if no one could beat him, we shouldn't complain. The words out of that dummy's mouth..."

By pinning the blame for the unseemliness of it on Palinchron, I emphasized that Kanami himself was truly free of fault. And since this was Palinchron we were talking about, nothing would change if *his* reputation soured more.

"That happened on day one?! I did wonder why Kanami was serving as guildmaster. To think he was forced into it so..."

"Yes, that blockhead was being *very* pushy—"

"No. Palinchron Regacy is no fool. If anything, he possesses a discerning eye. He detected Kanami's talents and placed him in the position he deserved, regardless of the criticism he received from his peers. Heh. I expect no less of that wunderkind. I can see it now: Kanami showing off his skills with the blade during the mock battle against the rest of the guild, captivating them all with his sheer artistry. The moment they all recognized him as their master."

Actually, back then, Kanami's sword skills hadn't reached their current insane heights, but it seemed Lord Siddark believed he had been Blademaster level from the start. As my aim was to make sure Kanami's reputation didn't take a hit, I didn't disabuse him of that notion.

"Yes, it's just as you say, Lord Siddark. And once he became guildmaster, he met then-submaster Snow, and...heh heh. Yessir. That's where Kanami and Snow's budding love affair began! Of course, at first, Snow was her lethargic self, but the more she interacted with him and the more guildwork they did—"

"That's okay. I don't need to hear about Snow. I'm sure it's the same old same old with her. Let me guess, she foisted all the work on the good-natured Kanami. Don't need to be a seer to guess that."

That wasn't exactly the response I'd wanted to hear upon mentioning my pride and joy, Snow. It was like he had more of an interest in Kanami than in his betrothed.

"Okay, then. Well, their work together formed the greater part of his daily life at Epic Seeker, so if I leave all that out, the next big event would be his meeting Mr. Lorwen. He snatched up both Mr. Lorwen and little Reaper from the

Dungeon.”

“That’s what I wanna know about! I knew it—he bumped into Lorwen Arrace in the Dungeon, did he?! So...how did he and Kanami spend their days?! What did the two who would eventually face off in the finals talk about?! Tell me this instant!”

“Um, yes. So...”

Whoa. He was comporting himself a bit oddly. He was getting so excited hearing about Kanami’s activities that he reminded me of a hyped-up little kid. He just wanted to know more about the boy. Nothing more, nothing less. I sensed no shred of envy or malice there, nor any ulterior motives or intention to drag his name through the mud. That threw me for a loop, but I did as I was told and recounted what I knew.

“So as you can see, he and Mr. Lorwen got along great. They worked together, and trained together, stuff like—”

“I see! So that’s what led to that master-versus-disciple showdown they had! And then?! What next?!”

“Before the Brawl, they took on a dragon-slaying mission, and I do believe it was Kanami who delivered the finishing blow. It was around then his sword skills developed rapidly.”

“Ha ha! That’s the hero who defeated me for you! He even caught up to Sir Lorwen, lifetime honorary Blademaster! How gallant! Oh, right, I need to write all this down! In order to save the caged daughter of a noble house, our Hero of Laoravia took the head of a dragon unaided! His swordsmanship surpassing even that of the Blademaster Fenrir!”

“Well, that’s a bit exaggerated, isn’t it?”

“Hold your tongue! Exaggerated, say you?! When it comes to *Kanami*, such feats are par for the course!” he shouted like a child whose favorite thing in the world had been mocked.

It was then it dawned on me. After that display, how could I not realize it? The man was just a Kanami fanboy...and an off-puttingly high-intensity one at that.

“Uh, certainly, knowing *him*, he could do it... I suppose? And sure, *maybe*, he did it all to save Snow from her anguish... Maybe.”

Personally, I’d be more inclined to watch the play if it were centered on Snow rather than Mr. Lorwen. It would be a great chance to make her lovability and adorability known throughout the Alliance.

“Right?!” he replied.

“Yes! Absolutely! Let’s go with that!”

“Ha ha! Now, on to the next great feats of his! Tell me more, Linkar!”

Our interests aligned—I approved of the credulous encomium he called a play. Our scriptwriting lasted well into the night, and come daybreak, we were still at it.

“Oho! I like the sound of that, Linkar!”

“Heh heh! You’re a man of sense and taste, Lord Siddark!”

The two of us had hit it off, and now our play was nearing completion. For decades to come, the theaters and troubadours of the Alliance would recite the legend by the name of *The Brawl of Kanami the Hero*.

Let’s Make an Anti-See-Through Barrier

The ship we purchased, the *Living Legend*, was a great vessel. The merchant told us it was a fuel-inefficient jalopy, but if you paid that shortcoming no mind, you could call it world-class. The onboard equipment and facilities wouldn’t be out of place in a noble’s mansion, with an ample number of magic gems used throughout all manner of magic tool furnishings. There was no more convenient place to spend one’s days. What really exemplified that was the bath chamber on board. The fact that we could relax in a hot tub was a luxury only the *Living Legend* could provide.

There was, however, one problem with that luxury. One complaint that arose on this day. And it was something that couldn’t be overlooked during a voyage with mixed-gender company.

Maria groaned, her arms folded in front of the entrance to the baths. “It’s a

glorious tub, but at this rate...Mr. Kanami can peep on us as much as he likes.”

“Wait, what?” I definitely wasn’t expecting *that*. I’d been called down here after being told it was an emergency, but now I just wanted to run for the hills.

“In the past, I didn’t give the idea of bathing in your vicinity any thought because I didn’t have a full grasp of your abilities, but now that I think about it, that was quite risky of me. The baths in this ship have no barrier, so you can use *Dimension* to peep to your heart’s content. Let’s do something about that.”

Maria had also called the others here. Lastiara was first to give her two cents. “I mean, I don’t really care either way. Also, why now, after all this time?”

“Ms. Lastiara, let’s exercise a bit more discretion, shall we? I know your actual age is three, but you do still have the body of an adult. You mustn’t ever bare your skin to the opposite sex so lightly.”

“I understand that. But the only guy on the ship’s Kanami, so what’s the big deal?”

Just like that, it came to light that the most gorgeous girl in the group wasn’t wary in the slightest, and as the only guy present, it made me want to flee in embarrassment.

What Snow followed up with didn’t help matters either. “Maybe if it’s *him* peeking I don’t mind so much... Heh heh heh...” she said, shooting glances my way.

That was Snow for you. A noted expert on driving me up a wall. But Maria was quick to reprimand her moronic comment in harsh tones.

“Ms. Snow, we’re also meeting to discuss countermeasures against all your eavesdropping.”

“Huh?! You’re gonna counter my magic too?!” she shouted, genuinely astonished despite how blindingly obvious that was. In a dither, she looked around with a vexed expression, but of course, nobody offered her a lifeboat. She was getting her just deserts.

Maria continued, ignoring her. “What do you think, Dia?”

“You’re totally right, Maria! It’s... It’s, it’s it’s not like *I’m* worried about

getting peeped on, but we do gotta do something about this kinda thing, you know?! So, yeah!”

He seemed pretty damn worried about it. Dia was reacting the most like a girl out of all of them, beet red in the face.

“Uh-huh. Nice answer, Dia. Next we have Reaper. Your thoughts?”

“Big brother and I are linked to begin with. My body getting seen makes no difference to me! So if you ask me, I’d say maybe it’s not so necessary.”

“Mr. Kanami,” said Maria after a pause, “what exactly is the meaning of that?”

Ms. Sera pressed closer to me, shuddering with rage. “You! *You!* You would lay your hands on a *child* like Reaper?!”

“Hold on, wait up! Hold on a second! Look, it’s...it’s true I might know Reaper’s sizes or whatever, but I do my best not to look at that kinda stuff! I swear! And I have the same policy with *Dimension!* I don’t think about you guys’ bodies at all!”

“I see,” said Maria. “Well, this is *you* we’re talking about, so I believe you. That said, the fact that you don’t think anything of us as ladies *at all* is something of a bitter pill in and of itself.”

Ugh, what do you want from me, then?

Realizing that at this rate I’d be criticized no matter how I replied, I understood that I had no choice but to flee at full throttle. “Uh, actually...wouldn’t it be, like, better if you guys talked about it while I’m not around? Can I, like, go back to my room for a sec?”

“No. For the time being, we’ll ask Dia to make an anti-magic barrier. You’ll be here to test whether you can see through that barrier and into the baths using *Dimension.*”

So she meant to have the barrier erected right away, and for me to stress test it. If you asked me, there wasn’t much of a point in having *me* test it; I got the feeling that I could manipulate how durable it ended up being by going easy on it.

There was a whole bunch I wanted to say, but before I could, Lastiara gleefully jumped at the idea of the stress test. She was always a believer in fun above all else.

“Now that sounds like a hoot! All right, I’ll be standing on the other side of the door, so let’s see if you can defend against Kanami’s *Dimension*, Dia!”

And with that, the construction of the bath chamber barrier began. The barrier whose purpose was to prevent any potential peeping by me...and whose creation I was helping with. To be honest, it didn’t make sense.

Sure enough, the making of the barrier didn’t go smoothly. At one point, Lastiara was actually changing clothes on the other side of the door for some reason. At another, Snow started interfering in order to prevent countermeasures against her eavesdropping powers. At another, Reaper got bored and entered the baths herself. It was truly rough going from all the trouble we ran into.

That night, the barrier was complete—at the cost of my stomach health. But that wasn’t the last of the ulcer-inducing incidents. Frighteningly, my boat voyage had only just begun...

The Otherworld Heroines' Otherworld Massages, Part 3

Maybe it was because in this world, it was magic and not science that people built up over time, but I was always bumping into culture shocks I would never have expected. Basically everything anyone did had magic involved in some form, and since I was so used to living in modern society, every day was full of surprises. One recent example that was fresh in my mind was magic-assisted massages.

Back when I was living in Laoravia, before embarking on the sea voyage, I received one massage from Maria and one from Snow. Maria had used fire magic and Snow vibration magic, resulting in Maria burning my back and Snow damn near killing me. I was surprised, or rather, frightened. Truly, truly frightened. I vowed inwardly to never receive a massage again.

Sadly, reality didn't always oblige, my vow to myself notwithstanding, for there was another girl who was stirred to action after hearing about my two massages. It was Lastiara, the one who loved anything that seemed fun. All throughout the voyage, she'd keep going, "Feeling tired? I'll massage you if you like?" and I'd keep replying, "That's okay, I'm good."

But she just wouldn't give up. In the end, she started whining, "What, *still*?" Kicking up a fuss over wanting a turn too like the little kid she effectively was. And once things got to *that* point, it was more of a pain trying to dissuade her than not. Plus, I did have feelings for her, which went most of the way. I told her that she could give me a *quick little* massage, and just like that, she was rubbing my shoulders while I was sitting in a deck chair.

"How's that feel, good sir?" she asked like a consummate masseuse. No idea where she learned how to talk like one.

"I hate to admit it, but you're good."

"Aren't I? I was *born* dexterous. I can do pretty much anything, really."

Why had I doubted Lastiara's massage skills? Any parlor of pros would snatch her up in a heartbeat. I'd thought that thanks to her personality, it would end up turning into something stranger than this. I closed my eyes, and a little bit of

the fatigue I'd accrued on this trip melted away. After a few minutes of Lastiara massaging my shoulders, right after I let my guard all the way down, she proved I'd been right to doubt her.

"A blood mage of my caliber can even massage you in a way that improves your blood flow. Let me show ya."

"Huh? Ah, uh, cool. I do think I feel kinda nice and warm now."

She started rubbing my shoulders with some blood magic without stopping to hear me say yes first. Magic-assisted massages triggered a trauma response in me, but the lovely effect hit me before I could even warn or stop her. That was my worst lapse of vigilance all day.

"Yeah! And I know lots of other good techniques too. They're inscribed in my blood!"

"You don't gotta do anything fancy. Just give me a normal massage. I want normal..."

"Like, for example, a massage using wind magic. I can loosen up muscle stiffness with the spell that makes lightning bzzt right through you."

"Wait, lightning? Wait, I don't— Gwahhh!"

Electricity coursed through me. Her point-blank lightning spell made my body go rigid and immobile. I tumbled down from my chair and hit the ground face down. Then she sat astride me.

"Got you! Hee hee. It's a full-body massage or nothing! Otherwise it's not as fun for me!"

"Wh-Why you!"

It seemed this was what she'd been after from the beginning. After restraining me, she gave a smile of great glee as she worked her magic energy.

"Let's see, Mar-Mar used fire magic, and Snow used non-elemental magic...so why don't I try using all the other elements for your massage? See what happens? I think I'll go for water magic first. I'll manipulate the water in your body and boost your health. Or you know, something like that."

"Hey! Don't make me your guinea pig! Y-You little—"

Spooked for my well-being, I tried to escape.

“Ah, no moving your body. Bzzt.”

It was no use. Another electric attack temporarily paralyzed me.

“Stop hitting me with point-blank electric shocks! Fuck, that hurts!”

“But if I go softer on you, you’ll keep struggling.”

“You took a huge chunk of my HP! That shit deals crazy damage, you know!”

Looking at my menu, the sheer damage might even be akin to a hit from a Dungeon monster. In other words, one false step and I was dead as a doornail.

“Oh yeah, look at that. You did take a ton of damage off that...but it’s A-OK, Kanami! I can use healing magic!”

“So?!”

“So even if you take damage from the body-moisture massage I’m about to give you, there’s no need to worry!”

“No need to worry my ass!”

What sprang to mind right then were Maria’s and Snow’s massages. Both had been accompanied by horrendous pain, and both had taken me to the very brink of death. And now, history was about to repeat itself.

“No, stop! Don’t mix magic and massages! I’m telling you, it’s legit dangerous!”

“It’ll be *fine*. I can see how much HP you’ve got left, and I’m good at healing. You’re not gonna *die*.”

“You say that like it’s a given you’re gonna bring me to *near* death through your massage!”

“Heh heh heh... Once I’m done with the water element, let’s go with wood or earth next. If I bury you in the ground, will you perk up like a plant? Ah, some time’s passed. Bzzt.”

“Don’t electrocute me like it’s routine! You’ve really got no intention of letting me go, huh?!”

Due to her electric magic and her being on top of me, I was totally unable to wrest myself free. Then I felt the activation of water magic through my back, just as Lastiara began her full-body massage. And frankly, it did feel good. Unfortunately, that pleasant sensation was counterbalanced by the constant anxiety. Also, what exactly *was* a body-moisture massage, anyway? It sounded scary as hell.

“Somebody save m—”

“Bzzt.”

Thus, I was subjected to this human experimentation she called a massage until the moment my other allies arrived on the deck. The end result? She did make me feel light as a feather. Yet it had also been more than enough to make my phobia of massages full-blown. That night, I swore to myself yet again that I would never let anyone else massage me. I really did. However, that wasn't the end of my battle against massages. I had other friends on this ship. Other friends who had yet to give me one.

My ordeal wasn't over.

To be continued...

Let's Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 7

At present, I was in quite a shitty position at Eltraliew Academy. How shitty, you may ask. I'll tell you. It was I-dunno-when-somebody-might-stab-me-from-behind-level shitty.

It all started a week ago when, invited by the student council president of our academy, the noble-born Karamia Arrace, I showed up at her house, where I met the head of the clan, a ripped old man named Fenrir Arrace, holder of the you've-gotta-be-kidding-me title of "Blademaster." For some reason, he took quite a liking to me. Then at some point, Karamia told him, "He's always there to protect me at school. He's almost like my boyfriend." There was even talk of me being the next successor to the Arrace school of the blade, and before long, the rumors had made it to the halls of the academy.

It was late morning, and I was doing my work as Lady Karamia's butler when a female student I wasn't familiar with hit her with one hair-raising question. "Is it true, Lady Karamia?! Is Kanami over there really a candidate to become your fiancé?!"

Her face turned red. "No. Not yet," she replied sheepishly.

The girl practically squealed as she took to her heels. This was bad. Real bad.

I cast a glance at Lady Karamia as we talked side by side, only to find her staring at me. When our eyes met, she averted her gaze shyly. "Well...drat. Where on earth did a rumor like *that* come from? Heh heh heh."

Clearly, she wasn't actually all that chagrined by this development. It was then that it sank in—I was more cornered than I'd thought. My school chums, Annius and Liner, had warned me time and again of the consequences, but only now did I understand. Lady Karamia... Up until a little while ago, she'd been raring to kill me. How had it ended up this way? In what world could I have seen it coming? When she'd invited me to her home, I'd honestly thought, *It doesn't mean anything; she only hired me to use me and then toss me aside when she's done with me.*

On the other hand, I wasn't entirely dissatisfied with the rumors either. The

student council president was one of the top beauties in the academy, and she even had something akin to a fan club that worshiped the ground she walked on, which wasn't something anyone questioned. Her light crimson hair and eyes were arresting; one glance and you were captivated. She was more than just "cute." To put it bluntly, she was pretty as all get-out.

Needless to say, however, the word of my becoming her fiancé made me the object of the male students' enmity. Moreover, there were plenty of nobles who would never see someone of shady stock such as me as having the right to even become acquainted with the House of Arrace, one of the leading noble clans. Thanks to that, I was soon dragged to the roof by a mob of hostiles.

It happened after class, and after my butler work for Lady Karamia was over for the day. I was walking down a hallway by myself when students who were perfect strangers dragged me off. The roof of Eltraliew Academy was as opulent as every other location. It was as spacious as a sporting ground, and it had a few trees here and there for what I assumed were ornamental purposes. The imposing mob had chased me to a corner of the roof, and they had me surrounded. They were glowering at me from all directions; there had to be well over twenty of the bastards.

The guy who looked the highest-status student out of all of them gave an affected sigh. "Oh, what trouble. A mud-blood like you getting in close with the exalted stock that is Student Council President Arrace. The very notion would throw this vaunted academy into disarray."

I'd heard lines like that before somewhere. It would be pointless to give his remarks any deep thought. At the end of the day, he was going to have me beaten to a pulp because he didn't much care for me. End of story.

"Are you sure you can? If you put a hand on me, Lady Karamia and the headmaster won't take it lying down."

"Please don't get the wrong idea. What's about to unfold is only a *duel*. They're quite the rage at the academy these days. These here pupils, they're full of vim and vigor, see. And they'll be challenging you, the talk of the town, to a duel. Continually. That's all there is to it."

The noble-among-nobles guy looked at the students around us. In all

likelihood, the ones surrounding me were only here because they'd been forced into it by this dude's high level of authority. At the academy, status was everything. Those of low social standing couldn't defy the orders of their "betters." Judging by the looks on their faces, they'd definitely been ordered to thrash me even if it meant expulsion. It was always the same—the bozos with money and power made the whole world dance to their tune. And here at Eltraliew Academy, such abuses of power went unpunished.

"Now then, let him have it," the boy said with no hesitation.

All at once, the students surrounding me started crafting their respective spells.

"Dammit!"

Needless to say, I attempted to flee, but the ringleader's spell blocked my path.

"Light Wall. Heh. Now be good and eat all their spells."

Things truly couldn't get much worse. I was up against a whole gang of people. It was safe to say my chance of winning a protracted battle against this many was nil. My combat style involved chewing through one-off magic items, so I was only good at one-on-one fights, and even then, only when I could win quickly. I wasn't going to win this one. And who knew what would happen to me after I lost? The kids here were going to launch attacks at me that broke my bones without batting an eye.

No, that was overly optimistic. These guys intended to pummel me into paste, fully aware that they were antagonizing Ms. Karamia in doing so. There was no way they didn't have the necessary determination and a carefully thought-out plan. And rubbing me out had to be on the table for them. The hope was slim that they'd be so merciful as to leave it at threatening me or giving me a scare. After all, covering up my murder as a "fatal accident" would be child's play for a noble of this guy's standing.

A wall of light was barring my escape, and dozens of students were getting ready to unleash their magic at me. The quality and quantity of the magic tools on my person could *maybe* win me a single duel. I simply lacked the power to overcome this situation. There was no need to calculate my odds; my defeat

was written in stone. The scene of the death of Aikawa Kanami flashed through my mind. The boy who'd stumbled into another world. The boy who'd been tossed into an academy without any choice in the matter. The boy who'd be flattened by a mob without understanding the first thing about anything.

No way. No way I can get that raw of a deal! I won't let that happen! Get outta here with that shit!

Right when I was about to make my move...

"Pipe down."

One sentence. Two words.

That instant, magic power rushed across the roof, and a shock wave not unlike a powder keg exploding suffused the space. It happened in the blink of an eye. One sentence. One spell. One single, solitary blast. That was all it took to strike down all of the students, leaving only their ringleader standing. Baffled, he surveyed the wretched state of his posse of flunkies, then caught sight of who stood behind them.

"Huh? What happened?! Why?! Eeeeeek!"

He left the other students behind and ran as fast as his legs could carry him down from the roof. I immediately turned my eyes to where he had looked, and there she was, atop a branch of one of the trees lining the roof. A girl. The one who must have caused this devastation.

"Can you move?" she asked as she leaped down.

I couldn't reply right away. I was so astonished that I was struck dumb. Her light-blue hair was wavy like the sea. I was so mesmerized by her outrageously long, thin, beautiful hair that I was frozen in place. And it wasn't just her hair that made her a stunner. Her face, with her characteristically sleepy eyes, was as beautiful as Lady Karamia's. No, she was even more beautiful.

This girl wasn't wearing the school uniform. Rather, she was wearing many layers of clothing in what I could only describe as "folk dress." Coupled with her cool-as-a-sea-breeze hair color, she looked gorgeous. She was so beautiful that I could hardly take my eyes off her.

“Wait. Don’t tell me I injured you?”

That snapped me out of it. I owed this girl my life. This was no time to be clamming up. “Er, uh, it’s just... I’m okay... Thank you very much...”

“Gotcha. Good then,” she said expressionlessly.

When she looked at my face, it gave her pause. Even I could tell my face was turning red, all because I’d made eye contact with her. I was probably wearing the same expression that Lady Karamia had exhibited that morning.

A pause. “Hm? Hold on. Could you be Ms. Arrace’s fiancé?”

“Um...well, uh, not yet...” I said. I found myself not wanting her to get the wrong idea.

A pause. “Oh well, whatever. ‘Kay, so you clean that mess up. I’m going back to sleep.” She returned to the branches to doze off once more.

“Ms. Walker! Ms. Snow Walker!”

A pause. “Hngh. What?” She’d responded.

So I was right. This was the person who was considered “beyond rank” in the Elt-Order duelist rankings. The one I was so determined to defeat one day. The legendary girl rumored to be the strongest at the academy. The Azure Fury herself, Snow Walker.

“Allow me to express my thanks one more time. Thank you so much...for saving me.”

A pause. “You’re welcome.” And with that, she closed her eyes.

Watching her, I was rendered speechless anew. All around me were kids groaning on the floor, knocked over by her spell. Yet my eyes were locked on Ms. Snow above. She’d stolen my gaze...and my heart.

For on this day, it was love at first sight.

And this very day was the day my tale at this academy *truly* began.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 1: A Fun, Fun, Heartwarming Boat Trip](#)

[Chapter 2: The Party Grows](#)

[Chapter 3: Friction](#)

[Chapter 4: Break Time's Over](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 7

by Tarisa Warinai

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