

Tarisa Warinai

Illust. Saki Ukai

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Chapter 1: And Then It All Began

Outside the castle, it was dead silent—the opposite of the hustle and bustle happening inside.

It was just as quiet out on the balcony where we were taking a breather; all that could be heard was the whistle of the cold night breeze. Maybe because I'd been in that wind for too long, my body was trembling slightly. I shot a fleeting glance at the balcony bench, where two noble siblings, a girl and a guy, were situated.

The girl with the cool blue hair and the cherry-blossom-pink eyes was Snow Walker. The guy with the copper-colored hair and the brown eyes was Glenn Walker. They didn't look anything alike, but siblings they were. Snow was sitting and hanging her head, while Mr. Glenn was massaging her back, apologizing and apologizing. And that scene was what I knew to be the kind that played out among true siblings.

Like Mr. Glenn, I myself was trying to think of what I could do for her. Obviously, I couldn't say yes to her far-too-sudden proposal, and not just because marrying as the most convenient and easiest arrangement was crazy, but because I sensed a plot of Palinchron's behind it as well. I had no doubt he was aiming to get me and her hitched. Snow's abrupt one-eighty had made that clear. But be that as it may...I figured I couldn't keep turning her away either.

I never wanna make the wrong choice again.

That was what I'd thought to myself. I'd vowed not to slip up like before.

That being said, I wouldn't come upon something I could do for her so easily. Even if it served to console her, the one thing I knew I mustn't do was lie. Nobody ended up happy going down that path. No, I had to find a different way. But what could that be? What possible way?

Right then, Snow got to her feet all of a sudden. She tottered a tad as she drew closer to me. "I'm sorry I was being so weird, Kanami," she said, sounding

genuinely apologetic. "I've calmed down now. I'm okay."

She was back to the Snow I knew. She was no longer in that agitated state from moments prior or the Snow who was talking to herself before that.

Since she'd gone back to normal, I replied to her as my usual self as well. "It's okay, don't worry about it. That impending marriage has been weighing on you for ages, right? I can't blame you for losing your composure a little."

"Yeah... Yeah, huh. It's been on my mind, and I...I'm feeling the heat. They keep telling me to get married, over and over and over, and it looks like my brain's fried, aha ha."

Her laughter sounded forced. She was keeping up appearances.

"Ha ha ha... I'm sorry. Forget what just happened. What was I getting so frantic over? It's not like it'll turn out okay, no matter how desperately I try."

And now, just like always, she was giving up on anything and everything. While that was like her, I could hardly turn a blind eye to it. After all, it wasn't as though I was telling her to abandon all hope.

"No need to get so spineless, Snow. I told you I'm gonna help you, didn't I? If somebody tries to impose something on you, just come to me. I'll figure something out, I swear it. I will!"

A pause. "Kay. Thanks," she replied, extremely curtly.

Obviously, she wasn't grateful. Not truly. She was all but telling me that those weren't the words she wanted to come out of my mouth.

She sidled up to me, clasped my hands, and stared up at me with an ill-fitting smile on her face. "So, uh, Kanami. Just...for the time being. For the time being, that's all I ask... Just remember that that path does exist, okay? That's all I need... Please?"

That path. In other words, us getting married.

"Uh, yeah, sure... I don't mind just remembering."

When Snow saw me nod, she smiled, relieved. Then Mr. Glenn, who'd been watching from afar, came closer.

“So you made peace, right, you two? Things are okay again?”

“Yes, Mr. Glenn. It’s okay now.”

We both nodded.

“Phew, that’s a relief. I’m seriously glad to hear it... Now, uh, I’m really sorry, but I’ve gotta go back to the schmoozing circuit. Ms. Snow, are you really okay now?”

Apparently, he’d been on tenterhooks because he thought we were fighting because of *him*.

“It’s okay,” said Snow. “I’m sorry to keep you while you’re so busy.”

“No, it’s I who oughta apologize, Ms. Snow... Now then, be back later.”

With that, he went back inside the castle’s great hall. I could tell even from the balcony that people began to swarm him immediately. And the number of people was many times the number I’d had to deal with earlier. It seemed that when you were a so-called hero lionized as the “strongest diver,” countless schmucks came out of the woodwork to cozy up at places like this.

“Whoa. He really *is* busy.”

“You see what he’s like, and yet the five nations still boast about him as a hero. It’s like that wherever he goes.”

“Wherever he goes, huh? Sounds rough.”

“Yeah. It’s rough for me too. Extremely rough.” From the sound of her voice, she meant it.

Figuring she was still exhausted, I asked, “Snow. What do you wanna do? Wanna go home for today?”

“I do.”

Just like that, we decided to leave the ball. It was true that Snow wasn’t feeling so well. We’d just bow our heads and extricate ourselves. I took her by the hand, and together we went back into the great hall. We used Mr. Glenn as a decoy (as bad as it feels to put it that way) to effect our escape, and I used *Dimension: Calculash* to avoid all the gazes of the chattering nobles as we

wended our way toward the exit. We were so close to home free when an unfamiliar girl spoke to me.

“Hold on, is that you, sir? Whoa, it’s been a while!”

She was a cheery-looking girl with short hair. While she was using the polite register, she was using it in a half-assed way that didn’t quite fit the decorum of the ball. She waved at me from a little distance away.

I was bewildered. I would’ve preferred to ignore her, but for all I knew, she was a member of the highest echelons of the upper class. I had no choice but to stop in my tracks and shift my gaze to her.

Just then, yet another person spoke up. This voice was a low, seasoned one. “Hrm... Are you Siegfried Vizzita?”

Unlike the first girl, this woman was remarkably tall. And her voice was strangely deep, exactly like a man’s. Moreover, she was taller than me, and her countenance was quite dignified, to the point she looked not unlike a handsome young man. The lady wore her long chestnut-brown hair in a ponytail.

Faced with these two distinctive characters, I sensed right away that they were far from ordinary. I could tell just from the way they carried themselves. They moved silently, with no wasted motions. It was the gait one needed for combat. And in that respect, the short-haired girl in particular reminded me of Lorwen.

I instantly gave the stats of the two strong fighters a look-see with my menu-sight.

【STATUS】

NAME: Pelsiona Quaygar

HP: 430/434

MP: 105/105

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 27

STR 10.99

VIT 9.73

DEX 8.55

AGI 10.09

INT 9.32

MAG 6.56

APT 1.56

INNATE SKILLS: None

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.89, Holy Magic 1.95

【STATUS】

NAME: Ragne Kyquora

HP: 158/161

MP: 36/36

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 17

STR 3.40

VIT 4.42

DEX 12.05

AGI 6.62

INT 7.52

MAG 1.62

APT 1.12

INNATE SKILLS: Magic Power Manipulation 2.12

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 0.57, Holy Magic 1.02

The short-haired girl was Ragne Kyquora, and the tall lady was Pelsiona Quaygar. Their menus told me they were knights, which was corroborated by their formal raiments. And they both boasted considerable prowess. In Ragne Kyquora's case, she possessed a skill that Lorwen had said took a lifetime to learn—Magic Power Manipulation.

That was all the more reason to ignore them and go home. I would've loved to just pretend I didn't hear them and zip right out of there. But I didn't yet have the courage to ignore knights of such renown.

"I'm sorry, I think you're mistaking me for someone else. That isn't my name, you see."

"Uh, what?" said Ragne Kyquora. "How could we ever confuse *the* Mr. Sieg with anybody? After you gave us that one-sided walloping, it's we-see-you-in-our-dreams level. You took us by surprise back then, but we won't lose next time, you hear?"

"I'm telling you, you have the wrong—"

Ragne leaned in closer; I used my hands to form a wall between us and backed away.

"Hm." Upon seeing that, Pelsiona Quaygar nodded as if to say she was convinced before grabbing her colleague by the back of the collar and pulling her.

"It's true. We do have to chalk this up to a case of mistaken identity," she said. "Ragne, it's as this gentleman said. That *other* man's status as a criminal has been squared through a deal made between Whoseyards and Laoravia. Consequently, this person is a separate entity from that rogue."

"Wait, is that true? Nobody told me anything."

"You have a loose tongue, and you're low in the pecking order. As such, you were not given all the details."

"For... For real?"

It seemed this "Sieg" I kept hearing about even had criminal charges. That wasn't what I wanted to hear, and the timing was terrible too.

The two of them introduced themselves with matching frowns.

“Sir Aikawa, brave hero of Laoravia, I apologize for my subordinate’s discourtesy. I am the knight ranked number one among the Seven Celestial Knights, Pelsiona Quaygar. It’s a pleasure.”

“I’m Ragne Kyquora, also a Celestial. Thanks to circumstance, I’m ranked number three now.”

If they were going to introduce themselves this politely, I had no choice but to follow suit. “I’m Aikawa Kanami, guildmaster of the Laoravian government-affiliated guild, Epic Seeker. This is one of my submasters, Snow Walker. However, we’re in a hurry, so please allow us to make our—”

“We’re back! Hello, Head of the Knights!”

I was interrupted by yet another girl. She had a particularly high-class air to her, even amid the other guests at the ball. She had very conspicuous blonde pigtails, and her extravagant dress was adorned with embroidery of gold and silver.

“Good timing,” said Pelsiona. “I’ll introduce them too. They’re the newest members of the Seven Celestial Knights, Franrühle Hellvilleshine, ranked sixth, and Liner Hellvilleshine, ranked seventh.”

The pigtails girl’s eyes met mine. “Huh, what? Sir... Sir Sieg?” she murmured, her pupils turning small and her mouth agape.

Behind her, a boy in butler attire looked astonished as well. But it was different in nature from her astonishment; he bared a stinging hatred. I adopted a light defensive stance as I used Analyze.

【STATUS】

NAME: Liner Hellvilleshine

HP: 142/172

MP: 23/50

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 12

STR 6.12

VIT 4.52

DEX 5.01

AGI 6.92

INT 6.53

MAG 3.88

APT 1.89

INNATE SKILLS: Wind Magic 1.12

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.23, Holy Magic 1.02

He had a fair amount of talent, but he was no one I needed to look out for. Or at least, I thought that was safe to assume.

By the time I was finished looking at his menu, his hostility had dissipated like mist. His expression was blank now, and he waited behind the girl. I relaxed my own stance in response.

“Huh? What are you doing here, Sir Sieg? And you’re with Snow too.”

Franrühle Hellvilleshine was even worse than Ragne had been earlier about trying to press in close to me. This time, Snow stepped in between us, keeping us apart.

“Long time no see, Lady Franrühle. I heard you were inducted into the highest-order band of knights in Whoseyards. Congratulations.”

“Snow! I did hear you’re on leave from the academy and doing guild work at the moment, but...didn’t you tell me you’re not interested in Sir Sieg?!”

“It just worked out this way.”

“It... It just worked out that way, you say?! If that’s all it took to be with Sir Sieg, I wouldn’t be going through these pains!”

From the sound of it, they were academy acquaintances. Snow was more at

ease with her than the other nobles, so I stayed quiet and let her handle it.

However, Pelsiona saw this quarrel was unbecoming of the ball. “Enough, Fran. That gentleman isn’t Sieg.”

“Sir Sieg! It’s me! Franrühle Hellvilleshine! You helped me with an academy assignment! Do you remember me?!”

“I said, that’s enough,” said Pelsiona, grabbing her by the collar from behind.



“Gah!” she yelped in an unladylike tone.

Pelsiona lowered her back onto the floor behind her. “Listen to me. You are one of the Celestial Knights, and he is a Laoravian guildmaster named Aikawa Kanami. That’s how they’re spinning it...and you’re letting your personal feelings get in the way.”

“Urgh!”

The girl who’d seemed so full of spirit now slunk away dejectedly, as did Liner Hellvilleshine. Afterward, Pelsiona Quaygar cleared her throat and continued as though nothing had happened.

“Sir Aikawa Kanami,” she said, her manner of speech a tad affected as she closed the distance between us. “The open seats of the Celestial Knights have thus been taken up by the relatives of Hine Hellvilleshine...but there’s one seat that remains to be filled. I must say, it’s truly distressing. If the Seven Celestials, paragons of knighthood, stay at only six members for very long, we’ll lose standing with the other nations... So we’re currently searching for an outstanding knight to fulfill Hine’s last wishes.”

“Hine?”

Hine Hellvilleshine. When I heard that name, my heart cried out. My fists balled up despite myself.

“As Head of the Knights, I’d like to recommend you for the final position. Extending the invitation costs us nothing, after all. So, what say you?”

As long as I was under the patronage of Laoravia, I had no intention of signing up for this “Seven Celestial Knights” deal, though I did want to hear more about this Hine person. But before I could answer her, the subordinates behind her started getting all worked up.

“I do declare, that’s a swell idea! Good going, Head Knight!”

“Huh?! But those three seats basically opened up because of him in the first place, right? Would the higher-ups ever sign off on that?!”

Two lively, shrill voices. Their responses were adorable but nonthreatening. The problem was the boy hiding behind them—Liner Hellvilleshine. All of a

sudden, his animosity swelled. The senses I honed through all of the training with Lorwen were sounding the alarm bells that this expressionless boy might even attack me. I didn't know if Pelsiona was aware of that fact, but she continued regardless.

"Pipe down a little, you two. Now then, Sir Aikawa Kanami, your answer?"

"Er..." I figured I'd ask for more information, but then...

"He can't," said Snow, who cut in front of me and glared up at Pelsiona. "He's my guildmaster and my partner. I won't hand him to Whoseyards."

Pelsiona stared at her, intrigued. "Oho."

"Kanami is a Laoravian. Come what may, he'll never depart from Epic Seeker. Right, Kanami?"

I got the feeling Snow's shoulders were trembling.

"Yep," I agreed after a moment's hesitation. For Snow's sake too, I figured I'd better cut this short sooner rather than later.

Pelsiona's sharp gaze fell on me. "Hmph. Then I suppose I'll try persuading you during the Brawl. The Celestial Knights are participating as Whoseyards's recommendees. And since you're Laoravia's recommendee, the chances are high we'll cross paths again."

Clearly, she hadn't given up on the idea one iota.

"Just to warn you," said Snow, "I'll be participating in the Brawl too. Please don't think you'll be able to fight against Kanami that easily."

"I see. Even we, the Celestials, must tread with caution if we are to cross swords with the mightiest of little sisters. Lady Snow Walker, Dracon of the House of Walker."

The two glared at each other. After some time passed, Pelsiona chuckled. "Heh. How was that for words of greeting? Sorry to have kept you. Let's meet again, Sir Aikawa Kanami, Lady Snow Walker."

With that, Pelsiona turned her back to us, her noisy colleagues in tow, leaving us alone in front of the great hall's exit.

Something felt off about the way Snow had acted just now. “Snow?”

Snow’s shoulders shivered with a start. She kept her eyes averted. “I...I’m sorry if I hurt their feelings, but...you’re *my* Kanami.”

“Huh?”

“No, not that way,” she added, flustered. “I mean as the guildmaster of Epic Seeker. You’re *our* Kanami, is what I mean. If they poached you away from us just like that, it’d sadden everybody in the guild.”

Her ruffled demeanor gave away that that was not, in fact, what she truly meant. In all likelihood, she hadn’t given up on the idea of getting married to me in the slightest. And I understood that, so while I hesitated a little, I ended up nodding gently.

“You don’t gotta worry. I won’t run off to Whoseyards under any circumstances. Not after I’ve gotten as close as I have with my guild members.”

Her face lit up. “Right, of course. Hee hee, that’s a relief.”

Seeing her reaction gave half of me peace of mind, but at the same time, it caused my unease to swell even more. As her diving and guild work partner, her smile made me happy. Yet there was no mistaking the fact that that new side to her had me perplexed.

“Let’s head home for now,” I said. “I’m a bit tired too now.”

“Yeah, let’s go home, the two of us.”

We escaped the great hall together. With that, my high society debut had drawn to a close. On the way back, I reflected. I got the feeling that Snow and I had grown closer than before. And I also found myself musing that Snow seemed girlier than usual as well. But when it occurred to me that what had undergirded that was her desire to marry me, I ended up withdrawing a step behind her despite myself.



With the night of the ball behind us, the Brawl was only two days away. I’d learned a lot of things that night. For one, my image of “the hero” had been turned on its head. The man bearing the title of “the strongest” had looked so,

so exhausted. Years and years of toil had formed dark circles under his eyes, and he'd even grumbled that he wanted to die.

I'd also learned that Snow felt a lot more cornered than I'd previously imagined. Now that I knew one factor that was causing her to suffer, I'd taken more of a dislike to nobles in general. To be honest, I never wanted to go to that ball again. While it had looked all shiny and splendidous, it came with an unpleasant, nose-turning stench.

Everybody in that ballroom had prestige to their name, and to my recollection, Lorwen had told me what he wanted was prestige and glory. It was enough to give me concerns about Lorwen's lingering attachments. He wanted the world I saw in that castle?

I'd truly learned a lot. And I'd found a lot of fresh problems in the process.

Also, I still couldn't bring myself to touch my bangle. There was no doubt that the bangle Palinchron had prepared for me was important. If I removed it, my memories might come back to me. Then again, there was also the possibility that if I removed it, only unhappiness awaited me, and that thought made me freeze up. If it were only my own happiness I was risking, that'd be one thing, but knowing Maria and Snow could be made miserable too, I couldn't act too carelessly.

I walked through Epic Seeker as I pondered not just Snow and Lorwen, but my own memories, among other things. I also contemplated what I should do in the two days leading up to the Brawl, heading toward my office for the time being.

It was early in the morning. Nobody would be in my office. I decided I'd figure out what policy to take as I waited for Snow and Lorwen and Reaper and friends —

"Morning, Kanami!" shouted Snow cheerily. "Today's another day of hard work to look forward to!"

"Oh, morning... You seem awfully eager today. Something wrong?"

I was confused both by how early she was and how hyper she sounded.

"Really? But I'm always like this!"

It seemed she thought she was being honest, but from where I was standing, it gave me the willies. Snow, whose picture was in the dictionary under “lazy,” waiting for me an hour before the start of work?

“Hey, are we gonna Dungeon dive today?” she said excitedly. “Or are we doing work for Laoravia?”

“Actually, I’m still thinking about it, so...”

“I think I wanna take up some government-commissioned quests. Look, I brought a variety of ’em. We’ve got our pick!”

She spread out a bunch of documents atop the desk, smiling all the while. Apparently, they were a collection of commissions Laoravia was giving to its guilds. I gave the documents a cursory look. Their difficulty level made me wide-eyed with surprise. Every single one was the kind that top-class divers had to risk their lives to complete. They were far from the kind one could knock out in one’s spare time.

“Snow, the Brawl’s right around the corner, so I’d prefer some simpler ones...”

“Ah, this one’s great,” she said, handing me one of the documents. “Slaying a monster that dwells in the undeveloped land in the west. Looks like the mountains in the west get dragon trouble. Seems challenging but rewarding!”

I never would have expected lines like that out of her. “Dragon slaying? If possible, I wanna avoid anything that’ll be a big to-do.”

“But if we don’t complete the big ones, we can’t secure any prestige, so...”

“Prestige?” I stammered. “I don’t really want prestige.”

Snow had never concerned herself with prestige before. Not once. She was clearly acting way too strange.

“Lorwen Arrace’s goals are prestige and glory. And I think the prestige of slaying dragons would make him very happy. Plus, it’d serve Epic Seeker too.”

Snow was smiling; it appeared she truly made that suggestion believing it’d be to everyone’s benefit. She was right that it’d help clear Lorwen’s attachments. If we invited him along, he’d almost certainly pitch in. But right this moment, I

wanted to focus on more pressing stuff, like the Brawl and the problem with my memories.

I needed to buy time so I could come up with a reason to say no. “In that case, we should think it over together with Lorwen. I’ll go call him a sec.”

She nodded, still smiling. “Yeah, let’s call Lorwen Arrace. I’ll be waiting here, Kanami.”

I deployed *Dimension* and exited in search of Lorwen, closing the door behind me. Before it fully closed, I could hear Snow say something. She was muttering under her breath, but I still caught it loud and clear.

“All right, if Kanami can kill a dragon, then... I just know it...”

From her voice, she sounded like she was in high spirits. It was great that she was showing enthusiasm for work, but I sensed danger there. All she could see anymore was what was right in front of her. That was the impression I got. And what was all she could see anymore? At a guess, she was trying to increase my renown. Was that for Epic Seeker’s sake, or my sake, or her own? While I didn’t think it was a bad thing, I couldn’t imagine it’d be a good thing either.

Apprehension in my heart, I kept searching for Lorwen. Before long, *Dimension* spotted him. He was playing with kids at an orphanage at the edge of town this early in the morning. I’d heard that he’d grown friendly with them while he was helping the guild with maintaining public order. Even while he wasn’t working, he was always playing the champion of justice and enjoyed high levels of popularity with the citizens, particularly children.

I walked through town toward the orphanage, greeting the people I passed. I saw him there in the orphanage’s garden, teaching the kids the blade with wooden sticks.

“Oh wow, you’re so quick to learn. Good, now give the sword a nice full swing!”

“Okay, Teach!”

He was showing them the treat that was Arrace swordsmanship. I reckoned even kids were able to tell how incredible Lorwen’s technique was. They were mimicking his swings with sparkles in their eyes.

“Uh-huh. That’s the foundation of the sweeping stroke within the Arrace School. Keep repeating the motion until it’s ingrained!” said Lorwen merrily, drumming his superhuman skills into the children.

“Quick, Teach, show us the next move!”

“A really cool one, if you can!”

“Are there any secret techniques?!”

“Guess it can’t be helped,” said Lorwen smilingly. He brandished the stick. “All right, it’s a bit early on, but I might as well teach you guys the secret technique. Because like, whoa, if you master this, you’ll be able to understand the natural ways of the world! To put it bluntly, if you’ve got this under your belt, you can’t lose! I call it the Arrace School Secret Sword Technique, *Responsiveness!*”

“Responsiveness?”

“What a weird name.”

“How do ya do it, Teach?!”

The kids’ eyes were still alive with curiosity.

“It’s simple. First you empty your mind, throw off all your bonds of obligation, dwell upon the wellspring of the whole of creation, relish both the happiness and unhappiness in this life, kill the self, erase your emotions—”

I attacked him from behind. “Lorwen, you dumbass! That sounds like danger city!”

“Whoa! What’s the big idea, Kanami?!”

He just barely dodged my full-on dropkick. His Responsiveness skill was as amazing as ever. But it wasn’t something it was okay to teach kids so casually, because from the sound of it, the toll it exacted would be no laughing matter.

“You took the words outta my mouth, Lorwen. What do you think you’re doing, man?”

“Whaddya mean, what? I’m just teaching ’em the blade. You more or less mastered it in a day, so I’m looking for new disciples.”

“If you’re gonna teach kids, stick to the basics. The Responsiveness skill is too

much, too early for the little guys.”

“My friend, I was around their age when I started learning it.”

“Even so.”

It sounded as though Lorwen had undergone training that involved “killing the self” and “erasing one’s emotions” when he was that young. And here I didn’t think his past could get any sadder.

“Hm, all right, fine then. If it’s what my number one disciple wants, I’ll do it your way.”

“I mean, I’d really rather you arrive at that conclusion without me, but okay.”

“Now then, Kanami, you got some business with me? You came all the way out here, so something’s gotta be up, right?”

“Ah, right, yeah. I almost forgot. Snow said she wants to tackle a big quest, so I thought I’d ask for your thoughts on it.”

“A big quest, huh? Sounds like fun.”

“The papers are over in the office, so come back a sec.”

Lorwen turned to face the kids again. “Sorry, everybody! Something fell into my lap, so that’s a wrap for today! Keep practicing the sweeping stroke and master it by the next time I roll around!”

“No way!”

The kids sounded dissatisfied. Which would mean I was the one who stole away their fun. I kind of didn’t feel like staying for very much longer.

“I’m busy working for a peaceful Laoravia. See ya!” said Lorwen, turning his back to them.

Despite him springing a sudden departure on them, the orphans saw him off with a smile.

“If it’s so ya can keep the peace, I get it!”

“Come again, Teach!”

“Thank you so much, Teach!”

They must have trusted this one adult from the bottom of their hearts. Once they heard that duty called for him, they didn't try to keep him around.

"All right, Kanami, shall we?"

"Yep. Let's go."

Lorwen had my respect; he was doing the whole hero thing more than I was. I made to lead the way back, but he stopped me.

"Ah, sorry, hold on. Could we hit the atelier before the office? The sword I asked Alibers to make me should be finished as of yesterday."

"Oh, really? He made you a sword? Kay, got it."

We walked toward the sooty building located in a corner of Epic Seeker and entered. Ever since I had ordered my own sword, business was booming for Mr. Alibers. That was partly because I periodically asked him to do repairs for me but also because he had more customers now. They'd seen the quality of the blade he'd made me.

"Mr. Alibers!" I shouted inside the hot and muggy workshop. "Hello!"

"Oh, if it ain't my guildmaster and Lorwen," said Mr. Alibers, big drops of sweat dripping down him. "Welcome, and thanks for visiting me in a dirty dump like this."

"Yo, Alibers, my sword finished yet?"

"That you, Lorwen? Yep, of course it is. I'll get it for ya right quick."

He splayed the weapons out on the workbench. Among them were the ones I'd asked him to repair, so I took those.

"Er, this one's the guildmaster's, so...I guess this one's yours, Lorwen."

I gave Lorwen's sword a glance. It wasn't all that special or notable. It was just a sword forged using mithril, a popular magic metal for divers. If I had to point out something special about the sword, it would have to be the pointless amount of ornamentation on its scabbard.

"Thanks, Alibers. If I kept borrowing swords from Kanami, I'd lose cool points as a swordsman." He received his newly forged blade, as pleased as a little kid

unwrapping a present.

“I could’ve just given you one of my swords, man.”

“Nah, it’s cool *because* I bought it with the money I earned. ’Cause ya know, now it feels like *my* sword.”

I looked over my repaired swords as he said that. Then Mr. Alibers pointed at two blades that were leaning against the wall.

“Ah, by the way...I’m sorry, Master. Those two, I couldn’t find a way to repair them, try as I might.”

It seemed the materials were too unique for him to be able to do anything with. When Lorwen looked at the swords, his eyes opened wide, his mouth agape.

“Wait, those swords...”

They were the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan and Rukh Bringer. From what I recalled, Lorwen’s surname was Arrace, so he might know something about it.

“Ha, ha ha ha. It’s like a *curse*. Actually, no, I’ll call it a bad presence in my life.” He smiled wryly, nostalgia written on his face as he reached for the two blades.

Mr. Alibers hastened to stop him. “Wait, hold on, Lorwen! That black sword —”

“It’s okay. It’s weak enough for Responsiveness to nullify.” He casually grabbed Rukh Bringer and traced its broken blade with his finger. The sword bled miasma, but he didn’t worry about it one bit. “Look at you two... You’re so beat up.” He accepted its mind taint with that strained smile on his face.

I inferred that they must have some history together. “Have you seen that sword before? In your prior life?”

“Yep, I have. I know ’em both. I got so nostalgic; I was in a bit of a daze there.” He leaned them back against the wall. “There was a time when I used this treasured sword over here. I’d never mistake another sword for it. And this one, I think it’s called Rukh Bringer. I’ve crossed blades with it more than a couple of

times. Man, the nostalgia. Where on earth did ya get these, Kanami?”

“Er, uh, the Dungeon, I guess.”

Rukh Bringer, I remembered from not too long ago. The Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, on the other hand, I had no idea.

“I see. Destiny can be a strange beast, huh? To think these swords would gather before my eyes again.”

I could tell from the way he spoke that he felt an attachment to them.

“If you want ’em, I’ll give ’em to you.”

“Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Of course, man. Only, since they’re beyond repair, they’re worse than useless.”

“It’s all in the little tricks. It’s one area where a blacksmith’s skill can shine. Alibers, let’s talk,” he said, his expression lighting up.

“Oh? What?”

“I don’t want our guildmaster overhearing, so lend me an ear a sec.”

They started talking between themselves. Given he’d made a point to say it was a private conversation, I figured he was specifically telling me not to use *Dimension*. Lorwen was my pal, and I trusted him, so I canceled the spell. Sensing that *Dimension* was dispelled, he grinned and whispered into Mr. Alibers’s ear.

“Wait, huh? That’s really all that’s needed, Lorwen?” said Mr. Alibers, clearly surprised. It seemed that whatever Lorwen had suggested, it wasn’t something a blacksmith would think was a passable final product.

“Yep, do that for the Arrace sword. In Rukh Bringer’s case, I reckon its sheath will end up being a bit unique, but do your best.”

“I don’t think the sheath’ll be a problem. If you’re fine with that, Lorwen, I’ll do it, but...”

“All right, we’ve got a deal. I’ll come pay ya later.”

“That request’ll take less than a day, so you can come in tomorrow if ya like.”

They'd sealed the deal loudly enough for me to hear.

"Sorry to keep ya, Kanami. Right then, let's go back to the office."

"What on earth did you suggest?"

"That's a secret. I want it to be a fun little surprise," he said, smiling gleefully.

"Gotcha. Then I look forward to it," I replied, smiling and choosing not to grill him.

We headed for the office, where Snow was waiting for us. The detour had eaten up some time, but she was in as good a mood as before.

"Welcome back. So, Lorwen Arrace, are you interested in slaying a dragon?"

"Yep. Let's do it," he said with no hesitation whatsoever.

"Cool, it's settled. I'd figured you'd say yes, so I already finished the paperwork," she said, showing him the relevant documents on the desk.

"I see. A stray dragon attacking an outland village, huh? Sounds like time's of the essence if we wanna save 'em."

"I thought you'd say that, so I finished the preparations for heading out. A Walker Clan carriage is on standby outside."

"Nice. Let's go, shall we? Dragon slaying... Not a bad addition to my tales of heroism!"

Just like that, they made to go outside. Using *Wintermension: Frost*, I froze the exit and prevented them from leaving.

"Hey, wait a sec, you two! Not so fast! Did you already discuss it beforehand or what?!"

"Hm? Nope. I just figured that a glory hound like him would jump at the chance."

"I ain't got a reason to turn it down. It doesn't get any more prestigious than slaying a dragon. It pains me to admit it, but Snow's proposal was airtight."

From those remarks, I couldn't tell if they liked each other or not. *Really, Lorwen? That's what you call an airtight proposal?*

“You two may be fine with it, but I’m not. I’d like to do more peaceful quests if at all possible.”

“C’mon, Kanami. We’re talking *slaying a dragon* here.”

“I get that you’re taken with that phrase, but calm down.”

“Dude...”

Lorwen wasn’t relenting. Left with no other choice, I decided to ask him about something that had been on my mind. I’d sensed it when I watched him from behind as he was teaching those kids.

“Lorwen. Recently, you’ve gotten a hell of a lot weaker, haven’t you? Are you even sure you can beat a dragon?”

“Urgh... It’s true that I’m weaker than before. But when it comes to dragon slaying, it’s a different story.”

Through his newfound everyday life on the surface, his power had steadily waned. His magic energy was so much thinner now compared to when we’d first met on Floor 30. It had even begun to affect his physical abilities. Yet he was still intent on becoming a dragon slayer. Snow’s bait had been more effective than I’d anticipated. Given he looked so happy, I hesitated to stop him. Erasing Lorwen from existence *was* one of my current goals, after all.

“Are you really gonna be all right? You’re not gonna lose?”

He nodded, an earnest look on his face. “Yep, I’ll be fine. Let me do this. An Arrace swordsman would never lose to the likes of a dragon.”

He looked so serious about it; I couldn’t get on his case anymore. But then there was the girl behind him. From her expression, I’d bet you anything she was thinking, *Hook, line, and sinker!*

“Your turn, Snow: why spring something like this on us all of a sudden?”

“Hm, well...right now, my brother’s the only person in Laoravia with the title of dragon slayer. I figured it’s something you need too. If you kill this dragon, your fame jumps to new heights.”

“Look, I don’t need my fame jumping to new heights.”

I knew that as the master of a guild, that was wrong of me, but I found myself thinking that wasn't what I needed to lean toward right now. As a last resort, I spoke the name of the last of the lodgers.

"Oh, I know! Come to think of it, what's Reaper up to? If she ends up feeling left out, I'm sure it'll turn into a whole big pain, so let me go call her over!"

"Hm...Reaper? I guess it can't be helped," said Snow.

If Reaper was against the idea, I could take the quest thing to safer ground. In all honesty, what I wanted right now wasn't so much fame as time to think.

Seeing Snow give me the nod, I spread *Dimension* to encompass the town. Shifting my attention to stores I thought Reaper might be in, I checked to see if she was hitting various candy shops. Then I looked at hang-out places for kids her age. And since I often saw her playing the big kid about town, I also scanned empty lots and riversides. But I couldn't find her. Unavoidably, I poured more power in and made it *Layered Dimension*—

There she was—squatting on the roof of a house. And she was trembling. She was clutching her neck, shivering and struggling.

"R... Reaper?" I stammered.

The moment I spoke Reaper's name, she noticed my magic energy, kilometers away from me. Even through all of the obstacles between us, our eyes met, and she grinned broadly. Then she wiped away the crazy amounts of sweat dripping down her forehead before teleporting repeatedly to arrive at the office.

"Comin' through!" She popped in from out of nowhere amid a haze of black mist.

Her expression betrayed none of the anguish it had before. She had the same pure and innocent smile on her face as always.

"Oh, hey, Reaper," said Lorwen. "You're here. We're about to go slay a dragon. You wanna come with? It'll make for a good pre-Brawl warm-up. Maybe a dragon will show up at the Brawl too."

"A dragon? Wow, sounds interesting! That's that one beastie that keeps popping up in my picture books, right?!"

“Yep, that’s the one. And with me and Kanami around, I don’t see us being in danger. So whaddya say?”

“I’ll come! I bet it’ll be lotsa fun!” said Reaper, jumping onto Snow’s back.

Snow acknowledged Reaper’s participation with a smile, but I wasn’t so quick to do the same.

“Uh, Reaper? You sure it’s gonna be all right?” I asked. And I meant that question two different ways.

“Yep, I’ll be fine!”

With a smile, she responded by feeding me back magic energy through our curse-link. The energy was transmitted into me through the emblem on my neck, and it felt warm, infused with kindness and tenderness. Through that, she was telling me to rest easy.

“Shouldn’t we think twice about this? At the very least, I’m not all that enthused.”

Reaper had seemed so distressed up until a moment ago. I had no idea why. I just figured I ought to keep an eye on her.

“Yeah, I guess you’re just not into the idea,” said Lorwen. “You know what, we can do it—me, Reaper, and Snow.”

Snow rushed to object. “No, we...we can’t! This quest is for Kanami’s sake. Taking it on requires trust and confidence. Without Kanami, who’s helped put Epic Seeker on the map, we can’t take the job.”

“We can’t make do with you, Snow?” asked Lorwen.

“Well, I mean, we could, but...”

Reaper watched warmly as the two spoke. Then those warm eyes fell on me. That look. She was telling me she wanted me to forget what I’d just seen. Maybe it was because she didn’t want to worry Lorwen. After a moment of not knowing what to do, I decided to accede to her wishes. But for that very reason, I couldn’t afford to let her go unsupervised.

“All right, I’ll come,” I said. “If everybody’s going, I might as well tag along too.”

I planned to stick by Reaper's side and, when the chance arose, ask her about the anguished look she'd had on her face. And to do that, I had no choice but to take on the dragon-slaying quest too.

Snow was the most thrilled to hear it. "Great! Thanks, Kanami!" She shook my hand with a grin a mile wide.

"Nice," said Lorwen. "Much appreciated, Kanami. Now that's settled."

"A dragon, huh?" said Reaper. "Wonder how huge it'll be? Can it be eaten?"

I observed the jovial ghost girl watchfully, but not even with *Dimension* could I detect anything anomalous. As I'd thought, I'd just have to ask her directly.

While my attention was on Reaper, Snow squeezed my hand.

"Right then, Kanami, let's be on our way! Ah, and don't forget to put up a portal in this room. We'll rely on the dimensional spell to get back."

"Oh, right, you got it."

I complied and placed a *Connection* door in the back of the room, after which she led me out of there by the hand. Lorwen and Reaper followed.

Several luxurious carriages were parked outside Epic Seeker. The carriage we'd taken to the ball was also there, indicating that they all belonged to the Walker Clan. Normally, Snow didn't like it when her clan poked its nose into her work life. Or rather, she found it tiresome. Now, however, she was actively leaning on it. She was smiling and brimming with enthusiasm, but behind all that was self-interested calculation.

I let her keep dragging me off, and together we headed to the dragon.

Snow's change of heart, Lorwen's ebbing strength, Reaper's anguished expression, and my own sealed memories... There was so much on my mind...



Snow had finished all the necessary procedures and detailed preparations. Or more accurately, it seemed that the folks over at the Walker Clan had taken on at least some of that work. All the ducks had been put in a row in the blink of an eye, and that very morning, we left Laoravia and headed for the village to the west.

Come to think of it, this is my first time leaving the Dungeon Alliance. From inside the carriage, I casually gazed at the scenery outside the window. There were white mountains visible in the distance, looming above prairies of green. I'd heard that the land outside the Alliance was still in development; there really was nothing out here. There were simple roads, but it was mostly nature untouched by human hands.

Reaper was also watching the scenery as the carriage rattled and shook. I kept my voice down so nobody else could hear.

"Hey, Reaper. What *was* that earlier?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You looked so distressed."

"Oh, that. That's, well, um..."

Reaper started keeping her voice down too. She practically whispered her answer. "I don't know how to put it, exactly... It's my urge to kill, I guess? And when I force down my urge to kill Lorwen...that's what happens."

"Your...urge to kill? That's how much it hurts you whenever you keep it in check?"

"It hurts so bad I feel like my body might twist in half. Maybe it's 'cause I'm rejecting the reason I exist?"

Reaper was a spell-construct, and the chances were high that she had been created for the sole purpose of killing Lorwen Arrace. Resisting the formulas behind the magic meant disavowing everything about the shadow-loving specter known as the Grim Rim Reaper. I couldn't even imagine the torment she must have been in. But Reaper was bravely toughing it out with a smile.

"It's okay," she said. "I won't give in. I won't give in to some mission that was thrust upon me, like 'kill Lorwen.' I won't let anybody toy with my fate! I'll keep fighting against the false urge that was imposed on me! Because I'm *me*!"

She was speaking under her breath, but her words were strong. She was taking the reason for her birth by the horns, intent on choosing her own path in life. This wasn't the fortitude of a child under a year old.

The praise came spilling out. “Wow, Reaper...that’s amazing.”

For some reason, her declaration had reverberated deep within my soul.

“Hm, I don’t think I’m amazing or anything. Those feelings are probably just echoing you.”

“Huh? You’re echoing *me*?”

I was nonplussed. I had no recollection of ever lecturing her to that effect.

“You never said it aloud, but it comes flowing into me through the link. ‘*Don’t toy with people’s fates.*’ ‘*Don’t let his lies go unpunished.*’ ‘*Don’t get what you want mixed up.*’ The voice is hoarse, but it’s there... And it’s the most desperate, heartbroken, earnest voice ever...which is why I believe in it.”

“It’s flowing into you? So our magic energies aren’t the only thing that’s linked?”



My hand flew to the emblem on my neck. If not just magic energy but also emotions flowed through the link, I could somewhat understand Reaper's remarks.

"So what I'm saying is just me echoing *your* words, mister."

She shifted her gaze back to the scenery outside. Her sage expression was now gone, reverting to something more her age.

Her words are my words?

I couldn't imagine that what she'd just said had originated solely from her. When I considered that it was the thoughts of my *past* self that were mixed in there, lots started to fit together. To put it bluntly, my current self lacked any of the steely convictions I had just witnessed in Reaper. I did dislike lies and unruliness and stuff; that was true. But I didn't have such a strong will. What had I experienced that would give rise to such convictions within me? What were my reasons for spouting such comments to her?

"Don't toy with people's fates."

"Don't let his lies go unpunished."

"Don't confuse what it is you want."

I turned those words over in my mind until, at last, the carriage reached the village in the west.



The village, which had taken about half a day to get to, was a lot more put-together than I'd imagined. There were more wooden houses than stone ones, and while the pasturage and farming conditions did give it a rural, frontier feel, in terms of size, it was about as big as the townscape of Laoravia. We exchanged words of greeting with its denizens as we headed to the large mansion at its heart.

It was a meeting with our client, the village chief, but the Walker Clan's chamberlains played an active role here as well. From the negotiations to the contracts, they took care of all the work, wrapping it all up before it could even sink in that I was taking on a quest in a distant land. Though I was present as the

party's leader, there were no objections for me to raise, so really I was just standing there. They concluded that we were to roll out to slay the dragon right away, and I summarily left the village chief's mansion.

Near the mansion, Lorwen was once again playing with some children; I suppose he'd had nothing else to do while I was negotiating with the villagers. When he displayed his swordsmanship to the kids, he got oohs and ahs of admiration. Clearly in a sunny mood, he repeated one technique after another. I let him be and unfurled the map that I'd received on the ground, after which I pulled in Reaper, who'd been playing nearby, to check the location together.

"Spellcast: *Layered Dimension!*"

"I spellcast too! *Dimension!*"

A party lucky enough to include somebody who could use dimensional magic had no need for a scout, nor would any of us ever lose track of the group for long. My spell spread to encompass the entirety of the village and the whole of the nearby mountain, the abandoned castle that was our destination as well, and I gleaned the information on the terrain.

Reaper, who was next to me, was groaning with exertion. It seemed that with her stores of magic energy, her sonar couldn't reach as far. It probably reached up to the foot of the mountain. I watched over her as I widened *Layered Dimension* even further. Grasping the structure of the castle, I searched for the dragon that had settled there. The castle was notable for its massive but withered garden. It was three times bigger than the Laoravian castle I'd visited for that ball. *Maybe the owner liked lush greenery*, I thought as I stretched deeper inside.

I found it in no time. It was slumbering on the throne. The throne meant for humans. How majestic.

There it was, all curled up in the seat of honor. A large amount of the crops it must have plundered from the village were lying around, but the place was otherwise empty. It was hardly a glorious sight. In fairy tales, vividly colored dragons guarded treasure troves, but this guy had nothing shiny to speak of, and its other scales were filthy as sin, not to mention it had made an abandoned castle that looked like it might collapse at any moment its

stronghold. And all the root crops and the lack of gold and silver only added to how humble and humdrum it looked.

【MONSTER】Dhruv Dragon: Rank 26

Apparently, I could use Analyze on monsters outside of the Dungeon too. Seeing it was only Rank 26 was a relief. When it came to raw stats, it was no match for me. Not after I'd reached Floor 30.

"There it is...a Dhruv Dragon."

Reaper started looking every which way. "Wait, huh? Where, mister? Where?!"

I bolstered her *Dimension* using my own magic energy. That wasn't a stunt mages could typically do for one another, but we were different. So long as we were linked the way we were, our energy's elements and nature were similar enough. We could at least share *Dimension* between us.

"Not there, Reaper. Stretch it north-northwest... Right, there."

"Oh, over there, huh? Wow, that castle's amazing! And I see a giant lizard there too!"

Upon seeing we'd spotted it, Snow triumphantly announced it was time for us to set off. "Mm, excellent. It's over that way? All right, let's go. Lorwen Arrace!"

Lorwen stopped interacting with the kids. After he quickly said his goodbyes, they saw him off with a "Do your best, Teach!" Clearly, he had made the children here call him that.

With that, we ventured into the mountains. Under normal circumstances, dragon slaying would require extensive preparation, but we were lightly dressed, and I did mean lightly. Since all the tools necessary for the expedition were in my inventory, we proceeded smoothly. While walking along the mountain path, I spoke with Snow in order to go over the information we had about our target.

"At this rate, we'll really get this over within the space of a day, huh? Killing

the Dhruv Dragon...”

“Mm-hmm. That’s exactly the kinda job I was looking for,” said Snow.

“I wonder why nobody’s slain it already, seeing as it’s so close by.”

“It’s no mystery. If anything, it’d be crazier if somebody had slain it already.”

“What do you mean?”

“This dragon isn’t worth the effort. It’s a strong target but the reward’s really low. That’s why it’s been around for so long. Unlike your usual covetous dragon, this one’s not very greedy. The only evil it commits is stealing however much produce it needs to survive. And it steals the bare minimum, at that. Going through the trouble of taking it down only earns you a pittance, yet it’s still dragon-level tough, so nobody’s bothered.”

So there was a proper reason it’d been left alone. While the government wanted it eliminated, it hadn’t done enough damage to make itself a priority. In other words...

“This dragon’s smart, huh?”

“Not smart. Tricksy,” she said, irritated. “The other dragons bit the dust, so it threw away its pride and now it’s a shut-in. It’s a tricky little lizard.”

“So, uh, there used to be other dragons around?”

“Yeah. Three others in the backcountry. Then again, it was Glenn who slew them all, so...”

When she spoke Mr. Glenn’s name just now, she averted her gaze a little. Since I’d shifted to ready-for-anything mode, I not only had *Dimension* up, I’d made it keener than usual. As such, I could tell she was lying about that.

“Those three were highly dangerous, I take it?”

“They were your typical greedy dragons. They burned down villages, attacked towns, ate people, and snatched away treasure. High-figure bounties were placed on their heads in no time. And they killed loads of the bounty hunters and knights who tried to slay them, but in the end, they died unsightly deaths.”

“Humans versus dragons, huh? It’s like something out of a fairy tale. Guess no

matter how strong the dragon may be, it eventually loses.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said, slightly sorrowfully, before going quiet. Maybe she felt sympathy for the slain dragons. She did have dragon blood in her veins.

“All right, so how do we fight this Dhruv Dragon thing? It seems pretty strong.”

“We fight it head-on. We’ll probably emerge unscathed.”

“I mean, yeah, maybe, but...shouldn’t we, you know, draft a strategy or something?”

“Everybody in this party stays in the front... That’s our best option.”

It seemed it wasn’t simply because she *wanted* to fight it head-on, our party was just that unbalanced; none of us could fight from the rear. What a headache.

“I see. If possible, I’d have liked a magic specialist with us—”

“That’s unnecessary. We’re all we need.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“Er, well, that’s, uh...”

She searched for what to say. She’d essentially admitted that she didn’t want anybody muscling in, but she didn’t have a pretext for that stance ready to go. I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Snow...”

My expression turned a little on the stern side, but that was it. Yet that was all it took for her demeanor to shift completely.

“It’s... It’s not what you think, okay? Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound that way. Are... Are you mad? You’re not mad at me, right?”

That spinelessness reminded me a lot of Mr. Glenn. They might not have been blood related, but I could tell they were siblings all the same.

“No, not really. I’m not *mad*. So just relax.”

“Good... Because what I meant is that Epic Seeker’s got enough skilled mages

already,” she said, frantically explaining herself away. “Oh yeah, how about we call in Tayly next?”

“Yeah. With Ms. Tayly, we have more latitude in combat.”

“Kay, let’s do that!” she said, smiling with relief.

It seemed she was happy our opinions now matched again. The forced smile had been there for a while. I knew that the fawning attitude she put on from time to time was how she approached problems. But it was also the Snow I most disliked dealing with. Should I tell her that outright? Maybe if I hit her with that, she’d break down like she had the night of the ball. If I didn’t sever the problem that plagued Snow at the foundation, it wouldn’t get resolved either way. Her betrothal to a noble, her duty to the House of Walker, her emotional fragility...or the root I was pretty sure lay at the heart of it all.

I sighed. The situation was only getting more and more issues stacked on top.

“Kanami...what’s the matter? You okay?”

The way she came across when she nestled in closer with that worried look was the opposite of when we first met. She looked so sweet and cute. But that came with feelings of discomfort. Put simply, a cute Snow was no Snow I knew. She was straining herself to be that way. And that smile was so self-abasing that I couldn’t stand to look at it. Which was perhaps the number one reason I couldn’t be okay with the way she was acting at the moment.

“I’m all right. Never mind that; let’s come up with a plan to fight it. We’ll fight it head-on, sure, but we’ve still gotta settle on stuff.”

“Yep, got it. Let’s see...”

While we decided on the particulars of our strategy, another one of my concurrent thought-streams contemplated something else—the question of how to bring Snow back to her old self. If I could just solve her marriage problem, she’d have room to breathe again. But it was a difficult knot for me to untangle. I was unfamiliar with the workings of aristocracy in this world. All I could think to do was pretend to be her fiancé to buy time, and even then, I didn’t know if that’d work. There was also the distinct possibility that if I did that, I’d end up being forced to marry her for real.

Pretending to be engaged to her was my last resort. I kept thinking about it as I talked to Snow, but ultimately, we reached the castle where the dragon awaited before any halfway decent ideas sprang to mind.

The mountain path was steep, but we weren't fatigued. Our stamina was superhuman, and that went for all four of us. We were used to a place that was even harsher—the Dungeon. Reaper, far from needing to take a break, was excited; she was flying from place to place in the vicinity. The abandoned castle before her eyes was so thick with atmosphere that she couldn't restrain herself.

I grabbed Reaper by the scruff of her neck and together we entered the castle grounds. After a short walk, we soon arrived at the giant garden, where there wasn't a single colorful flower to be seen. From end to end, it was just green, green, green. That wasn't to say that this garden didn't have a unique beauty all its own. It was a weaving of various shades of green, from faded dark green to bright yellow-green. It was deserted, yes, but oddly enough, there was a sense of oneness, of cohesion, to it as well.

We passed through the overgrown world of greens and arrived at the entrance of the castle. The huge gate had been destroyed, allowing even a creature as colossal as a dragon to enter and exit as it wished.

If we had a magician who specialized in offensive magic, we could leverage *Dimension* to attack from all the way out here, but as things stood, we had no choice but to venture inside. After double-checking our formation, I took out the weapons from inside my inventory for us to equip. This time around, I followed Mr. Alibers's advice and gave Snow a large axe and two logs. Our preparations complete, we cautiously infiltrated the castle, passing through the broken gate, past the foyer covered in mold and moss, up the grand staircase, and into the throne room.

There we encountered it. The Dhruv Dragon. The moment we entered the chamber, it spread its wings; it had already been awake by the time we entered the castle. Clearly, it possessed sharp senses.

Its enormous frame was quite imposing. I'd fought a variety of monsters so far, but this was the first time I'd faced a monster this gargantuan. It looked like one of the dragons in Western fairy tales, which was to say, a giant winged

lizard. Its body measured about fifteen meters in length, but by spreading its huge wings, it exuded a presence that went beyond such numbers. Covered in tough-looking ocher scales, it bore scars all over its hide. How many dozens of times had it come near death, only to prevail?

Daunted, we froze in our tracks. The Dhruv Dragon turned its head to face us. Its head was gigantic. So gigantic, it could probably swallow all four of us at once. Its reptilian eyes met mine. Then it shifted its gaze toward Reaper for some reason. She and I were the two entities it expressed a strong interest in. It bellowed throatily, which sounded like somebody pounding on timpani drums, and its gaze never strayed from me and Reaper.

“Huh?” I said quietly.

I couldn’t sense any hostility. In fact, I could see the intelligence in its eyes. It saw Reaper and me, and it *saw* us—

“Kanami!!!” shouted Snow reproachfully as I just stood there in a daze.

Lorwen, who was the farthest ahead, had already unsheathed the sword from the scabbard at his waist. Flustered, I gripped my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword tighter. According to the plan we’d crafted beforehand, he and I were to rush in first, while Snow and Reaper were to spring a surprise attack from behind.

Now faced with Lorwen’s naked belligerence, the dragon’s expression changed. Its eyes went from intelligent to ferocious, and it opened its dread maw before unleashing a roar that sounded like myriad cymbals. Urged forward by that roar, I ran forward to the left while Lorwen dashed to its right.

In response, the enemy beat its wings and kicked up a wind. This was no ordinary gust. Dragons stood at the top of the monster chain of being. These were draco-winds, gale-force blasts induced by vast quantities of magic energy. The brutal squall buffeted us, but to us, the fact it added magic energy to the wind presented nothing less than an opening.

“Spellcast: *Wintermension!*”

I used my magic to shift the magic energy infused in the wind. While the dragon’s magic might have seemed crude at first, it was actually very

meticulous. On the outside, it looked like it was simply flapping its wings, but in reality, intricate magic formulas had been woven, and it was activating them...as expected of a dragon. Unfortunately for it, the more intricate the magic used against me, the greater the impact *Wintermension* had when it interfered with that intricate structure. Thanks to it, the draco-winds became normal, if strong, winds, and I succeeded in standing my ground purely on my own physical strength.

However, Lorwen, who was on the other side, had no defense and was blown away. It was as I'd suspected: he was helpless against magic attacks. On the other hand, while magic could be said to be his weakness, he was still the mightiest sword fighter there was, and he didn't let getting blown back stop him. He kicked off against the throne chamber's stone pillars and walls, using his superhuman physical prowess to defy the enemy's attempts to push him away.

The dragon swung its deadly, powerful claws at me and Lorwen, but we dodged them. Without a moment's delay, it shook its tail, topping a stone pillar. Its target? Lorwen.

He put his hand on the fast-approaching tail for an instant, and leaped over it the same way one might vault over a fence. Round one of our showdown was over; our formation was complete. From the dragon's perspective, Snow was right in front, with me on the right side and Lorwen on the left. And behind it...

"Got your ba-ack!"

Reaper's scythe tore into its back. But the wound was shallow. The sickle was too small compared to the monster's massive body. That said, any damage was good damage. In its ire, it bellowed and faced the other way.

"Hee hee! Made you look! And now you're easy prey for the Grim Rim Reaper! Spellcast: *Dimension: Nightmare!* Spellcast: *Form: Abyss!*"

It seemed that Reaper had developed her magic before I even knew it. Using a dimensional spell I'd never seen before, she enveloped the scythe with black energy. As much as I wanted to analyze it, I was in the midst of a boss battle right now, so I had to resist the urge for the time being.

The dragon quickly counterattacked Reaper with its claws and tail, but she

repeatedly teleported out of their way. Besides, from what I could tell via *Dimension*, Reaper had no physical substance to begin with. A direct hit would deal no damage anyway. Not that the dragon had any way of knowing that; it kept attacking her in vain.

“Magic stake: *Impulse Break!*”

After confirming that the front and back of the Dhruv Dragon had completely switched places, Snow launched a full-scale magic attack against the enemy’s back. Well, “magic attack.” Really, it was just her chucking a log wrapped in vibration magic at it. Compared to the intricate magic the dragon was capable of weaving, that move could be said to be quite primitive. But that was the very reason it was such a solid, forceful blow. Snow’s brute-strength log was potent enough to rock the dragon’s colossal frame, and it lost its footing.

Lorwen and I swooped in to slash it.

“Magic Energy Freezing!”

“Magic Power Materialization!”

We lengthened our blades at the target, gashing its arms and legs. Now bereft of its maneuverability, it had no defense against the coordinated attacks coming at it from all sides. Reaper followed up by brandishing her scythe, clad in murky black magic energy, to finish it off. For just that instant, I stopped *Dimension*-tracking her. A fresh new gash was cloven into its back, reaching all the way to its left wing and so deep that it damn near sliced the wing clean off.

“Gah! GAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!”

The dragon collapsed with a scream, after which it simply remained crouched down and panted with shallow breaths. Concluding that we’d dealt it a fatal wound, we relaxed our assault. That didn’t mean I turned off my prepared-for-everything mode, of course. However, since our strategy had been to attack it from behind when it was busy attacking somebody else, the timing window to strike it was gone now.

No one moved; silence filled the throne room. The dragon, still breathing shallowly, moved its neck just a little—and turned its eyes to me. He was staring at me, faintly yelping something in the back of its throat. I got the impression

this dragon was trying to tell me something. But I didn't understand one iota. No matter my competence and observational skills, there was no way I could comprehend what a dragon was saying right then and there. Even so, I lowered my sword and took a step toward it, attempting to infer its intentions. Maybe there was a way to clear this quest without having to kill the thing.

Snow's cold voice reverberated from a bit away. "No, Kanami. There's nothing we can do for a mongrel like that."

It sounded like she was making a pronouncement for the dragon to hear. She raised her giant axe overhead.

"Ah, wait! I'll be the one to take its head! I wanna be the dragon slay—" Lorwen stepped forward with his sword in order to be the one to deliver the coup de grâce.

And then there was Reaper—she wasn't like those two. Like me, she lowered her weapon and stared at the dragon with a docile, curious expression.

What was this gap between us?

In order to learn the answer, I wanted to try communicating with the dragon at least a little bit more. But it was all too late. Snow and Lorwen's attacks reached it. The axe hammered into its cranium, smashing its skull. At the same time, Lorwen's sword dug into its neck, a river of blood gushing out.

With that, the dragon breathed its... Wait...

"Huh?" said Snow, surprised.

The Dhruv Dragon had such fearsome vitality that despite its axe-smashed skull, it turned its head and sent Snow flying.

"Gwah!"

Its head was now even more on the brink of coming to pieces, and yet it beat its wing and sent Lorwen flying.

"What the?!"

Eating direct hits, they were both mercilessly slammed into the walls and floor. Apparently, the counterattack had been too unexpected for them to react in time. Luckily, as a dragonewt, Snow was largely unaffected. Thanks to her

sturdy body, a blow like that wasn't a big deal for her. But Lorwen was different. Though he was the boss monster of the thirtieth floor, his body was almost the same as that of an ordinary human. He was crouching and vomiting blood. The dragon compared the two and chose to chase after Lorwen. I immediately took to running, pouring magic energy into *Wintermension* to try and slow the dragon down however much I could. I tried to get to Lorwen before it did—but I couldn't make it in time. He was just too far away from me. At this rate, Lorwen would...

Just then, Reaper cried out to us, "Mister! Lorwen! Look away from me!"

I understood what she was trying to do and dispelled the dimensional magic. My magic energy, which had formerly suffused the throne room, was now gone, leaving only Reaper's own magic energy. And I also averted my eyes away from Lorwen. I couldn't allow myself to perceive what was about to happen in any way. As long as she was unseen and undetected, Reaper could have a field day.

"We're counting on you, Reaper!"

"I got this, mister!"

A roar. I could tell the dragon had rammed itself into the spot where Lorwen was crouching. After a beat, I deployed *Dimension* again and found Reaper and Lorwen lying in a corner of the throne room. Reaper had used her teleportation power to reach him, and then managed to whisk him away in the brief moment she was material.

"Reaper, leave the rest to me! Spellcast: *Wintermension*!"

Even while I was actively looking away from Lorwen, I was still running toward the dragon. It noticed my approach and turned to intercept. I couldn't expect any backup from the other three; I had no choice but to beat it one-on-one. I held the blade made longer with Magic Energy Freezing and thrust it in. The dragon's body trembled; it wrung out magic from deep within. Then, in its death throes, it gulped down air and expelled it from its maw in a blazing blast of flame.

"Spellcast: *Freeze*!"

I erected a barrier of cold and pushed through the fire. I could handle fire of

this magnitude; I was wearing the fire-resistance-boosting Red Talisman, and above all, I knew of fire that was far more terrifying. After passing through the scorching flames, what awaited me were the dragon's enormous claws. I blocked its attack with my sword. Of course, if I stopped at that, it'd simply blow me away. Only the stupid-strong Snow could withstand this. So I used Magic Energy Freezing to change the shape of the sword, expanding the surface area out into the shape of a shield and making its claws slide across the ice. It was a trick that Magic Energy Freezing could do that Lorwen's Magic Power Materialization couldn't.

Some of the ice got scraped off, sending white sparks into the air. Then, I succeeded in slipping into the space between its arms and chest, and I lengthened my sword again, aiming for its neck. As Lorwen had already wounded it there, it looked as though it'd only take a little more effort to slice it in two. It was the place to attack. I dodged another claw attack and leaped onto its arm, thereby gaining some elevation. All that was left was to extend my blade toward the spot on its neck that seemed like it would snap in two at any moment!

Picking up on where I was aiming, the Dhruv Dragon beat its wing. In tandem with the magic energy-infused gales, it flew close to the ground. By taking flight in the throne room, it was trying to throw me off. However, among all the ways I could anticipate it counterattacking, this was one of the counterattacks that I could deal with the easiest. Earlier, the Dhruv Dragon had used magic energy to control the wind. As expected, it also needed magic to fly. And the magic would have to be powerful enough to work on its gigantic form, so it was undoubtedly fairly high-level magic. *Wintermension* threw its flight magic askew, causing the dragon to lose its balance.

That presented more than enough of an opening. As I leaped, I extended my sword to its limit with Magic Energy Freezing, and this time I moved to decapitate it without hesitation. Aiming at the wound Lorwen had opened up, my sword was able to rend the dragon's flesh, splitting it in two once and for all.

Blood rained down, dyeing the crownless throne room red. The colossus crumpled to the ground, and a roar resounded. As soon as I landed, I cautiously checked to see if the enemy was alive. It wasn't. I didn't detect any life energy

or magic in it. It didn't, however, turn into light and fade away. And of course it didn't. That phenomenon was Dungeon-only. It seemed that magic formulas to that effect were built into the Dungeon.

This was my first time seeing a monster's corpse up close. There was no doubting it was dead now; the carcass itself was evidence that a life had been taken.

I turned my attention to the safety of my comrades. Snow was walking toward me with a worried look.

"You okay, Kanami?!"

"Yeah, I'm okay. It never hit me."

"I expected nothing less of you. Unscathed even against a dragon."

She looked at me with spellbound eyes. It was the kind of look one might give "the hero." I'd have liked her to stop looking at me like that, but there was something else I wanted to say that took precedence.

"Hey, Snow, tell me... Were you able to communicate with that dragon?"

Maybe I was mistaken, but to my eyes, it looked as though she'd listened to what the dragon said.

"Huh? No, nuh-uh. I can't do anything like that."

"I see."

In order to determine whether that was a lie, I was about to strengthen *Dimension*. But then I stopped myself. It wasn't something I should be using on my allies, and besides, knowing wouldn't change anything. The dragon was dead now.

I checked on how Reaper and Lorwen were doing. Reaper was by the edge of the throne room, rejoicing that Lorwen was okay.

"I'm so glad... Lorwen..."

But her right leg from the knee down was gone. Lorwen was staring at it, trembling and white in the face.

"Reaper," he stammered. "Why go so far to..."

“Why? You’re the one who taught me to decide for myself. So I’ve made up my mind. From here on out, come what may, I’m gonna save you!”

“Save...me?”

“I’ve got a mission to ‘kill Lorwen’? Well I’m ignoring that stupid urge! I decided my new mission’s to *save* you! And I’ll do just that. I’ll save you, even if it costs me my life! ‘Cause you’re my playmate, and you’re important to me!”

“Reaper...”

She was smiling. And because we were linked, I could understand the state she was in, albeit vaguely. Though she was a spell-construct, she was based on a human girl. Because she was a faithful recreation of a human, she was the same as us, down to her sense of pain. That meant she was currently enduring the horrendous pain of losing her leg and smiling for him to see.

I couldn’t bear to just stand there and watch.

“Reaper, are you okay?!” I shouted as I approached the two. “Can I heal your leg through magic energy?!”

“I’m okay. Just a little while longer and I’ll be back to normal. You’re giving me loads of magic energy, so this is nothing.”

“All right, then... Just be sure to use however much energy you need from me, okay?”

While I was relieved that she wasn’t going to die, the pain transmitted to me through our link was considerable.

Lorwen wobbled as he reached a hand toward Reaper. But his hand couldn’t touch her body.

“Urgh... I’m so pathetic... My body’s weakened, but even so, how pathetic can I be?!” he muttered bitterly.

The hand that had slipped through her was now pushing against the ground. It was true; that pitiful display was unlike him. While the Guardian specialized in battles against other people, it was still strange that he couldn’t react to the dragon’s surprise attack in time. Back when we were training, he’d had the ability to see enemy attacks coming. So much so that it was akin to

precognition. Maybe he'd gotten even weaker than I'd thought due to the way he'd been working through his lingering attachments over the past few days.

As I kicked myself for how naive I'd been this morning, I healed Reaper using my magic energy and items in my inventory.

It was then I noticed. The strange way Lorwen was acting.



“I was this close to dying!” he continued to mutter. “And if I die, I ‘monsterify,’ and then I’d... They’d all...”

Lorwen poured power into the fist he had pressed against the ground, and cracks appeared in the stone floor, abnormal amounts of magic power now surging from inside him, exerting a frightening level of pressure. I knew he wasn’t our enemy, but it had me in a cold sweat regardless. The strength that Lorwen had lost was gradually returning. That could only mean he was so sorry about what had happened that it was a new attachment, a new regret to work through.

“Lorwen! Don’t fret over it, man. These things happen!”

“No! It was a fatal mistake! ’Cause if I monsterify, it’s not just my problem! I’ll lose all reason once it happens! You could even say I’ll fully become a monster. If I monsterified in a place like this, things would turn grim!” After pounding the ground a few times, he covered his face with both hands.

Reaper responded with kindness. “You’re more worried than ya need to be, Lorwen! Even if you do monsterify, we’re strong enough to stop you! We’re friends, so have faith we’re at least that strong!”

“Reaper...”

In response, he closed his mouth and stopped talking. It seemed he’d decided not to bitch and moan anymore, for Reaper’s sake. Then silence descended on the throne room, and everyone left the castle together. We’d completed the quest to slay the dragon. We’d taken down our fearsome enemy and everybody was safe now. But I was nursing an indescribable anxiety, and it was about two of my friends and allies—Snow and Lorwen. Lorwen’s might as a Guardian had amplified, and the smile on Snow’s face was even shoddier than the one she’d pasted on that morning.

We had no choice but to make our way back to the village with that unease still in our hearts.

Snow and I carried the Dhruv Dragon’s severed head down the mountain as proof it had been slain. It didn’t fit inside my inventory; maybe it was too big?

To be honest, going back down the mountain was more tiring than fighting

the dragon. And when we returned and placed its head in the center of the village, the residents congregated, mouths agape in shock and shouting for joy. Some of them even started dancing. This dragon must have tormented the region quite a bit, as the villagers surrounded us, peppering us with ceaseless words of thanks. Young and old, male and female, they all kept on singing our praises with tears in their eyes until their voices overlapped and resounded throughout the village. We were blown away by their passion.

“So... So this is how people treat a *hero*, huh?” I muttered.

“Mm-hm, you’re Epic Seeker’s very own *hero*, Kanami. Excellent!”

That was when Snow launched into her PR pitch, making use of her dragonewt lung capacity to shout loud enough for all to hear.

“The dragon that ravaged your village was slain by none other than the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, Aikawa Kanami! He *is* the dragon slayer! The hero! And we ask you to show your hero your appreciation with some applause!”

This roused the villagers even more, and they started extolling my name.

“So that’s the guildmaster of Epic Seeker?!”

“Kanami! Aikawa Kanami!”

“To be a dragon slayer at that age?! He really is a hero of legend!”

The enthusiasm was so thick it was making me dizzy. It felt similar to when I’d had to deal with all those nobles and merchants at the ball. Though there was nothing nasty behind it, the tsunami of praise and high expectations made me nervous. And the fact that it was Snow, the girl who’d despised the ball, provoking it only exacerbated the sense of vertigo.

I waved to the villagers with a friendly smile. It looked as though on a fundamental level, I wasn’t suited to this sort of thing.

In order to flee, I headed over to the villagers in charge, to report on the quest. On the way there, I upbraided Snow under my breath.

“Snow! I don’t need a publicist in my life, thanks. And I’d have much preferred Lorwen gaining the ‘dragon slayer’ moniker.”

Snow and Lorwen both answered in turn.

“We can’t do that, Kanami. What happened just now was a necessary evil. You see how happy the villagers are, don’t you?”

“You’re the one who took that dragon’s head, Kanami. All I did was screw the pooch and cause trouble for Reaper. Sorry, buddy, but the moniker goes to you.”

It appeared both of them wanted to make me out to be a dragon slayer. All I could do was heave a sigh and keep on walking.

The pair continued offering their advice behind me.

“Kanami, you need to play the hero more. It’ll be in everybody’s best interests, I’m sure!”

“You won’t hear me complaining—this time around, you get the glory. But make no mistake, the glory’s going to *me* next time!”

Unable to fully sympathize with them, I said nothing. We entered the village chief’s mansion, where the Walker Clan workers were already lined up. When we appeared before them, they must have inferred we’d done the deed, because they started running the money for the quest right away. Since they handled it as deftly as they always did, we were once again left with nothing to do but stand there.

Once the details of the job were confirmed and the reward was handed over, the chief informed us that a feast would be held and that he’d like us to participate if we didn’t mind. I mused that this sort of thing happened all the time in RPGs, but as I didn’t see a point in attending the banquet, I wanted to decline. Unfortunately, I couldn’t, because the other three really, really wanted to attend.

The village began preparing for the impromptu banquet, and things got hectic. Snow said she’d think of a speech and holed up in a carriage, while Lorwen and Reaper went to play with the children. Now alone, I walked across the nearby prairie, partly because I didn’t want to get bombarded by questions from the villagers, but also because I wanted some time to myself to think about the ball and the dragon quest.

Time passed. Night fell, and the feast was on. This village on the western edge

of civilization started glowing in the twilight with the braziers and bonfires. The dragon's head was hoisted up to an elevated part of the village, and people playing various musical instruments began making jaunty music near it. Others sang and danced to the music, and large amounts of food were laid out on the tables. Apparently, one could take whatever food they wanted, buffet-style. Everybody was partaking in meat and booze and things and laughing with hearty cheer.

Despite how little time they'd had to prepare the feast, it was more full-scale than I'd imagined. Maybe the village had a custom of holding such feasts on a regular basis. Seated with a polite smile on my face, I was surrounded by many people.

One of the villagers spoke to me with a sparkle in their eyes. "Sir Kanami! Would you be so kind as to tell us how you slew the dragon?!"

The other folks around me also used that as their cue to hit me with question after question regarding my heroic tales of triumph. Nothing could have made me feel more apprehensive. In fact, with my luck, it might be even more ulcer-inducing than the ball had been. And I was really hating the way Snow was delivering exaggerated speeches about the dragon quest in the distance like some troubadour. Those who took what she said seriously came flowing over to me. This was harassment. Elaborately crafted harassment.

"Oh no," I said, "all I did was deliver the finishing blow after the rest had weakened it, so..."

But the people who'd listened to Snow's overblown rendition of what had happened wouldn't believe me.

"You're so humble, Sir Kanami. From what I heard, you severed its head during a one-on-one battle as it soared through the air!"

This was a serious pain. I had no choice but to repeat the same explanation over and over again, that forced smile never leaving my face. But the more I insisted the victory belonged to all four of us, the more they simply saw me as a humble and sincere "hero." It was clear that Snow had deliberately primed them to take that view. It made me want to play the part of some outrageous brute and ruin it all for her. But as guildmaster, that wasn't in the cards. I'd

betray the expectations of the woman in front of me, and there were children in the vicinity. Children with sparkles in their eyes at the presence of this larger-than-life “hero.”

Using *Dimension*, I looked at the expression on my face from an objective viewpoint. And I looked tired. It was the same look on my face as during the ball. A tired look not dissimilar to the one Mr. Glenn wore that day. Maybe what was going through his mind at the time was a lot like what was going through my mind currently.

I kept talking so that my emotions didn’t show. In the meantime, I found Lorwen a little distance away. Like me, he was surrounded by villagers. Unlike me, he was looking great. As such, while it pained me to do it, I brought *him* up.

I put on my biggest smile that day. “You see him over there? That’s Lorwen. He’s my blade instructor. And it’s thanks to his teachings that I’m able to fight monsters. If you’re curious about the sword side of things, maybe you’d be interested in talking to him?”

Presto, their interest was redirected.

“My apologies. Allow me to excuse myself for a moment. I need to go greet the chief,” I lied.

Before the people around me could notice how artificial that was, I hurried out of there, slipping through the human wall. But no matter what direction I walked, people’s eyes kept falling on me. It was patently obvious that at this rate, they’d simply encircle me again.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash.*”

I used magic to escape their prying eyes. I detected the movements of their lines of sight and always walked the opposite way. The moment I outmaneuvered all those human searchlights, I leaped without making a sound, successfully landing on the roof of the mansion without drawing any notice. Just as I was about to turn off *Dimension*, I spotted Reaper on another roof. I jumped across roofs to get closer to her. She was staring blankly at the stars, so quiet and well-behaved that I thought maybe she was unwell.

“What’s the matter, Reaper? Are you hurting again?”

Unperturbed by the suddenness of my presence, perhaps due to tracking me with her own *Dimension* spell, she replied, “Nuh-uh, I’m fine. I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Festivals don’t come every day. You’re not gonna go down and play?”

The Reaper I knew would be making a veritable racket. I didn’t think standing still and staring up at the sky was terribly like her.

“It’s okay,” she said, smiling. “I’m having fun just watching. So, what’s up, mister?”

I didn’t want anything from her. I’d only come over because I was kind of worried about her. Searching for a topic of conversation, I racked my brain. Something had been on my mind since the day before. More than one thing. I’d been thinking about myself, about Snow, about Lorwen, about Reaper, about everybody. And in the end, these were the words that came out of my mouth.

“Hey, Reaper. What’s your take on this whole ‘hero’ thing? Do you think it’s a good thing? You know, the kind they say can give everybody true happiness. Do you think such a sweet deal can even be real?”

I was being equivocal and oblique, but I did think that question struck at the heart of my predicament.

“Huh? A hero? What’s this about, all of a sudden? Hm... I dunno. I guess I don’t think it’s all that great a thing to be.”

At that, my expression turned cheerier. “Right? There’s no way a ‘hero’ could be a good thing. I’m happy you said that, Reaper. I was a little anxious since I couldn’t keep pace with Snow and Lorwen on the issue.”

I felt like those two believed in this “hero” character too blindly, and I couldn’t relate at all to their desperation to either gain or be one.

“Yeah. Ms. Snow and Lorwen are being a bit weird, huh?”

“Right?”

Now that I’d found somebody whose opinion I could understand, I felt more at ease. Being around that fame-obsessed pair was a bit exhausting. But Reaper, she was different. She didn’t have that implicit, unquestioning faith in

the concept. Her values were similar to my own. That was what I figured, and I tried to add more, only to be interrupted by Reaper's calm voice.

"But you know, mister, from where I'm standing, you're the same as them."

"Huh? I'm the same?" My enthusiasm that we understood each other was cooling.

"Lorwen's a slave to the mission he was given by the House of Arrace. Snow's a slave to the mission she was given by the House of Walker. And you're a slave to the mission you were given by someone else too. Maybe you're feeling a bit out of sync with them 'cause out of the three of you, you've got no need for a 'hero'? But as far as I can see, I think you're all pretty much doing the same thing."

To be honest, I couldn't comprehend what she was saying at first. It was only after I turned her words over in my mind that I realized how well considered and perspicacious they were, and I was taken aback by the keenness of her insight. As of late, she'd been taking a step back to ponder with some frequency, but it never occurred to me that this was what she'd been thinking as she viewed us from behind.

"What do you mean, the mission given to me by somebody else?"

There had to be some kind of deep meaning to the words she'd said repeatedly, and I repeated them myself, wanting to know what that deep meaning was. Maybe, just maybe, Reaper could solve all of my worries. But Reaper didn't pick up what I was putting down.

"I'm gonna keep fighting against the mission I was given by somebody else, mister."

She wasn't looking at anyone. She just stared at the sky and spoke of herself. She kept talking about herself, looking a little distressed. "I won't *get what I want mixed up*, I swear it!"

There was no composure in her expression; I could tell that her plate was already full. Maybe those comments were a by-product of her continuous search for the solution to her own woes. All this time, she'd been actively confronting her own problems—unlike me.

It made me feel pathetic for trying to lean on her like that. Here she was, fighting the good fight against what was plaguing her without involving anyone else. Meanwhile, I had tried to get somebody else to cough up an easy answer for my own issues. Right now, she was suffering from the hardship imposed on her by her nature as a spell, yet she'd chosen her own purpose in life regardless and was doing her damndest to abide by it. I took a step closer, hoping to be of help.

"Hey, Reaper. If that 'urge to kill' is hurting you, I could—"

"That's all right, mister. This is my problem. I'll figure something out."

Her expression was a complex weave of emotions. She did want help, but she couldn't allow herself to be helped. She did want a solution, an answer, but she couldn't allow it to come from me. She did want deliverance, but she couldn't allow herself to be rescued. The look on her face contained so many conflicted feelings.

In her view, I had what I truly wanted all wrong. Maybe she was thinking I should get myself sorted out before I could think about helping others. And put simply, she probably couldn't trust me. Not when she thought I was all screwed up.

"Gotcha," I said, gritting my teeth.

My eyes shifted a little bit, falling on my bangle. The problem I'd been running from this whole time. I *knew* it was the source of it all, but I'd tried not to think about it. I'd convinced myself that since I had time to spare, I should just go nice and easy, verifying stuff along the way. I'd kicked the can down the road, telling myself bullshit like maintaining the status quo came first. The little girl before my eyes was confronting her own troubles to the point of excruciating pain, whereas I wasn't facing mine at all. I recalled her words.

"Don't toy with other people's fates."

"Don't let his lies go unpunished."

"Don't confuse what it is you want."

They sank into my soul, as though they'd been my own words. And I reckoned they sounded more like me than anything I'd said recently. That feeling backed

up a certain theory I'd considered in a corner of my mind, and now that theory was beginning to sound quite plausible, forcing me to think about its origin and foundation. Before I knew it, I was sitting beside Reaper, ruminating. I found myself looking down at the feast taking place in the village. Through my parallel streams of thought, I took note of Lorwen amid the crowd.

"Ah! Over there," I said. "The kids Lorwen was teaching the blade to when we got here."

Lorwen was surrounded by a crowd of people. The kids were there too, but not as close up to him, and they had vexed looks on their faces.

"Yep," said Reaper distractedly.

She was probably deep in thought, just like me. But the words kept spilling out of me.

"Lorwen's surrounded by so many different people, they can't get to him."

"Yep."

The kids wanted to talk to him, but couldn't.

"Is Lorwen unable to see those kids, maybe?"

"Could be he can't see them from where he is."

I got the feeling that this sight provided the answer to it all. And then I realized the truth. No, I didn't *realize* the truth. Reaper had *taught* me the truth. Or no, that might not be it either. Because if my conjecture was correct, the one who'd told me was *me*.

I stole a glance at Reaper's expression. She was in pain. But that was also *my* expression. She was showing me what I was *truly* feeling. So I took a page from her book.

"I've made up my mind, Reaper. Just like you, I refuse to get what I really want confused anymore."

She nodded gently—she seemed a tiny bit happier.

I'd finally set my heart on it. On looking my problems square in the eyes. I couldn't put it off any longer. I mustn't. Because I already knew the way to solve

those problems, what I ought to do, and the answer for me. And I suspected I'd known from the very start. Since that very first morning I'd awoken inside Epic Seeker, every cell in my body had been screaming. I'd just been ignoring that fact. Pretending not to notice. Because this setup was so comfortable. So blissful. My little sister Maria being there with me served as a ball and chain. My material reality was so beyond reproach that it had made me give up on doubting any of it. Because that was the easiest thing to do. And because I'd been promised I'd obtain glory down that road. But that was a miserable sham. Watching Snow and Lorwen made me realize that was unimportant. And watching Reaper made me realize what *was* important.

Everything up until today had been a straitjacket robbing me of my freedom. And who had put me in that straitjacket? Palinchron Regacy. In all likelihood, I didn't actually owe him my life. Far from it. He was my nemesis. And that had already dawned on me. But I was afraid my comfortable chains might break.

I'd been well aware that lies never saved anybody. I'd even said as much. But I'd been unable to actively pursue the truth. According to Mr. Rayle, the memories of my past apparently held only sorrow and a wretched turn of fate equivalent to Maria losing part of her body. Or, no. Not "apparently." In truth, I knew the only thing those stolen memories could point to. And it was bigger than my memories being stolen from me or my little sister's real name being different.

Yes. Yes, the whole truth was big enough and horrible enough to spell the end of everybody's halcyon days.

I prioritized my sister's happiness over my own life. And given that fact, there was only one thing that font of sorrow could be. Only one, singular possibility—my sister wasn't in this world. That was the answer. I was sure nothing else made sense. The girl called Maria was NOT my sister.

"Urgh..."

Now that I was facing that from which I'd been averting my eyes, I was assailed by intense nausea. My stomach was churning, and I could swear my heart was about to crawl out of my throat. And if I had indeed reached the truth, this was not the time to be doing this dumb shit. This was not the time to

be playing guildmaster. I had to save my sister, and I had to save her *now*! I had to go home. I had to make my sister happy, even if the happiness was hers alone, and I didn't care if I had to die to make that happen.

My resolve to take back the truth had solidified, but that came with a fierce *ague*. I was so dizzy it felt like up was down and down was up. The fact that that which was more precious to me than my own life lay outside my reach was agony. But I mustn't run away from that strife.

The same went for Reaper. She also had what was more important than her own life chosen for her and was subjecting herself to pain by reaching toward what *she'd* decided was important. And I couldn't very well tuck tail and run when a girl so much younger than me was standing and fighting.

Reaper noticed something was amiss and turned her attention to me. "Mister?"

The pain hadn't lessened, but just like she'd done for me, I smiled to show her she needn't worry. However, I no longer had the time or energy to be thinking about Reaper. I couldn't afford to occupy myself with anything else. And I was sure it was much the same for her. It had to be. There was no way anybody who was expending every effort on themselves had the wherewithal to be able to intuit or understand the feelings of others all that deeply.

I laughed at how shortsighted and foolish I'd been up until now, and the gears in my head started spinning so furiously that the heat threatened to melt my brain. A quick and speedy resolution would benefit everybody. The sooner I solved this, the sooner I'd be able to help Reaper. And I'd be able to help Snow and Lorwen in the true sense of the word. Together with Reaper, I continued to gaze upon the feast below and the night sky above. The banquet had gotten hectic because the guest of honor had disappeared, but I ignored all that and kept mulling things over, just me and her, for a good long time.

Chapter 2: The Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball

The morning following the night of the feast, we returned to the Dungeon Alliance by way of *Connection*. Today was the day before the Brawl. There was a bunch of follow-up work to do after the dragon quest, but I slipped away from Epic Seeker after stating that I had something important to attend to. Now at a deserted, vacant lot on the outskirts of town, I followed through on what I'd decided the day before.

"Can I break it?"

I took out the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from my inventory and pressed the blade against the bangle. This was a weapon that could slice through Crystal Golems. It should be possible to break the bangle, no matter what the thing was made of. I put all my strength into the sword and tried my best to cut clean through it, but the bangle remained unscathed. It wasn't that the sharpness of the sword was beat out by the hardness of the bangle; it was that the sword's wielder stayed their hand right before it *could* cut it. My body was betraying me.

"Tch!"

I poured all my strength into it again, but the bangle emerged without a scratch on it, and no matter how many times I tried, the result was the same. Like some jinxed artifact, the bangle just wouldn't go away. In fact, I could feel my own physical condition worsen whenever I tried so hard to destroy it, like it was hurting *me*. Nausea and fatigue attacked me, as though to rid me of the energy I needed to fight against it. Was this a curse?

"Damn! I knew it!"

While I'd seen it coming, it still rattled me considerably. Up until now, I'd been under the optimistic impression that I could destroy the bangle whenever I so chose, but in reality, it was indestructible even if I had every intention of smashing it.

“All right, it’s no use. Next order of business.”

I had to put that behind me and move on. I’d thought about things quite carefully the day prior, so I’d braced myself for this possibility. I speed-walked back to Epic Seeker and sneaked into the Dungeon using the *Connection* portal in my office, unnoticed by anyone. Then I traveled to Floor 11 in search of monsters.

When you had sufficiently high attack power, any mook was fine. I walked around the floor, impelled by frustration and impatience. I soon found a monster resembling a gorilla that seemed easy enough to handle and approached it unarmed. The monster, having come upon some prey, bellowed and attacked.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash.*”

I now understood everything about all the space around us. I stood in place, my will unyielding; I lifted up my bangled arm to defend against the monster’s brawny smashing arm. And the very next moment, the monster was rent in two. Cold sweat dripped down my forehead as I watched the slain beast fade into light. My previously empty hand was gripping a sword without me even realizing it. I knew what had happened. *Dimension* let me in on it. The series of events leading up to that moment was in my memory banks. Right before the gorilla thing could actually strike the bangle, I’d gotten hit by an emotion I couldn’t identify, compelling me to pull a sword from my inventory and instantly slash the enemy. There was nothing more to it than that.

“I can’t even have a monster destroy it for me?”

That unsettling discovery left me shivering. I analyzed the unidentified emotion that had driven my actions. In that moment, what I felt was terror. A fear that I might lose something extremely important to me. That was what had caused me to unconsciously slaughter the enemy before it could break the bangle. I understood that. I understood it was fear, but I had no earthly clue *why* that emotion had stirred within me. It was as though I was holding this stupid bangle on the same level of importance as my sister. But how could that be? How could this obnoxious burden of a bangle be as precious to me as her? It couldn’t. That I could be sure of. And it was proof positive that my emotions

had been tampered with, toyed with. They defied my conscious will.

Once I realized that, a dormant emotion roared to life—the wrath I felt over being played like somebody’s puppet. One of Reaper’s remarks sprang to mind: *“Don’t toy with people’s fates.”*

The true meaning of those words was clear to me now. At long last, the cells in my body and I understood each other. My hands balled into fists of fury, blood dripping from my palms. I tried straight up punching the bangle—only to veer away from it. Instead, my fist hit my elbow, sending pain shooting through my body.

“Fuck! Let’s try this again. I’ll just go harder this time!”

Once more, I steeled my resolve. I swore that this time, I wouldn’t move a muscle, no matter what. So I hunted for another monster and found a number of the same type, allowing myself to be surrounded.

“Come at me!”

The gorilla-like creatures swung their arms at me from every direction. Determined to take all of their blows on the chin, I attempted to bring the bangle up to block one of their flying punches. The monsters pummeled me and pummeled me and pummeled me, and I stood there and ate it. But the bangle was the sole place that never got attacked. The sole part of my body that moved out of the way, despite my intentions.

“Grah! Urgh!”

However much punishment I subjected my body to, it would always work against my will to protect the bangle and only the bangle. A blow to the head made my vision falter. My abdomen got slashed up, and my consciousness ebbed. Hits to the arms and legs rendered me unable to move with any speed. But through all that, the bangle was undamaged. Knowing that at this rate I would die, I had no choice but to cut down the monsters encircling me. During the light show that followed their deaths, I wiped away my dripping blood, fetched a healing item from my inventory, and stanching the bleeding.

“So that’s not gonna work either, huh? All right, next.”

I dragged my wound-riddled body back to Epic Seeker through the *Connection*

portal on the tenth floor, wasting no time casting *Layered Dimension* from my office to look for a heavy hitter who could break through my involuntary last-minute defense. First, I spotted Lorwen, who was walking around town. I met up with him and brought him to the first vacant lot. He was a little taken aback, but he followed me anyway.

“Lorwen, could you break this bangle for me?”

Upon hearing my very direct plea, and seeing all my bruises, he inferred what was going on. I could tell by the way he grimaced.

“The bangle? But why? Why now?”

“I’ve finally realized that I can’t abide the lies. Reaper taught me that lesson.”

“R... Reaper did?” he asked, surprised. He must not have been expecting her name to come up.

“I’m trying to get all my memories back, man. If anything, I’m doing all this too late.”

Lorwen was my friend; I made my wishes known without dressing them up in any way. But his expression was dour. It was quite dour, in fact.

He averted his eyes. “Sorry, but...I can’t. That’s the one thing I can’t do.”

“You can’t?”

“After I noticed how out of sync your body and spirit are, I went and asked Rayle Thanks about it. And he probably told me more than he told you.”

It was my turn to be taken aback. But I sensed that he, too, was being up front with me, as my friend. I hadn’t minced my words, and he wasn’t mincing his either.

“And after I heard what I heard, I came to the conclusion that you shouldn’t take it off. I’m of the same opinion as him. I think you’re better off not getting your memories back. You’ll be way happier on this path. *Everybody* can find happiness this way.”

I frowned. “Lorwen! Even if I’d be happier this way, I think there are things you just shouldn’t tolerate. A happiness that’s borne of lies is a mistake. Even without my memories, I know my past self is pissed. That’s why I’m gonna get

my memories back, whatever it takes. I've gotta remember as soon as possible!"

"No, you can't! If you take that bangle off, there's a good chance you'll be unable to grant my wish. I'm sure you'll end up not having time to think about me. So I'm not gonna help you do that. I don't wanna!"

His voice was feeble. And if I wasn't misreading things, he was ashamed of himself for giving me the thumbs down for his own selfish reasons.

"That's not true! I'll still help you with working through your regrets! I swear I will, memories or no memories!"

"You don't know that. Not without your memories back. There's no knowing what you'll do once you do remember. And as long as that's true, I choose how you are now."

"You're the one who told me my heart and body are out of sync! Do you honestly believe it's fine if I stay that way, Lorwen?!"

"That's... I..."

From how tongue-tied he was, I could tell he didn't actually think that was an okay thing to do to me, but I could also tell it was something he couldn't give ground on. I leaned in to press him further, but he interrupted me.

"Sorry, Kanami. Just, hold off until after the Brawl's over." Lorwen was clearly aware that what he was saying didn't hold water, but he was trying to get me to go with what he wanted regardless. He summed up his thoughts briefly and succinctly. "Look, the Brawl just suits our purposes in every way. By going there, I can check and see. And I've got a hunch that by surpassing you, I can become a real hero. If you've still got that bangle on, I can be sure you'll fight me at full strength, 'cause you'll come at me wanting to learn everything. You made that sort of deal with Rayle Thanks, didn't you? That's why I don't wanna destroy the bangle. I can't afford to."

"Lorwen...do you wanna be a 'hero' bad enough to do all that?"

"Yep. That's my dream. Ever since I was a kid, it's the only thing I've wanted. It's what I've wanted since a thousand years ago... A thousand years..." he replied, feeling the pressure something was exerting on him. Then he started

shouting. “If I give up on it now, I’d be selling my whole life down the river! If I don’t fulfill the earnest wish of the Arrace Clan, I’ll stop knowing why I was even born!”

He looked so tormented as he shouted all that. He couldn’t even put on a brave front and smile like Reaper and I could; he was scowling. I could sort of understand why we were different that way. Reaper and I, we knew that our desires were wrongheaded. Lorwen, on the other hand, couldn’t accept that his was too.

“How’re you ever gonna work out your attachments when you’ve got that bitter look on your face? I bet that even if you did become a so-called hero, it wouldn’t help you... No, it’ll take something else to save you. Even I know that much, as I am now.”

Lorwen shook his head quietly. “That may well be...but I remember now. I remember that it’s the destiny of the eldest son of the Arrace Clan. That I was born to become a hero.” He took a step back. “The Brawl’s a day away...and Epic Seeker received a notice stating that participants need to congregate at Valhuura by the end of today. I’m headed there now. Let’s meet at the tournament, Kanami... That’s where it’ll all be settled.”

I thought about it. One option sprang to mind. An option that would decide everything right then and there. If I was thinking only about myself, I could choose to take down the Guardian of Floor 30 on the spot, then have Mr. Rayle give me back my memories. On the other hand, I was loath to just jump on the path that had been laid out for me. I figured if I did as they wanted me to do, I’d end up on the losing end. So I decided to do as Lorwen desired. I’d let the Brawl be where we fought it all out.

“All right, got it.”

With that, Lorwen turned his back to me and strode off. He didn’t look as frail as he once did. Before, he was riding the line, but before I knew it, he was shrouded in thick magic energy. With the Brawl right around the corner, his obsessions, and with them, his strength, had returned.

What was it the man *truly* regretted, though? Not becoming his concept of a hero? I highly doubted it. No, it wasn’t glory or prestige that Lorwen needed.

Even before the dragon quest, I'd sensed that vaguely, but that quest had removed any doubt. Even so, he'd still pursue it. I didn't know whether he wanted it for the sake of the Arrace Clan or for some acquaintance from his prior life, or to fulfill some sort of promise. What I did know was that he was aiming to take the tournament for somebody other than himself. He was too kind to be doing it for himself.

If nobody stopped him, he'd keep making the mistake of going down this path. And I got the ominous feeling that I was the only one who could put an end to it. I felt as though that was the duty and the obligation of the one who had made it to Floor 30.

That being said, it was still beyond my power. As I'd realized back with Reaper, I couldn't do anything for anybody until I resolved my own issues. How could I possibly guide someone on the correct path when I couldn't even remember what was truly important to me?

I had to get the bangle destroyed somehow, not only for my sake but for Lorwen's. I deployed *Dimension* and searched for the girl I had put off until last. I was apprehensive about it, but there was no other choice now. I didn't know anybody else who might be able to break the thing. So I started walking toward Epic Seeker, where Snow was.



I let myself into Snow's room, and she welcomed me delightedly. She made me some tea with unpracticed hands and asked how I was feeling, the smile never once leaving her face. But due to what she'd said on the night of the ball, I couldn't see that smile as real. She was simply fawning over me because she wanted the easy life. And now that I understood that, my heart could only grow colder and colder.

Looking for a topic of conversation, Snow showed me the scarves she had knitted earlier. She also took out the knitting and sewing tools, and actively made an effort to share her hobby. There was loads I wanted to say, but for now, there was something more important I had to ascertain. I steeled my resolve and broached the subject. Just as I had done with Lorwen, I asked for her cooperation in destroying the bangle without mincing words. And just like

Lorwen, she grimaced.

“Huh?”

“I’m gonna suppress the urge to the very last second. I want you to use all your strength to destroy the bangle.”

The second she heard the word “bangle,” she smiled again. The room fell completely silent for an instant, and we stared at each other—before she averted her eyes and muttered, voice trembling. “I... I don’t wanna.”

This was the girl who’d advised me to break it the day I met her, so I’d held on to the faint hope that she might gladly oblige me. That hope was dashed now, and Snow continued to shake her head.

“You can’t! You absolutely can’t!” She stared at the ground, shaking her head like a little kid.

The apprehension I felt regarding Snow for some time had proved to be on the mark. I had hoped it was only an unfounded worry.

“You can’t give me that!” she shouted. “After all we’ve been through, you drop that on me now?! If I break that bangle, you’ll pull out of Epic Seeker! I know it! You’ll leave Laoravia! And I can’t imagine how I’ll get through life without you! I won’t do it! I refuse!”

“S... Snow...”

I was blown away. She was desperate. Frantic. The girl who’d been such a lazy bones was now struggling like her life depended on it. And that was enough to leave me speechless.

Her lips curved into a crooked smile. “Hey, Kanami...is the way things are really that bad? I mean, what else do you need? You’ll get status, you’ll get glory, you’ll get money and safety. You’ll get everything. What could top that? I’m begging you, stop. Just...stop.”

I immediately replied with the words I’d lined up beforehand. “Snow, I can’t hold with the status quo. It’s the truth that I need...because the hidden truth might just be more precious to me than my own life. So I’m destroying this bangle.”

“Hee hee.” A forced giggle. “I’ll make a great wife! I swear I’ll be a good wife to you, so stay the way you are, Kanami! The way you are now is the Kanami I want! Let’s live this lie together, forever! Please, Kanami! Don’t you see?! Here’s a world where we can all find happiness!”

“Yeah, I’m sure we would be ‘happy.’ So I hear, anyway. But that won’t do. Snow, you just said we’d be living a lie. And personally, I can’t accept a life like that, *knowing* it’s a lie. I can’t afford to mistake what I *truly* want anymore!” I said, borrowing the words of the ghost girl who had set me back on the right path.

“I want to live the sweet lie, Kanami... I wanna be lied to forever and ever. So please, embrace the lies with me. Please.”

I shook my head calmly. “I’m sorry. I can’t do that.”

Faced with the firmness of my determination, her expression changed. “In that case, just wait a little bit longer! If you save me by winning the Brawl and becoming a true hero, that’s all I really—”

After hearing the word “hero” come out of her mouth, I communicated to her the conclusion I’d come to the night before. “I can’t do that either, Snow. However much you scream out for one, a hero who’ll conveniently solve your problems will never come. Not ever, Snow.”

“Wait, huh? The... The hero won’t come?”

“I can’t become some fairy-tale hero. I know now that path is the wrong one...which is why the hero you’re looking for will never appear.”

Maybe it would’ve been better to wait until after I’d already regained my memories to tell her that, but I couldn’t keep myself from trying to get her to see reason. I wanted her to become aware of my true desires before the Brawl began, if possible.

She started sobbing, tears welling up in her eyes. My heart twinged, but I kept my cool.

“I’ve discovered what I truly want. I still can’t remember anything, but I know there’s no way my real wish can be anything else. I’m gonna take back my memories, and with it, the truth. And I’m not gonna let him toy with anybody’s

hearts. Not anymore. So I ask you to walk the right path too. We're gonna grant *your* wish, not the wishes of the Walker Clan." Once again, I was echoing what Reaper had told me.

She fell to her knees, her legs splayed out and her hands covering her face. "Ah... Aughhh, Kanami... My Kanami..."

"No. I'm not 'your' Kanami."

Her eyes still cast downward; she started laughing hoarsely. "Ha, ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha. I knew it. It's no use. It's no use if it's *me*."

I didn't want her misunderstanding, so I disabused her of that notion. "You may like me as a 'hero,' Snow, but I'll never like that fakey version of me...and we were probably never gonna gel from the very beginning."

"I get it. You hate me...and now you're telling me to get married to Elmirahd."

"That's not what I'm saying! *You* have to decide who you marry, Snow. It's not anything for *me* to decide!"

Nobody should have to go through with a marriage reluctantly. And marrying just because it made things easier that way was a mistake.

"But... But Kanami! Palinchron told me you'd decide for me! He told me you're the only one who can show me the way! He... He *told* me..."

I wanted her to be like Reaper and search for what *she* wanted out of life. "Don't just believe what you're told. Think for yourself and believe only in what you decide yourself."

No dice. After hearing those words, she displayed the same look of pure despair Lorwen had. "I... That's not possible for me... It's too hard. Palinchron..." she murmured feebly. "Kanami's tossed me aside...and just like always, nobody's coming to save me. Nobody! Nobody's coming! Waaaahhhh!!!"

"Stop waiting for someone else! Figure out what you want your own damn self! Rescue your own damn self! You have that power, Snow! You need to get serious and live for yourself!"

I wanted her to move forward on her own two legs, like me and Reaper.

“That’s not something I’m capable of,” she replied, without giving it a second of thought. Her expression was hollow, her voice detached. “This sucks. I put in a little effort, and this is how I’m rewarded. Get serious and live life for me? Get real. Do you understand how miserable this is? I wanted you, I honestly wanted you, and then you discarded me. It’s so miserable it makes me wanna die. I hope you know that. I knew it—I should’ve never put in any effort. It would’ve been so much better if I hadn’t... ’Cause whenever I ‘get serious,’ I get seriously *hurt*.”

She got closer to me, calling my name, hoping I’d change my mind.

“Kanami... It hurts so bad, Kanami... C’mon, do something. Anything. I don’t wanna do anything anymore. I don’t wanna make any more choices. I don’t wanna think about anything... Please, Kanami...”

She extended her arm and tried to cling to me. Her pathetic whimpering had me aghast. I’d misjudged her—her spirit was far, far weaker than I could have imagined. Without a rock to cling to, the girl called Snow Walker couldn’t even walk on her own two feet. But that didn’t mean anything about her would change if I lent her a helping hand. It would just be the same shit over and over again. Her heart would get even more frail. So I distanced myself from her. I retreated to a spot where she could never reach me and took a deep breath to calm my nerves before imparting some final words.

“I’ve chosen my own path. I’d be delighted if you did likewise.”

Then I turned my back to her, opened the door, and exited the room without looking back.

“Ah... Kanami...” I heard her say from behind.

Her voice was quivering, but it was important that I not look back. It was my fault she’d gotten this weak. I’d spoiled her too much. Thanks to my presence, she had ended up putting all her hope-eggs in a basket that was never really there. It was never going to end any other way. If I spoiled her any more, she’d probably permanently lose the ability to decide anything for herself. From here on out, if I ever lent a hand to her again, it would only be after she made some decision under her own power. As heartrending as it was, I ignored her and put her room behind me.

I thought to myself as I walked around the interior of the guild. There was no longer anybody within my circle who might be able to break my bangle. The next strongest guild member, Mr. Vohlzark, couldn't even scratch me. I had no choice but to find some other sufficiently strong person. Luckily, it would be a piece of cake to find strong people. That very day, people with confidence in their skills would be gathering from all over the world. My only option now was to join them at Valhuura and participate in the Brawl. But I had someone to talk to before I could head off. I walked straight to the top floor of Epic Seeker and opened the door to the room.

"Morning, Maria."

I did my best to put on this smile for the girl I wasn't sure was my sister.

"Ah, Kanami..."

She was sitting in bed, and her face turned toward me. Just looking at her made love spring in my mind. Yet the chances were good that this black-haired girl was not my sister. In fact, I could be sure she wasn't. All the circumstantial evidence corroborated that fact. As such, I could only conclude that this surge of affection stemmed from the bangle. If my very memories had been manipulated, instilling such things in me must have been easy as pie. I suppressed the emotions welling within and informed her that I'd be away for a while.

"I'm sure you've already heard, but starting today, there's this Brawl event happening. And I'm participating as a representative for Laoravia."

"Yes, I have heard. I'll be here, waiting. I wouldn't even be able to spectate, my eyes being the way they are, so I'd just get in the way."

"Yeah, guess so."

I wondered about the true identity and background of this blind little girl. For a moment, I entertained the notion that she might be a brilliant actress who was in league with Palinchron, but then I remembered she was wearing a bangle too. In all likelihood, she was in the same pickle I was.

I was worried about her bangle. If I destroyed it, she would remember her true self again, but while there was a good possibility that would lead to some

new information for me, that was ground I couldn't tread. After all, she hadn't come to the determination I had. I hesitated to make her recall memories of whatever horrid tragedy had befallen her through nothing more than my own judgment call. It was the same problem as with Reaper and the rest—regaining my memories had to come first.

I kept my smile on. "All right, then; I'll be back in a few days. See you, Maria."

"Wait, you're leaving already?"

"Yeah, I've got some urgent business to take care of. Sorry."

A pause. "Then it can't be helped. See you, Kanami."

She was reluctant to part, but I didn't even know if those feelings of hers were genuine or artificial. I couldn't have fun chatting up a storm with her. Not anymore. So I kept our conversation on the short side, and with that, I exited the room.

Scowling, I walked around Epic Seeker once again. Then a guild member handed me the documents addressed to the guildmaster pertaining to the Brawl. The papers contained information about the Brawl and where my accommodations were located. I'd be staying the night at a first-class cabin inside a high-end luxury hotel-ship. The cabin was on the highest floor, and it boasted a nice view.

I also looked at the full diagram of Valhuura in the documents, and its bizarre structure surprised me. I'd been under the impression that it was one big ship, but I'd been mistaken. Apparently, whenever it came time for the Brawl, ships revered for their size gathered together from all over the Alliance. That some of them were convoy battleships went without saying, but according to the papers, there were also ships that conducted circuses or sideshows, as well as ships with restaurants in them. Even just the ships meant purely as accommodations numbered in the double digits, and since ships transporting nobles from all four corners of the world would also be coming, the total number reached staggering proportions. Since the Brawl was tomorrow, I reckoned all of the ships were already linked by chains to allow people to move between them on foot. This grand fleet with the giant theater-ship *Valhuura* at its center had to be the largest-scale fleet in the world, bar none. And from that

day forward, people referred to the whole fleet collectively as Valhuura.

I felt a bit excited to get the chance to walk through Valhuura, but that excitement lasted less than a second. If there had been a single person nearby I could have shared that excitement with, it probably wouldn't have abated like that, but at the moment...I had nobody to keep me company.

I walked toward the north of Laoravia. I couldn't deny I was lonely. Up until recently, I'd been with my trio of comrades, Snow, Lorwen and Reaper. I'd thought I could treat the Brawl like a nice little vacation. But in reality, it was the opposite. We were all apart.

I didn't just feel lonely; I also felt sorry for myself. Suddenly, the thought crossed my mind: "I wonder if I would've handled it better if I had been that Siegfried Vizzita guy."

I was curious about who I'd been before. Siegfried the hero, the boy who adopted that silly-ass name and dauntlessly took on the Dungeon. Maybe *he* would've done a better job of it than me. Maybe *he* would've solved Snow's, Lorwen's, and Reaper's woes by this time. Maybe we could've all been walking toward Valhuura side by side, the four of us.

I shook my head. "No. *I'm* doing this. Aikawa Kanami's doing this!"

Perhaps Siegfried Vizzita had been an impressive enough dude to be able to save everyone and their mom. But it wasn't him who held the reins right now. It was me. I couldn't lean on some ghost of myself that wasn't even around. If I did, I'd only be halting my own forward motion, much like Snow.

To show her the correct path, I put my strength back into my feet and headed for Valhuura. I was sure they'd be there—the two people whose interests now totally aligned with my own. Without my memories, I couldn't truly trust them as my comrades, but at least with regard to getting my memories back, I *could* trust they'd help me.

Lastiara Whoseyards and Diablo Sith.

I quickened my pace. I wanted the truth back, and I wanted it now.



The name of the river separating the nation of Eltraliew to the northwest and Laoravia to the southwest was the Huura. The river's waters were beautiful and clear, and wide enough to be mistaken for the open sea. The Alliance treated it like a national treasure. The closer I got to the Huura, the more dramatically the number of people I passed increased. I had no doubt the vast majority of those folks were here for the Brawl. I even got the feeling the temperature was going up a little. These numbers were by no means fewer than the numbers of people back during that festival.

Back during "that festival"? What festival?

I had no recollection of what I'd just found myself thinking about. But I already understood what had caused it. It could only be a lost memory from my past self. I was used to this sensation; I shook off the headache that accompanied the sense of discomfort and kept on walking.

I boarded a river skiff at a small cove at the northern edge of Laoravia. The little boat was slowly ferrying dozens of passengers toward the center of the Huura. The river was packed with so many ships, one might think a war was transpiring there.

When our boat came up beside one of the huge ships in the river, ropes came falling from above, and the hull was lifted up. Evidently, this was how people boarded Valhuura. Talk about a festival with a high threshold for entry. During the other festival I couldn't remember, one could look around for free, but one had to pay for boat passage just to enter Valhuura.

I boarded Valhuura amid the crowd and scanned my surroundings. I might as well have been on dry land; the ships were packed tightly enough to leave no gaps, and the rocking was slight. That was maybe why it didn't really sink in that I was on the water. It felt more like I'd disembarked on an island called Valhuura.

On Valhuura, there seemed to be more people who were well-dressed than not. That settled it—the boat passage fee, which might as well have been an entry fee, made for a natural filter. I blotted out any festive mood I might have had and expanded *Dimension*, browsing the menus of anybody and everybody I thought looked like tough stuff. I'd probably be able to spot Lastiara and Dia in

the process too.

I walked around holding the papers in one hand, taking stock of the ship and the people. According to the documents, Valhuura was divided into four areas. The map indicated I was currently in the north area of the fleet that was categorized by the cardinal directions. The participants of the Brawl were likewise divided into those four groups, and only the winning team in each area would get the chance to duke it out on the largest ship, the theater-ship in the center.

I cast my eyes toward the center. A huge luxury liner was floating there like a fortress. The central ship, which was on another level in terms of both material and size, exuded a different air than the others. Literally—the density of the magic energy was far thicker. I figured part of the reason was that there must be a large number of magic gems in use, but even more saliently, the overall power level of the people aboard it was high.

“Spellcast: *Layered Dimension*.”

I continued my examination, this time focusing more on the center. I still couldn’t detect Lastiara or Dia. Even people above Mr. Vohlzark’s level were quite rare. Although this was an assembly of tough guys and fearless fighters from every nation, compared to Alliance residents who made Dungeon diving their business, their degree of proficiency was low. Of course, now that I thought about it, that made sense. If they’d been *truly* confident in their skills, they’d have come to the Alliance before the advent of the Brawl.

Heaving a sigh, I turned to the Brawl data documents to study the fiercest fighters. My best bet was the man bearing the title of “the strongest,” Glenn Walker. He was currently making the rounds over in the hall where nobles gathered, within the center-ship. Then again, he’d shown a low-key desire to get me and his sister hitched. Plus, he seemed to be in good with Palinchron, so chances were low he’d help me with destroying the bangle.

The next potential candidate was the man bearing the title of the Blademaster, Fenrir Arrace. He was in the same hall as Mr. Glenn. At first glance, he looked almost elderly, but there could be no doubt that his body hadn’t weakened with age at all. One didn’t need *Dimension*; you could see how

muscular he was through his clothes. And that sharp glint in his eyes put the fear of God in a fair few nobles. He had to be at least as formidable a force as Mr. Glenn. In all honesty, though, there wasn't much hope to be had with him either. He was surrounded by nobles at all times, and he had numerous guards as well. Moreover, I couldn't get him to do it for me all that easily by paying him. That wasn't an option for people like him who were too high-status to want for money. Not that I knew how I'd even separate him from the crowd, or how I'd broach the subject if I did manage to do so.

In the end, turning to Lastiara Whoseyards and Diablo Sith was my most realistic option. But unfortunately, I couldn't seem to find them. I was searching every sector of the Huura, but they were nowhere to be found. They never did show up on Valhuura, even after it got dark out. Left with no other choice, I went to the room that had been arranged for me while keeping *Dimension* up. According to the documents, Lastiara's team was slated for a match in the west area the next morning. I'd simply have to hit them up then and there.

Disheartened by the unexpected troubles I was running into searching for them, I entered my lavish room. It was probably a room meant for guests of state, as it was filled with extremely high-end furniture that made use of magic gems. Each and every piece of furniture cost about as much as an ordinary citizen made in a year's salary.

Standing at the center of the room, I drew my sword and brought it up to the bangle. I couldn't fritter my time away waiting for Lastiara to appear. Instead, I'd use this downtime to experiment. What if I bound and tied my whole body such that only my right hand could move freely? What would happen if I focused only on my right hand while I was in that state? I also wanted to try destroying the bangle when my consciousness was hazy from drowsiness.

I took out some rope that looked strong enough to restrain me from my inventory and began to fetter my legs. I tested out every workaround I could think of while I waited for Lastiara to blip on my *Dimension* radar. But ultimately, she didn't appear, and I was unable to break the bangle. Another day passed with nothing to show for it.



A dull ache in my skull. I shook off the drowsiness like so much mud. When I opened my eyes, I was greeted by an unfamiliar ceiling. Upon attempting to gently raise my body, I noticed my legs were immobile. It seemed that I'd lost consciousness the previous night while pushing my experimentation to the limit. Today was the day the Brawl began.

My left arm was tied to the bed; using my free hand, I quickly untied the tightly fastened rope.

"If people saw me now, they'd definitely get the wrong idea."

While I was in the middle of it, I heard a knock on the door.

"Excuse me. Sir Aikawa Kanami, may I have a word?"

Via *Dimension*, I could tell the person standing in front of my room was one of the workers in charge of running the Brawl. I hastened to untie myself and make myself look presentable before opening the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I stammered. "Aikawa Kanami speaking."

The woman, who was wearing white formal attire, bowed deeply. Her tone of voice was all business, and she kept it concise. "Sir, I have a message for you, as you will be participating in the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball."

"Ah, sure. Please tell me the message."

"As you are here representing the nation of Laoravia, you are exempted from having to participate in the first match. You are seeded, so to speak. As such, we ask that you come to the arena ship in the afternoon and not in the morning. End of message. We wish you the best of luck, Sir Aikawa Kanami. If you'll excuse me."

She took her leave. As I watched her walk off, I deployed *Dimension* to gather information and grasp the time of day and the situation outside. It was bright out, a pleasant, sunshiny morning. Every ship was bustling with the Brawl's many, many guests. Apparently, the first round was about to start. Lorwen was preparing for his match on the arena ship in the south area, which lay opposite the north (the area I was in). Reaper, meanwhile, wasn't anywhere. Maybe she didn't plan to participate in the Brawl at all.

Snow was with Ms. Tayly of Epic Seeker, who was comforting her in the waiting room of the arena ship in the west area. Nearby was Mr. Vohlzark; he was wearing an ill-at-ease expression. As I'd been told a little while back, these three would also be participating in the Brawl as representatives of the guild. Maybe because of what had happened the day before, I was worried about Snow, but I figured that if I left her to those two, she ought to be okay for the time being.

I immediately searched for the two girls again. According to the documents, Lastiara's first match would take place in the west area. However, no amount of searching for them via *Dimension* helped; I just couldn't find them. How could they not be here even on the first day of the Brawl? I was getting frustrated. I searched the entire fleet, but there was no sign of them anywhere. That being said, I had nowhere else to go that morning, so I decided to wait in the west area anyway.

I entered the arena ship where Lastiara's match was to be held and surveyed the vicinity. The structure of the arena ship was considerably different from the others. It was clearly built to be sturdy, and one could tell from its stateliness that it was originally a battleship. It seemed they'd remodeled the deck of a huge battleship and installed a circular arena on top of it.

The structure of the arena wasn't too different from what I'd pictured. As a whole, it was circular, with tiers of seats. At the center lay a sandy-soil stage around the size of a sports ground, and it was easily visible from every seat. If anything could be said to run counter to what I'd been picturing, it was all the decoration. The arena was adorned with gems, and looking down, I could see plenty of ley lines. That was something you didn't see in arenas back in my world.

None of the seats were empty. I arrived with little time to spare, so I had no choice but to stand. I leaned back against the wall and waited for the match to start. Lastiara was supposed to be in the first match. In just a few more minutes, it would be a loss by default for her team.

Amid the din of the spectators, the clock struck the start time of the match at last. When the match didn't start on time, the clamor of the stands grew loud. It seemed Lastiara really wasn't in Valhuura. I had only bothered coming because

I'd thought maybe she was concealing herself from *Dimension* somehow, but it looked as though I'd schlepped here for nothing.

I was about to leave Valhuura to go look for them when a voice I assumed was the presenter's resounded through the arena.

"Allow me to apologize to all of you in attendance. The first match of the West Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball was supposed to begin, but the team headed by Lastiara Whoseyards has not yet arrived. Therefore, after a fifteen-minute grace period, we will have to consider it a loss by default for her team and proceed to the second match."

Curious as to the workings by which that announcement was made loud enough to be heard by the throng, I carefully observed my surroundings through *Dimension*. The presenter at the center of the stage was gripping something resembling a mic stand. It was made not of metal but of gemstone. The intricately carved details intimated that it was an item infused with magic formulas, and the magic tool was connected to the ley lines that stretched across the arena. It was similar to Snow's vibration magic. It seemed that if one possessed expensive magic tools and one or more ley lines, they didn't need Snow's magic. The ley lines at his feet vibrated every time he spoke. I continued to listen to his announcements as I admired how convenient it seemed.

Apparently, Lastiara wasn't immediately disqualified. There was to be a short grace period. I reckoned I might as well wait until that period was up, since there was a possibility Little Miss Bubbly would wait to show up until the last second. I decided to make use of this time by watching the matches transpiring in the other areas. *Dimension* made it possible to view the matches in all four zones simultaneously.

I focused on the south area first. It was the match featuring the man who was almost certainly the strongest of all the fighters: Lorwen. The arena ship in the south had the same structure as this one, and the seating was likewise fully occupied. The match in the west area might have been delayed, but it was proceeding apace in the south.

"Now then! May Round 1 of the South Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball commence!"

The first match in the south was just beginning. Three people were brandishing weapons before Lorwen, who was standing there, calm and composed. I looked through the materials I had in hand to learn more about those three. Apparently, they were well-known divers, and there was a lot of cheering from the stands rooting for them. In fact, if things didn't go great for Lorwen, he might find *all* of them were rooting for his opponents. That couldn't be helped; as far as the people of the Alliance were concerned, Lorwen was practically an unknown.

He didn't appear to mind. He was waiting for his opponents to approach him, an amused look on his face. The three divers, meanwhile, were conscientiously making the preparations for their attack. The balance of their party could easily be gleaned from their formation and outward appearance. One of them, a man who was clearly a mage, was incanting in the back, and a man and a woman each holding a sword and shield formed a wall to protect him—a tried-and-true tactic that stuck to the fundamentals. It was a defensive formation meant to leverage large-scale magic that required long-winded incantations. In time, they'd be letting a massive spell fly at the enemy. If one went after the mage without a solid plan, his two vanguards would take the opening that presented to attack. It was a classic approach, and it suitably had few weak spots.

“Then again, they're facing Lorwen.”

A sound strategy it was, but Lorwen was now so full of drive that it made me think they had no shot in hell. As usual, he had little magic energy, but his aura and sense of presence were more imposing than ever. He might even be in finer fighting form than the day we met.

That faint smile still on his lips, he had no intention of taking a single step forward. This did not please the crowd; the spectators hurled abuse at him, and who could blame them? To the untrained eye, his fighting style looked foolish. So long as there was a mage incanting in the back, the more time he wasted, the more of a disadvantage it put him in. At this rate, the mage would complete his large-scale spell without Lorwen lifting a finger in his own defense.

“O raging wisdom! Make time bloom! Fertility Woods!”

With the spell now complete, dust made of light fluttered down from the

man's staff. Since I'd analyzed the spell using *Dimension*, I knew what that light-dust was. He was sowing magic seeds. This was the culmination of wood-element magic energy that had been refined with frightening meticulousness. The seeds scattered across the sandy soil of the arena, instantly blooming into vegetation that grew into huge trees whose canopy might just blot out the sky. Those countless enormous trees that could each swallow a human started writhing to life like living dolls, and they attacked Lorwen from all directions. From an ordinary person's point of view, it'd look as though Lorwen was crushed by the overwhelming onslaught. I, on the other hand, could see him dodging all the attacks purely with his athletic prowess.

Judging by his smirk as he evaded the trees' movements, he was having fun. He eluded the tip of an incoming branch that swung right in front of his nose and leaped to dodge the thick trunk that came for him like a whip. Using the trunk he'd dodged as a foothold, he evaded yet more attacks coming from every which way. He even dodged roots that sprang up from behind to attack his blind spot, as if he could see the future. He dodged and he dodged and he dodged.

It took the crowd a few seconds longer than me to understand what they were watching, and when they did, they went wild. He was aiming to win over the spectators with his pure athleticism. After taking note of the crowd's fervor, he picked up a twig that had fallen nearby. It was one of the twigs scattered by the great big trees rubbing against one another. Gripping it firmly in his right hand, he stopped in his tracks.

Needless to say, the trees rushed him. The spectators gasped and hollered. There were even some shrieks. They knew that if Lorwen stood in place, he'd get pancaked by the trees' assault. The three divers, for their part, were smiling, certain that the match had been decided. And then, the moment everyone covered their eyes at the horrifying sight they were sure to witness—with a light slicing sound, the countless giant trees drooped to the sides. They'd all been sliced in two down the middle and were collapsing to the ground one after the other.

The presenter sounded stupefied. "Huh?"

Everyone in the arena shared his befuddlement. No one understood what had

just occurred. The answer was simple, of course. Lorwen had used Magic Power Materialization on the twig to make it a blade and swung it lightly to make short work of the things. But he'd moved so fast and the idea was so absurd that it had left the crowd confused. Most likely, the only ones who'd been able to follow along were his "number one disciple"—me—and Lorwen himself.

He strolled at a leisurely pace while the trees that had dominated the arena seconds prior were still in the process of toppling over.



It was an incredibly terrifying, if dreamlike, spectacle. Lorwen's opponents snapped out of it, and the two sword-wielding defenders at the fore attacked him as he approached. Challenging Lorwen, the "strongest swordsman in history," to a close-combat fight yielded the obvious outcome. The moment they made contact, the two dropped their blades to the ground, the backs of their hands bleeding.

Leaving those two to eat his dust, he walked up to the side of the mage at the rear. When Lorwen thrust the twig that had bested the wood spell the mage had spent all his energy casting before his eyes, the mage laughed in a cold sweat. In the face of a power gap that overwhelming, he had no choice but to drop his staff to the ground.

"Ha. Ha ha ha! We surrender."

"Right. I accept your surrender."

Lorwen threw the twig to the ground and raised his hands to the audience with a smile. That instant, cheers enveloped the whole arena. That grand spell in itself had been a sight worth seeing, and then this unknown swordsman had sliced right through it. It was a match everybody could be satisfied to have witnessed. The presenter shouted over the mighty din of cheering in order to be heard.

"L... Lorwen has fulfilled the match's win condition! Victory goes to Lorwen! A relative unknown has defeated a powerhouse team that was a favorite for the championship, and advances to Round 2!"

That announcement only made the cheering grow even louder. The storm of approbation could reasonably be called a moment of "glory." It wasn't the peak of the glory mountain, but Lorwen had set foot on the mountain's base. That was beyond doubt. And yet, his aura hadn't weakened at all, even after basking in so much praise. It was as strong and dense as ever. Sure, he was smiling. He was putting on a smile, there at the center of the arena. But he looked somewhat forlorn; I couldn't imagine it was a smile from the heart. While he was waving his hands at the crowd, it looked like he was *suffocating* a little. Like it was all so stifling.

Just then, I detected an organism traveling at high speed through *Dimension*.

Since I'd been focused on this match, it took me longer to notice than usual. A girl mounted atop a giant wolf was fast approaching, jumping off the small boats crossing the river in a manner not unlike a street performer. The wolf bounded onto the fleet, picking up even more speed and running across the roofs of the ship's various structures. With one last big jump, it cleared even the outer wall of the west area arena.

I caught sight of the wolf not through *Dimension*, but with my own two eyes. The nearby spectators also noticed the sudden arrival of that ferocious beast, and they screamed. It paid no heed to its intended route, or to the screams, for that matter. The pair swept through the audience like a swift wind and leaped onto the field of battle. While the wolf was airborne, the girl riding it also jumped, springing up with the clear skies and white sun at her back. The spectators who were waiting in the west area arena witnessed it.

With the crowd's eyes on her, she gracefully stuck the landing at the center of the arena. Then she swung her enshrouding cloak to clear away the cloud of dust she had kicked up upon landing and flung it off her in the same motion, thereby revealing who she was. Laid bare was a girl with golden hair that swayed like feathers. She was so beautiful that it instilled a sense of awe and fear in all who looked upon her; she was an unearthly entity whose very presence transformed her surroundings from mundane reality to fanciful fantasy. She was the most exalted and revered girl in all the Alliance. She was Lastiara Whoseyards.

Lastiara elegantly unsheathed the sword at her waist and clove the air. It was a dynamic entry right out of a drama, and her stirring entrance onto the stage caused an outpouring of excitement from the crowd. The cheering crashed onto the west area battlefield like an avalanche.

The presenter, having grasped what just happened, hastily made a fresh announcement. "She... She made it, folks! There's no mistaking her! The god incarnate of the Church of Levahn, the celestial princess Lastiara Whoseyards, has now arrived!"

With that declaration, the cheers reached a roaring crescendo. Lastiara responded with a smile and a wave of the hand. The administrative staff laid the preparations for the match without delay. They must have wanted to get

the Brawl rolling while everyone was still so worked up.

Team Lastiara's opponents, three men in their thirties to forties, quickly emerged from the gate to face off against her. They wore stern and solemn expressions, and their black clothes resembled military uniforms. These were not free-spirited adventurers or delvers; they looked more like they belonged to some public institution. It was immediately clear from all their scars that they were veteran warriors. Unfortunately for them, Lastiara was a rough adversary to have to face. That was just how fundamentally different—how blessed by this world—she was.

After confirming that both teams were ready, the presenter got things started. "Now then, we'll determine this match's format."

I looked at the materials I had on hand to check the method by which they nailed down the rules before any given match. Apparently, there was a different format for each of the matches in the Brawl. It said here that it was based on the prefight discussion between the two teams, where the rules of the duel and what was on the line were decided. However, there was also a disclaimer that if the talk seemed to be dragging on too long, the presenter could, at their discretion, apply the standard ruleset.

One of her opponents stepped forward and bowed deeply to Lastiara. "It's a pleasure and an honor to meet you, Lady Lastiara. My name is Shaid of the House of Fahre, which serves under a military capacity in our nation of Vart."

The presenter picked up his voice with the mic-like magic tool, making sure the venue could hear it. Lastiara responded frankly without taking the smile off her face.

"Nice to meet ya, Mr. Shaid. But since status doesn't matter here, you can relax."

"We are not worthy."

"Well, I guess even if I say that, it'll never actually work, huh? Right, then, what will be the condition for victory?"

"We request either the standard Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball ruleset of knocking the flower, or otherwise, knocking the weapon for the win."

Knocking the flower? I'd never heard that phrase before. I hurried to find the relevant passage in the rules written in my documents.

"Wearing a flower makes for a prettier show, so let's go for knocking the flower, shall we? Mr. Presenter, hand me my flower."

The document explained that "knocking the flower" referred to a battle where both sides placed a variation of a corsage on their chests. Whoever knocked their opponents' flowers off first won. The presenter gave her a decorative "flower" that was of a dark shade, not unlike a rose; she pinned it to her chest. Her opponents did likewise.

Once the battle preparations were over, one of her opponents suggested a reward for the duel. "In the event that we win, I think we would like you to return to the cathedral in Whoseyards."

"Sure, you got it. That's fine by me."

"You don't mind?" he asked, confused.

"Nope. I'm participating knowing that's a possibility."

"So you're competing knowing that if you lose, you'll be sent home immediately... Your resolve is admirable. Then if you should win, Lady Lastiara..."

"If I win, give my new life your blessing." While the man's victory request had been succinct and concrete, hers was ambiguous and vague. "I don't need your help or support. You can just pray for me."

Prayer. A victory request that cost the losers next to nothing and gained her next to nothing. But that was what she wanted.

"Understood," he said after a pause.

"You can decide how you face me too. I don't mind if you all come at me, three on one."

"No, I'll fight Your Holiness one-on-one as this group's representative. I won't belabor this."

"Roger that. All right, how 'bout we ring the bell?"

With that, the two put some distance between each other. They'd set the rules more smoothly than I'd anticipated. All that was left was to fight. When the presenter saw that they'd finished discussing, he summarized what they'd agreed on for the spectators' benefit.

"I couldn't cut in for fear of being impudent, but...it'd seem the format for the fight has been decided! The outcome of this match will determine whether Lady Lastiara Whoseyards will return to the cathedral, and it will be a straightforward duel between the teams' representatives! If Lord Fahre wins, the ongoing Festival of the Blessed Birth incident will instantly come to a resolution!"

The cheers resounded like a raging torrent. The excitement in the venue eclipsed the fervor generated by Lorwen's match. Lastiara was a huge name in this world. It could maybe be likened to an A-list pop idol participating in the Olympics.

"Now then, may Round 1 of the West Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball commence!"

The moment that sentence ended, Lastiara and the military man started running. Their swords clashed at the center of the arena, and the start signal was rung. The presenter hurriedly retreated outside of the battlefield. The force of the sword clash apparently caused them to be blown back, and they fell back one step at a time. The soldier wore a shocked expression, but it quickly reverted to a stern look as he started incanting. In response, Lastiara simply walked away with a smile on her face.

By that point, I could already see how the match would end up playing out. Given Lastiara's overwhelming physical strength, that whole both-blown-back-by-the-clash bit could only be play-acting on her part. She was pretending it was an evenly matched game for the audience's sake.

"Tear the enemy to pieces! Alto Sehr!"

He fired off a wind spell. After taking a good look at the craftsmanship that spell displayed, she spun like a top and slashed at the wind. She could have dodged the attack entirely, but she probably decided that scattering the squall in all directions would look cooler. She'd made it a point to fend it off with her sword.

In tandem with his wind spell, the soldier dashed forward. He must have favored close combat, using the wind as a means of distracting his opponent. Lastiara calmly engaged the enemy. The soldier's swordsmanship was superb, but she dealt with it with magnificent grace.

That performance of alternating between strong and soft sword styles electrified the stands. The strong sword style referred to simply overpowering the opponent, while the soft sword style referred to parrying the opponent's attacks and mustering the minimum strength necessary to get in a hit. But from my point of view, her performance was just that. It was all bullshit. Lastiara's sword skills were messy and all over the place. In reality, it wasn't the proper soft sword style—it was something that only looked like it. A flippant imitation.

I knew this because Lorwen had taught me the basics of the blade. The military man's soft sword style made perfect sense, but her swordplay was the opposite. It threw logic out the window. She was just swinging her sword in whichever way looked the coolest. The only reason there was any back-and-forth at all between them was her monstrous reflexes and dynamic visual acuity. And most of all, her sword moved far faster than his. No matter how much wasted movement she exhibited, her sheer speed made up for it. I felt deeply for the soldier guy.

Before long, Lastiara murmured, "You're a fine swordsman, and your strength's nothing to sneeze at either." She was clearly going for style points; with an affected dramatic flair, her fresh and cool voice resounded as she took a poised step forward. "That said, I don't think you're ready for the stage yet."

With one merciless stroke of her sword, Lastiara sent his own sword flying, scattering the flowers at his chest at the same time. The silver of the blade and the red flowers flew into the sky, and Lastiara's hair also fluttered in the air. The dust that she kicked up when she took that step was like the frame of a painting.

After bearing witness to a conclusion so beautiful it was out of a fairy tale, the audience unleashed the loudest cheering so far. Pushing his way through the volcanic eruption of cheers, the presenter signaled the end of the match.

"Lady Lastiara Whoseyards has fulfilled the win condition! Victory is hers! She

exquisitely advances to Round 2!”

Upon hearing that announcement, Lastiara sheathed her sword and extended a hand. With a wry smile, the soldier extended his own.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Shaid.”

“That was splendid, Lady Lastiara. I never could have guessed I’d be this outmatched.”

“Oh no, you were a worthy opponent!”

It might have seemed like he was a worthy opponent to the crowd, given the duration of the evenly matched sword duel portion of the fight, but the military man understood that it was all an act she had put on, and as such, he couldn’t respond with anything other than a polite smile. Thus did Lastiara’s first match come to an end.

Since the next match was going to start shortly, she walked toward the gate, beyond which was a room I assumed was a waiting room. She didn’t forget to work the crowd on her way there, flashing smiles all over the place. Seeing how short the distance was between the exit gate and the stands, I wove my way through to the front row. Then I cried out to her, through the roar of the crowd.

“Hey! Lastiara!”

Lastiara reacted by turning and scanning the crowd. She spotted me. “Hm? Wait, is that you, Kanami? Were you cheering me on?” she said, with the tone of someone bumping into an old friend, a response that warmed my heart.

It was difficult to make out what she said over the surrounding din. I could only barely manage to hear her, and only because of *Dimension*. I decided to get straight to the point. “Lastiara! You got some time later?! I wanna talk!”

“Huh? No, no time. I’ve got a second match today, so maybe after that, okay?”

It was then the spectators noticed someone was talking to her. A legion of eyes pointed my way; they were wondering who this guy chatting so casually with *the* Lastiara Whoseyards could be.

“All right, after Round 2 it is!”

“Cool. Ah, but be good and advance to the next round yourself, okay, Kanami? Promise me you will!”

“Yep, you got it!”

To avoid standing out, I left it there and took to my heels. I had plenty of shit on my mind, but I’d somehow managed to achieve my goal. All that was left was to wait for the time to come.

Pulling away from the spectators’ curious gazes, I hurried out of the west area arena.



After watching that match, I figured I’d spend the time I had until Match 2 started in the afternoon to get a meal, so I went to one of the onboard restaurants. It was a solid restaurant, but it didn’t really have that shipboard feel, probably because there were so many ships linked together. I could only make out any of the beautiful blue if I strained my eyes looking into the distant horizon. In any case, I filled my stomach as I viewed that not-so-amazing scenery and returned to my room. I knew a worker would come to my room to guide me again if I waited long enough.

As I’d promised Lastiara, I was thinking I might as well win the second round. If I remembered correctly, Lastiara told me she was planning to get the bangle off me during a proper match. I also had a duty to do it as a guildmaster, as well as Lorwen’s regrets to work through. Withdrawing from the tournament wasn’t an option.

After the sun had reached its zenith, a knock came on my door. The staff member instructed me to go to the north arena’s designated waiting room, which was *also* a swanky private compartment. Clearly, a lot had gone toward accommodating the Brawl’s participants. I imagined considerable amounts of money were changing hands thanks to these final rounds.

My match was to commence shortly. I sat down on a chair and deployed *Dimension*. I wanted to know who my opponents were beforehand. Expanding my senses, I came upon the name of the person I’d probably be facing off against. I also read her menu to obtain all the details, as was practically a habit at this point.

【STATUS】

NAME: Annius Crooner

HP: 143/147

MP: 156/156

CLASS: Mage

LEVEL 15

STR 3.31

VIT 3.15

DEX 1.89

AGI 1.26

INT 6.23

MAG 8.23

APT 1.42

The team's leader was named Annius. It seemed I'd be squaring off against a group of mage girls with this Annius at their head. I could tell by their uniforms and the contents of their conversation that they were academy students residing in Eltraliew. They were earnestly going over their battle strategy up until the last second.

"Listen, we'll be fighting the guildmaster of Epic Seeker. Let's not let our guard down and go full throttle from the word go!"

"Yeah, we know. Since his specialty is apparently ice magic, let's mainly use fire magic."

"I'll be all the way in the back, shooting off fire spells. I'll go full power from the very start, so back me up, please."

I was a fly on the wall of their final prematch meeting. This was hard to justify. I'd started to go so far as to listen in on their formation before chiding myself

and turning off *Dimension*. If I kept eavesdropping, the match would be over before it even began, and there was a limit to how low I was willing to stoop. I decided to use the rest of my time strengthening my mental focus instead. I calmed my fretful heart. I rationally suppressed the impulse to learn the truth as soon as possible, and the urge to save my friends. About an hour later, a worker prompted me to enter the arena. Nodding, I took out the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from my inventory and slowly walked down the path leading to the stage. The dim passage stretched for more than ten meters.

I passed through the entrance gate, and the moment I stepped into the arena, a piercing light hit me from the sky, along with cheers raining down on me. It was a tempest of sound that rocked me to my very core. My legs suddenly stiffened. This was different from the cheers I'd heard during Lorwen's and Lastiara's matches this morning. The vector of all the cheering of thousands of people was pointed squarely *my* way now, and that made a world of difference. It had a definite weight to it. And it was only natural that it hit differently compared to hearing that same cheering from behind the stands.

I managed to move my frozen legs from under the pounding cascade of cheers and stares and proceeded onto the sandy grounds. The excess of pressure parched my throat. My heart was thumping, my whole body tensing up. I kept my face an expressionless mask to hide my nerves and walked to the center, where my trio of opponents awaited. Apparently, I'd arrived after them.

The presenter shouted, "And this, ladies and gentlemen, is Laoravia's representative! The master of the hot-streak guild, Epic Seeker! It's the one and only Aikawa Kanami! What's more, folks, he's fighting all by his lonesome! He's the only man brave enough to tackle this tournament alone! Is it a sign of his absolute confidence, or is some other motive at play?!"

That introduction left me feeling more abashed than I'd expected; I looked down at my shoes and endured it. If it had been possible, I would have liked to have entered as a team of three myself. The fact that I was alone was all Palinchron.

I just didn't have anybody to ask besides Snow or Lorwen, so...

After I survived the introductory remarks, my opponents drew closer to me.

“Now then,” said the presenter, “please decide on the format for the match.”

The three students seemed to be as nervous as I was. They also looked around my age. The heated atmosphere in the arena must have been hard for a teenage girl to bear, but the girl I assumed was the leader strode forward with determination. I also steeled my resolve. I was planning to push for a standard ruleset match with nothing on the line. I had no intention of approving whatever the other side wanted.

“Er, uh, I’m a big fan! Please shake my hand!”

I’d had no intention of doing what they wanted...but my resolve had been weak. The girl before my eyes was blushing, and she bowed deeply, proffering her right hand.

“Huh? Ah, sure.”

Impelled by her modest demeanor, I found myself shaking her hand. Now she had a hold of both my hand and the pace of the conversation.

“I heard the rumors about Laoravia! You’re the same age as us, but you’re already kicking butt as the leader of a guild! I massively respect you! I’ve also seen you fight before! And, well, you looked incredibly cool!”

“Ah, uh, thanks.”

This unforeseen turn had me wincing. This was the second time I’d met a fan or what have you. I could never have guessed one of my opponents would be one.

“We’re aspiring to work for an Alliance guild after graduating, so we’ve looked into the guilds in all the nations...and we naturally found Epic Seeker to be the best one! And you’re a cut above even compared to the rest of the guild!”

“Th-Thanks, I guess?”

“I’m going to put aside my pride and make a humble request—if we win, could you come visit the academy?!”

“Wait, the academy? But why?”

“Allow me to explain! I heard you’re also a skilled mage and a Dungeon diver! We’d like it very much if you could come visit as a temporary teacher—or no, if

possible, as our private tutor! And could you please teach us about guild work and the Dungeon too?!”

I never saw that victory demand coming. I was so flummoxed that I just parroted the words. “Private tutor? Somebody like *me*?”

“Yes, if you would be so kind. My upperclassman Franrühle, who’s also participating, told us how stupendous your fighting skills were in the Dungeon too. I look up to you, and if you do us the honor of coming, it’d make us very happy.”

Franrühle... If I was remembering correctly, she was one of the knights I’d met at the ball. And she’d called me “Sieg.” It could be the case that my past self Dungeon dived alongside Franrühle at one point. And she must have exchanged that information with these students who frequented her academy. Talk about unexpected. I’d braced myself for putting my money on the line; I never would have supposed they’d ask me to become a *teacher*. I did think it was an endearing victory demand. It was like a bunch of soccer-loving kids asking a pro to coach them. I decided their demands were within the range of permissibility. While I wasn’t confident I was able to impart knowledge to anybody with any skill, it didn’t spell my end if I did lose.

“Uh, well...”

I was of two minds, as was clear from my hesitation to accept. The girl hastened to add, “If, uh, if we lose, we’ll do anything you like!”

My expression stiffened. I got the feeling that if I let that snowball roll, she’d wind up saying more unreasonable stuff. I remembered all the crazy examples of things getting out of hand that the lady at the Brawl reception desk had told me about, so I agreed to the terms before the situation worsened. I was sure my best bet was to just make quick work of the match, tell them I didn’t need anything, and end it all that way.

“Hm...that’s, uh, if you win, okay? If you guys win, I’m fine with that.”

“Thank you so much!”

I felt as though the voices of the venue grew appreciably louder once our victory demands were decided. Maybe they became excited about the stakes of

the match when they heard her say she'd do whatever I wanted. Unfortunately for them, I wouldn't ask for anything. If I did ask for something, I'd tell them to be partial to Epic Seeker. I ignored the riled-up audience and contemplated my path to victory.

"In exchange, please let this match's ruleset be knocking the flower. I don't wanna get hurt, and I don't wanna hurt anybody else either. Also, I don't mind if it's three-on-one. From what I hear, that's the standard ruleset."

"No problem!" she said, accepting those terms with a smile. "We were actually looking for it to be a knocking the flower match too! And we'll take you up on the three-on-one offer! We'll be pinning your flower!"

Then she put some distance back between us. Restlessly fidgeting, she received the flowers from the presenter. She looked super nervous, which made me somewhat suspicious. I put on the flower the same way.

The presenter started shouting. "I can't believe it! Aikawa has accepted those terrifying terms without a second thought! Does he not realize that while the words were soft, this means they're putting their bodies on the line?! Or is this an indication that he's just that overwhelmingly confident?!"

That explanation had been enough to point out my misunderstanding.

"Huh? My body?"

"There you have it, folks! He didn't realize! The word on the street's true—his skills are terrific, but he's quite the ditz!"

Before I knew it, it had turned into a serious matter. I'd been hoodwinked by how harmless the word "private tutor" sounded, but I'd finally realized that this blushing girl was putting herself on the line physically in order to obtain *my* body. And I'd said yes like it was no big thing. The receptionist lady had warned me and everything, and yet I'd still made this mistake. I wasn't surprised the spectators were eating it up either. The atmosphere in the arena heated up even more, and they were eagerly awaiting the start of the match.

"Wait, hold on a—"

"Now then, may Round 2 of the North Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball commence!"

As soon as the presenter finished that sentence, incantations echoed across the arena.

“Extend, O pillar! Flame Pillar!”

“Flame! Flame! Flame!”

“Pile up the flame sacrifices! Throw time on the pyre! Play the strings of your resolve...”

The girls deployed their magic right out of the gate. Despite their front-middle-back formation, all three of them chose to use magic. However, only the girl at the very back seemed to be incanting at length.

There was no time to complain. I deployed my own magic as I approached the nearest girl. Incidentally, I’d sheathed my sword. It would be a serious problem if I wounded a teenage girl.

“Spellcast: Wintermension.”

I began the process of nullifying all of their spells. Luckily, I housed an understanding of fire magic within me. I could do more than throw the spells askew; it was child’s play for me to disperse them altogether. First, I dispersed the *Flame Pillar* at the fore. Then I interfered with the long incantation at the rear. Then I attempted to dismantle the elementary-level spells simply named *Flame* shot by the middle guard—and failed to meddle with one of them.

“I can’t erase it?”

That *Flame* had no weak points whatsoever. I instantly understood why. The girl in the middle had a number of rings on her fingers, and I saw that some of the expensive-looking red rings were now broken. I looked at the menu for one of the unbroken ones.

【SCATTERFLAME MAGIC GEM RING】A ring containing the power of *Scatterflame*.

I understood that it was a magic tool with a specific spell incorporated into it. *Wintermension* couldn’t interfere with the complete spells residing inside such

magic tools. I rethought my strategy and stopped trying to pluck the closest girl's flower for the time being. If I kept pressing in on her, that one *Flame* would get in the way, preventing me from reaching her. I had no choice but to deal with the *Flame* headed my way.

As I analyzed the situation, I realized how limited my options were. The fire didn't pose a threat to me personally. Even if the flames did hit me, my HP wouldn't drop much at all. Since I was leveling up, my durability was surpassing what was humanly feasible. But the flower on my chest wasn't as durable as I was. The tiniest fragment of the tiniest spark would set it alight. That was the problem. And so I chose to focus on an abundance of defensive measures.

"Urgh! Spellcast: *Freeze!*"

While deploying magical cold, I made full use of my physical prowess to dodge all of the *Flames* with moves that carried me great distances. That was because, according to the rules, I couldn't even get grazed.

The first turn of the match was over, and the leader in the middle gave out instructions. "That was his rumored countermagic! Do as we planned and focus on the magic tools!"

They didn't seem all that shaken by the spells they'd tried to cast fizzling out. It looked as though they knew about the effects of my *Wintermension* to an extent...as was to be expected of fans of mine.

The girls deployed more magic, smashing the accessories they had on them to do so. These were all wide-range fire spells suited to knocking off the flower. I defended myself by dampening the diverse host of fire spells coming my way via *Wintermension*, occasionally using *Blizzardmension* to make them disappear outright.

I could see one expensive-looking magic tool break after another. The girls paid it no mind. They must have hailed from rich families. I had heard that the academy had a lot of nobles like that in attendance.

As I fended off the fire, I got a sense that the girls were pretty proficient. There were no pauses to speak of; the volley of spells was rapid-fire. Presumably, they'd undergone knocking-the-flower training at this Eltraliew Academy place. They were using the optimal strategy given the ruleset.

As I admired their prowess, I immediately drew my sword. Next, I took out some cloth and water from my inventory. Then I kicked myself for my arrogance. To be totally honest, I'd thought there was zero chance I could lose. That was why I'd gotten so sloppy with the prematch negotiations. I hadn't brought a weapon, since I didn't want to injure anyone. But thanks to that, I'd missed out on defeating the vanguard girl in the first turn. I'd been convinced I could curb stomp any opponent. And that was exacerbated by my failure to gather intel.

"Spellcast: *Blizzardmension! Magic Energy Freezing!*"

Putting the name of my strongest spell to my lips, I covered my flower with the wet cloth and crafted a membrane of water around it. Then I had to wait a few seconds.

"I won't let my guard down anymore!"

I ran with all my might into the storm of flame magic, closing the distance while my clothes and skin got scorched. I was far one instant and closing in the next; the vanguard looked surprised, but by the time her expression changed, it was already too late. My blade had scattered her flower, and I'd already run past her. The other two girls, the middle guard and rear guard, saw what had happened and tried to take a defensive posture. But before the middle guard could do so, the tip of my sword, which had grown longer due to *Magic Energy Freezing*, had scattered her flower too, leaving only the last one with any time to put up a fight. She held her staff forward, pointed at my eyes, crushed a magic tool, and released a hastily constructed flame spell.

"*F-Flame!*"

"Spellcast: *Ice Flamberge* combined with spellcast: *Blizzardmension*."

For a moment, I let *Blizzardmension* creep into the ice blade. Then, I stroked the *Flame* with my sword. The ice-element magic energy, which inhibited vibrations, penetrated the *Flame*, causing it to die away. After seeing that the fire was gone, I closed the distance without hesitation. The girl's staff flew into the air, and at the same time, the petals of her flower joined it. After confirming that every opponent's flower had fallen, I threw away the cloth on my chest. My flower wasn't the least bit singed. I immediately called out to the presenter,

who had lost sight of me, and pointed at the flowers.

“Uh, excuse me, sir. Can I call this my victory?”

He didn’t seem to understand what had happened, but he did see that all of the girls’ flowers were scattered and mine was intact. “It... It was instant, folks! It all happened in the blink of an eye! One second, the student team had the advantage, and the next, all of their flowers were gone! Is this the might of the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, Aikawa Kanami?!”

His bombastic hype-manning drowned the arena in a whirlpool of excitement.

“Aikawa Kanami has fulfilled the win condition! He advances to Round 3 with aplomb!”

I heaved a sigh of relief. I’d made it to the next round. Afterward, the oddly embarrassed girls came to verify what my victory demand was, but I shook my head and said I didn’t want anything from them. The spectators blasted me with a tempest of boos. Some called me a good-for-nothing and worse, and I shuffled out of the arena in low spirits.



As promised, I went to see Lastiara following the match. I searched for her using *Dimension* and found her not in any accommodations prearranged by the government, but rather on the floor of a certain luxury hotel. She and her compatriots had the whole floor to themselves. Since they had bounties on their heads, they were perhaps trying to disguise their whereabouts as much as possible. I knocked on the door to a room on the top floor and got an immediate reply before the door was opened.

“Welcome, Kanami. Come in, come in.”

“Okay.”

I stepped inside, never letting my guard down. The interior of the room wasn’t much different from the interior of mine. It was also top-class. If there was any point of difference to speak of, it was the fact that there was a beautiful woman standing there, leaning against the door to the room deeper within. My room certainly lacked that.

【STATUS】

NAME: Sera Radiant

HP: 259/263

MP: 108/108

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 22

STR 6.59

VIT 8.22

DEX 9.52

AGI 11.00

INT 5.72

MAG 7.98

APT 1.57

INNATE SKILLS: Intuition 1.77

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 2.13, Holy Magic 0.90

I knew that name. This was the wolf semifer who had entered the tournament alongside Lastiara. Her blue hair, reminiscent of Snow's, was quite distinctive. The clothes she was wearing and her taste in accessories also reminded me of Snow, as I could only describe a lot of what she had on as ethnic dress. Compared to Snow, however, the image she exhibited was stronger. On the whole, she was a bit flashy, and her hair color was a deeper, darker blue.

Her sharp eyes were glaring at me. Unlike with Lastiara or Diablo Sith, I could sense some hostility from her. When she noticed how wary I was of Sera Radiant, Lastiara smiled faintly.

“You don't have to be on high alert like that, you know. You're safe here.”

“You sure about that?”

“Serry’s one of us. You’ll be fine. I won’t deny she doesn’t get on great with *Sieg*, though.”

“I... I see.”

Sera Radiant huffed and turned the other way. That moment, her hostility dissipated. It seemed she had no intention of engaging me in battle then and there. That being said, it seemed she didn’t feel like stepping away either. While her presence did raise some questions, I cut to the chase.

“So, the thing is...Lastiara, I’d like you to destroy my bangle right away.”

Lastiara looked puzzled. “Destroy your bangle?”

I couldn’t blame her for being confused. A few days back, I’d adamantly protected it, only for me to now come and say the opposite. Anybody would be suspicious.

“Yeah. It’s a long story, but I’ve come to the conclusion that I need my memories back. You want to destroy my bangle, and you’ve got the power to make that happen. Could you give me a hand? Please.”

“It’s a long story, huh?” Lastiara put her hand on her chin and contemplated, a serious look on her face.

Maybe I’d abridged too much. Without an explanation for my sudden change of heart, there was a chance she would never take me at my word.

“It’s the truth. A lot’s happened. And the way it’s all stacked up, I realized I don’t have what’s important to me. I’m going to explain everything, so listen up.”

If I couldn’t win Lastiara’s trust, it’d really limit the number of people I could turn to, so I decided to be open and honest. First, I told her about the sense of discomfort and uneasiness that had been tormenting me this whole time. I told her about the other people besides her and her group who’d called me “Sieg.” I told her about the discrepancies between my memories and the information I received from my surroundings. Finally, I told her about Reaper’s remarks. The ghost girl with a line to my deep psyche had been the tipping point.

“I’m sorry I treated you so harshly back then. But I promise that now, I won’t

say no to destroying the bangle.”

“Well, hm. I see. I won’t lie, I’m a little suspicious, but we won’t hesitate to help you out. I mean, the reason we went into action to begin with is to get your memories back, so...”

“That’s a relief... All right, so—”

“Ah, sorry. I do have one condition,” she said, with an embarrassed expression. “Could you, uh, butter up Dia for me? He’s back in tiptop shape, physically, but mentally, hoo boy. It’s a powder keg situation.”

I summoned the memory of this Dia girl; she was the one who was crying her eyes out when we first met, and the loose cannon who had razed Mr. Rayle’s home to the ground.

“Er, she’s the one who burst into tears when she saw me, right? Won’t seeing me again have the opposite effect?”

“No, I don’t think it can get worse if ‘she’ sees you. Sieg was the person she trusted most in the world. From what I was told, you were each other’s first partners, and you were on fantastic terms. If you treat her kindly now, it should turn her frown upside down...probably.”

“Wait, we were that close? Me and *her*?”

Now that, I didn’t see coming. My past self had picked a nuclear bomb on legs like her as his first partner? What had I been on?

“Yep, you sure were. And because *you* got on famously, you don’t wanna know what *I’ve* been having to go through.” She heaved a sigh of exhaustion. It didn’t look like she was lying.

“Day by day, Dia’s eyes become hollower and hollower. It’s gotten pretty bad. I’m a bona fide hero for stopping her after she started running wild. The Alliance oughta write me a thousand thank-you letters. Do you *know* how much Alliance territory she would’ve deleted if I hadn’t been there to contain her?”

“Are things really that crazy?”

“Then again, if she helps us destroy the bangle, she’ll do the work of a hundred. After all, however she may come across, she’s actually a holy magic

specialist.”

“Gotcha. All right, I’ll try talking to her.”

I accepted Lastiara’s condition. If it was as she said, Dia would undoubtedly be useful in destroying the bangle.

“Okay, good. Right, so, Dia’s sulking in the next room over. Best of luck!”

She pointed to where Sera Radiant was standing. Dia must have been on the other side of the door. I drew nearer.

“Are you sure about this, milady?” Sera asked Lastiara. “Her Grace is currently a danger to others. This man might die the moment Lady Dia lays eyes on him. Not that I mind much if the knave does die.”

That froze me in my tracks. To think I’d been heading over to her like it was no big deal.

“It should be fine if it’s him. In fact, nobody besides him can do it. I feel like his immaculate timing has gotta be fate.”

“Reality doesn’t go like the stories you’re so fond of, milady. Just because his timing is amenable doesn’t necessarily mean he will succeed.”

“I know that. But I’m convinced it’ll be okay despite that...so please, Serry, open the way.”

With an acquiescent expression, Sera got out of the way, and now I could see the door leading into Dia’s room. But my legs still wouldn’t cooperate; terrifying magic energy was leaking from the other side, filling me with the fear of death.

Sera Radiant’s next words didn’t exactly help with that. “Siegfried Vizzita. If you do die, make sure to only die after you’ve returned Her Grace to her right mind.”

Her abrasive attitude had me wondering how she knew my past self.

“Did my past self do something to you?”

“Yes, that’s right. And it humiliated me.”

“Well, er, I’m sorry I did that.”

If I just stood there, I’d probably never come to understand how I’d been

connected to this semifer lady. I screwed up my resolve and approached the door. When I put my hand on the doorknob, I asked my last question.

“Uh, sorry, does that mean this Dia kid’s *not* in her right mind?”

“In the eyes of an ordinary person, she’d certainly appear that way,” said Lastiara. “But since I understand where she’s coming from, I can communicate with her. It might even be the case that you won’t be able to have a real conversation with her, Kanami.”

“Wait, huh? Then how can I possibly get on her good side?”

“I think you’ll be okay, conversation or no conversation. I have faith in you.”

Lastiara was placing way too much trust in me. She was sending me off to the danger room without a lick of worry. I was still a ball of anxiety, but I turned the knob and entered.

It was a dark and cramped room. All the entrances and exits were blocked, and the light from the window was shut out by the curtains. On the bed in the corner of the dark room, a girl was sitting facing the wall, repeatedly hiccuping and sniffing. Clearly, she’d just got done crying a river. I knew that it was me who’d caused this—or rather, “Sieg.” I was reluctant, but I needed to take responsibility. For now, it was time to focus on helping the girl before my eyes.

“Are you okay?”

I was still scared, though. Her menu could scarcely be more unsettling. Her Condition was near unhinged, and that MAG stat was so high, she could blast away a whole neighborhood without breaking a sweat. Depending on the situation, there was even a possibility this very ship would get blown to kingdom come.

Dia didn’t look my way; she just kept muttering, her voice nasal. “Yeah, I know. I know, Lastiara. I know. I know, I know I knowI knowI know...”

Nope, she was not well. I chose my words carefully.

“C’mon, Dia, honey, calm down... I want you to calm down and listen to what I have to say.”

“Dia...‘honey’? Who are you?” She looked my way and stiffened up. “Sieg?”

she stammered.

She stared at me with a befuddled look. I tried to get closer to her, but that proved hasty of me, because when she saw me approaching, her bloodshot eyes reeled wide open.

“Ah, augh, ahhhhh! Am... Am I seeing things? Argh, dammit, another hallucination! Ha ha, I’m so useless! Look at me. I’m wasting no time dreaming up convenient hallucinations. Trying to run from reality. But that’s no good. It’s not. If I stay this *weak*, I’ll never be able to help Sieg. To take him back from that bastard. I know, Lastiara. I know what I’ve gotta do, okay?! I just need to get stronger, right? I’ll never be worthy as Sieg’s comrade unless I get way stronger! *Way* stronger! Stronger than anyone!”

In tandem with her mad soliloquy, the sinister magic energy undulated. Detecting the surge accompanying the crafting of a powerful spell, I wrenched myself out of the way.

“Flame Arrow!”

From her mouth, a spell was spun, and the dark room flashed pure white. Where I had been just a moment before, a blistering beam of light raced. It was a laser packing a brutal amount of heat. That was no metaphor—it was a literal laser. I saw the edge of my clothes was singed, leaving me in a cold sweat. The spell’s piercing power was through the roof. Since this was the uppermost level of the ship, the laser blasted harmlessly into the sky. Now I knew why they’d reserved the whole floor for themselves. It was so that no innocents got hurt by Dia’s magic.

“Huh?” said Dia, staring blankly. “You dodged that?”

“Dia, calm down... I swear I only came to talk.”

I was trying to be patient, to be kind. But the closer I came, the more her expression warped.

“But... But why? Urgh, augh, wahhhhh! Don’t you dare come talk to me with that face, and that voice, you stupid illusion! Quiet, quiet, quiet, QUIET!”

Just like a moment ago, the room became suffused with ominous magic energy. And this time, the surge portended a spell that was even stronger than

before. At this rate, the ship would sink. I sped up the gears in my mind, trying to come up with some way to stop her.

“Sieg would never call me ‘honey’! You’re an impostor!”

I thought back upon all she’d said. I realized that she was angry because...

“You’re right! I *am* an impostor! In your eyes, I am one! But that doesn’t mean it’s okay to attack me! I’m on your side!”

“On...my side?”

“Yes. We’re comrades. I wanna help you bring back your ‘Sieg.’ In fact, I made that promise to Lastiara just now. Please believe me.”

“Don’t try and confuse me! Don’t say Sieg-like shit with that face!”

“While I may *look* like Sieg, I’m not Sieg. But I’m not your enemy either. If I was, I wouldn’t be standing in front of you like this.”

As much as possible, I tried to talk to her from where she currently was, mentally. I had a solid guess as to what was missing in her life. I, of all people, should understand how she felt. I was sure that, just like me, the person who was so important to her was someplace far, far away.

I walked closer as I spoke, extending a hand toward her. “It’s okay. The person who’s so dear to your heart will come back soon. I’ll help you get him back.”

“Wagh,” she sobbed, hanging her head. “He... He’s not coming back... He won’t come back for us... Even though we’ve been at it for so long, he just refuses to come back.”

I grabbed her by the arm. “I promise you I’ll bring Sieg back... So please, calm down.”

“L-Let go! Let go of me! Don’t touch meeee!!!”

Dia tried to shake off my hand. But it was a feeble attempt. Her low STR stat was part of the reason, but it was probably also because she wasn’t actually in tiptop shape. I kept holding her arm, stroking her head with the other hand.

“It’s okay. Calm down.”

I figured that what she needed was a sense of security. And that was because

a sense of security was what I desired most of all. We'd both lost someone dear to us. We were in the same boat.

Maybe having someone in Sieg's skin stroke her on the head made her feel more relaxed, because the tears started flowing.

"Waaaaaaaah..." She leaned her head on my chest, sobbing and hiccuping. "Sieg... I'm really, really doing my best to hang in there," she said, using the more feminine first-person pronoun now, "but Lastiara keeps picking on me. I'm just trying to punish the bad guys, but she's always saying I can't do this or I can't do that... I dunno know what I should even do anymore... I just don't know..."

She kept crying, and I had no words. I, Aikawa Kanami, had no words. I couldn't do anything but listen as she whimpered and whined.



"I'm... I'm okay now, Sieg. Sorry, I mean Kanami."

After listening to Dia for about an hour, I was finally free. Perhaps it had all been worth it, because she'd regained her composure, albeit only a little. Not only had I fulfilled Lastiara's request, I'd also somehow managed to get her to understand that I was a different person named Kanami who had lost "Sieg's" memories.

I brought Dia back to the other room.

"Nice!" said Lastiara. "Now then, let's talk about breaking that bangle, huh?"

"Uh, yeah, let's do that, but...can we leave her like that?"

Dia was under the covers of a bed in a corner of the room, staring in our direction. It looked as though she was majorly embarrassed by her behavior earlier. That she'd calmed down was a good thing, but did she have to be so far away? When I turned to look, she hurriedly hid her face behind the blanket. She was like some timid woodland creature. Like a cat or a squirrel or something.

"As long as she's listening calmly, anything's fine. In fact, now that she's acting all *girly*, I'm feasting. This is top content!"

"Oh. Okay, then..."

Lastiara was looking at her with an obscene expression. I wouldn't be surprised if she started drooling. Sensing me looking at her, she reverted to a serious expression.

"Ahem. Just leave the bangle to me and Dia. We plan to beat the daylights outta you and then take our time removing the thing."

"Remove it? Don't be so half-hearted. You can outright smash it. No need to hold back."

"Hm, I dunno... It's not that we're holding back. We're just scared to destroy it. We don't know what booby traps are in it, see. I mean, this is Palinchron we're talking about."

"You mean a suicide formula or something like that? I remember you mentioning that. But if we worry about that, it ties our hands, doesn't it?"

"We're okay on that front. I've got knowledge of all magic in the Alliance packed inside me, and Dia's the world's strongest user of holy magic. If we join forces, we can dismantle any magic formula there is, given enough time. And if there's a safe way to do it, then I wanna choose that way, even if it takes some time. After all, in the event we fail, Dia's gonna lose it!"

Lastiara was considering the worst-case scenario. She was probably thinking there was a chance the bangle would even explode. That was why she insisted on removing it instead of destroying it.

"Got it. Let's get it removed, then. Can I ask you to get on the case right away?"

Her expression was less than ideal. She hesitated to respond. "Ah, er...so, yeah, starting right away isn't gonna be possible."

"Huh?"

"I mean, if we start right now, we'll get interrupted for sure."

"Interrupted? By who? There's nobody around, is there?"

"Snow's around. She's probably listening in on us as we speak."

"Huh? Who, Snow?" I said, taken aback.

“Using her abilities, she’s able to eavesdrop on all of Valhuura. It’s just a guess, but I’ll bet she’s actively chasing you through the sounds you make.”

“Chasing me? Snow’s magic can do that?”

“She’s reached the peak of elementless vibration magic. If it has to do with sound, there are no limits. We’re unlucky that this fleet’s got nothing but high-class ships. There are so many magic gems she can use as intermediaries that her unique magic can permeate anywhere. I think she’ll be able to hear you no matter where you go.”

“That... That’s true, now that you mention it.”

The only magic Snow had told me about was her ability to convey vibrations from one magic gem to the next, but given how lazy she was, the chances were high that she’d hadn’t divulged her full bag of tricks.

“If we were to start trying to remove your bangle here and now, I’m sure she’d come barging in. The way she is now, she’s codependent on you, so I think she might even go further and put us in early graves. Like, seriously, though.”

At some point, Lastiara had come to grasp Snow’s current state. And she was taking it even more seriously than I was. She was even of the opinion that Snow might stoop to murder.

“But if it’s just Snow we’re fighting, we can hold her off together—”

“It’s not just her, though. That’s the problem. If I attack the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, we naturally make enemies of every guild member. Snow’s got the authority to issue orders against us, and I don’t think she’ll hesitate to do so if I give her a pretext. And that’s not all. The fact that you’re under Laoravia’s patronage isn’t great either. To be frank, we could be impeded any number of ways. Because if Snow picks up on us fighting, she’s got the ability to notify everybody.”

I was once again struck by how much of a thorn in our side Snow’s powers were. It felt like I was dealing with a different version of *Dimension*. In order to get my bangle destroyed, it would be necessary for them to incapacitate me. However, any third party would take that as an attack on my person. Forget the

members of my guild—even national security officers and well-intentioned third parties might step in to try to protect me. If I got unlucky, I might even end up having to fight Lorwen, who was also against the notion of destroying the bangle. If Snow called for him, he'd come running faster than anyone else. There was no way Lastiara and Dia would be able to focus on the bangle when they had to contend with so many capable foes. Besides, I might even join those foes in fighting them due to the bangle's curse.

“Then why don't we leave Valhuura and flee someplace Snow's abilities can't reach us?”

“If we did that, she'd probably go into no-mercy mode. I think she'd unhesitatingly use the faculties of the House of Walker and request help from the other three big houses too. Depending on the situation, Laoravia and Whoseyards might act as well. We've got plenty of reasons for those governments to want a piece of us.”

“Would Snow... Would she really go that far?”

“Have you seen her? She absolutely would. That's why I'm saying we make use of the Brawl. Like I said before, during a match, nobody will intervene. If the Brawl progresses smoothly, my team will battle Snow's in Round 4, and we'll fight you in the semifinals. If things go well, everything will be resolved there.”

Lastiara laid out her Brawl info documents and pointed at the bracket diagram. She was right; if we both won every match, that was how it would progress.

“Plus, I daresay the other side is thinking the same thing. Right, Snow?” she said, facing no one.

I also asked the air. “S-Snow...are you listening?”

After a moment's silence, one of the pieces of magic-gem-laden furniture started vibrating, producing human speech like so many vocal cords.

“Yep. I heard everything, Kanami.”

There was no mistaking that voice. It was Snow's.

“Snow...” I said, a bitter look on my face.

I didn't want to believe it. This was the girl who'd been my partner all this time.

"Living god of the Church of Levahn," she continued, ignoring me. "I'm going to surpass you."

A declaration of war. Her voice was as cold as her namesake.

"Bring it on, Snow."

"I want to marry Kanami... I don't care if that world's a lie or laid out for us by outside forces. I just want a happiness that lasts this time... That's my sole wish."

"I know... You want Kanami to yourself, right?"

"Please make that our bet. If I win the match, Kanami and I get your blessing to marry."

Lastiara looked annoyed, but she replied breezily. "I had a feeling that's where you were taking this... Sure, if we lose, we'll keep quiet. *If* we lose. But if *we* win, we get your blessing to start a new life."

Naturally, Dia also got up off her futon to give her a piece of her mind, but before she could, I shouted, "Stop it, Snow! My will is my own! Do you really think I'll marry you just because you beat Lastiara's team?! How's that make any sense?!"

A pause. "There was a time I thought my will was my own. But reality begged to differ. A single person's will is so easily crushed. It always gets crushed, Kanami. And no matter how much you struggle, you and I are getting married. The state will take away your 'right to choose' without blinking. And your position won't let you ever say no. I know that for a fact because it was Palinchron who painted this picture. I'm sure that once the Brawl's over, you'll have nowhere to run. In the end, you and I won't get a say. We'll be *made* happy...whether you like it or not."

I didn't know what to say. That rationale was just so high-handed and pushy. It was full of holes. But Snow clearly believed that if she beat Lastiara, she could find happiness with me.

“Let’s meet in the semifinals, Kanami. And don’t run. I’m always listening.”

And with that, the conversation ended. My words couldn’t reach her anymore. Her ears could hear what I said, but her heart wouldn’t listen. That was the feeling I got.



I was astounded that my speech the day before hadn't brought her around at all.

"That little—!"

I considered going over to Snow to persuade her. Our conversation just now had been tinged with enough madness to make me entertain the idea. But I thought better of it. If we met now, there was a good chance the encounter would take a turn for the violent. In Lastiara's eyes, Snow had that level of resolve. And if so, the optimal path might be as Lastiara planned—to beat Snow in the Brawl and get her to hold fast to the victory demand. This was the only period of time where we had a place where we could fight for what we wanted in a relatively safe way.

I felt pathetic for disgracing one of my own guild members, but I swallowed my pride and muttered with a serious expression, "I'm sorry, Lastiara, Dia. Please beat Snow. I want you to win, and stop that idiot..."

Crickets. Lastiara looked like she was stifling a laugh. Dia puffed out her cheeks a little, like she was sulking. Sera Radiant looked downright disgusted.

"Huh? What's gotten into you guys?"

I was the only one with a serious expression, apparently. Nervously, Dia spoke up. "Hey, Kanami. If we lose, are you gonna marry that Snow idiot?"

"Er, well, I dunno yet, but chances are that'll end up happening, maybe?"

"Oh, uh, wow. I see. I see..."

Dia's magic energy, which had quieted down, was leaking out again. She got under her blanket and kept repeating, "I see..." over and over.

"I swear, Kanami, you're always such a riot. Color me delighted. Pfft!"

Lastiara was laughing at me. Ms. Sera, meanwhile, wanted me to bite the biscuit.

"Drop dead."

"Huh? What the?"

Nobody was reacting the way I'd been expecting them to. Following that

scene just now, I thought they'd be indignant, but the mood in the air was strange and peculiar. And the atmosphere that only I was failing to comprehend continued on for a while.



After that chat with Snow, we continued to work out a plan to remove the bracelet during the semifinals. I got the sense that my relationship with Sera Radiant was gradually getting better as we talked. Somehow, I even received permission to call her Ms. Sera. The strategy to get my memories back during the semifinals was coalescing smoothly. However, if I could be said to have one nagging concern, it would be that Snow had overheard all of it. And to cap things off, Lastiara said something that made me all the more uneasy.

“Now then, Kanami. Go hang out with Dia.”

“Wait, what?”

“You can call it a date.”

“Whoa there, hold your horses! How is this the time to be doing that kinda thing?”

“It’s necessary if you want that bangle destroyed, so get a move on and get ready. We decided that you need to be totally worn out by the time our match rolls around, didn’t we? And a date’s just the thing.”

If I was going to fight back against my will, then the plan was to weaken me so that I couldn’t do so, and it seemed she wanted to execute that plan. Lastiara was refusing to underestimate the influence the bangle exerted on me. Even if I lost consciousness, if the bangle sensed danger, its wearer would be made to move. It made sense if you thought about it, and I knew what I was aiming for. Even so, I felt some resistance to the idea of deliberately running myself ragged as opposed to keeping myself in top form, considering I’d be facing strong opponents in a tournament, where there were no do-overs.

“But if I do follow through on that, there’s a chance I lose in Round 3 or 4. You sure?”

“Hm, well, judging by the brackets, I think you’ll probably be all right,” she said as she looked at the tournament diagram. “The ones we need to watch out

for are Snow and the Guardian Lorwen. Just those two. Snow will be fighting my team, while Lorwen's on the opposite side of the brackets. If you win your matches...looks like you'll probably be facing the Celestial Knights team and the team of the Supreme guild. Neither's a big deal, so Operation Weaken Kanami isn't off the wall or anything."

I looked at the diagram too. I had met both of those teams and their respective leaders, Pelsiona Quaygar and Elmirahd Siddark, before. One team was composed of the strongest knights in Whoseyards, and the other contained members from the top-ranked guild in Laoravia.

"Nothing to sneeze at? They're both top-level teams in their countries."

"Sure, they're top-level contenders within the realm of normal humans. But as long as we're not facing anybody *inhuman*, we're more than good."

It seemed she honestly didn't think either team could pose a threat.

"Er, so what you're saying is, we're inhuman?"

"I mean, kinda. We're standing on a whole different stage. At the end of the day, this tournament's nothing more than the battles between four teams of inhumans. Will it be my team? Will it be you? Or will it be Snow or Lorwen? It'll be one of those four that takes the tournament for sure. Boy, it's a miserable year for most participants, huh?"

"I can see Lorwen taking it, but Snow? Isn't her brother, the one they call the strongest, more of a danger than she is?"

Mr. Glenn's imposing suite of skills meant I had no idea what he was doing, which was threatening in itself. And I couldn't make light of the sheer experience a man who'd reached the very top had under his belt either. He might have been on the opposite end of the bracket, but I still thought I should be sufficiently wary of him.

"Sure, Glenn's fairly strong as a *runner-up*, but... Wait, hold on. Kanami, don't tell me you've never seen Snow go all out?"

"All out? Uh, no, not really. Why?"

Thus far in my life at the guild, I had always taken her place...which had

maybe been stupid of me, because I'd never seen her fight in earnest.

"In that case, I think you'll find out through this tournament. You'll see how she's the only entity who could possibly reach our level."

Lastiara had an uncharacteristically serious look on her face. In terms of stats, she had Snow beat. What did Snow have going for her that could erase Lastiara's confidence?

"That's why I want Dia in flawless form by the time we've gotta fight Snow. Now, go already. Go have yourselves a change of pace."

She reverted her expression and tried to send us off on our merry way. At some point, Dia had moved to the next room to start preparing to go out. It seemed that while she didn't understand why we were going to hang out, she was on board for it.

"Huh? But why a 'change of pace'?"

She leaned in closer and continued under her breath, "It'll both ingratiate you with her and tire you out. Two birds with one stone, you'll agree. During our match against Snow, Dia's mental state will be paramount. You know how a mage's mental state affects their spells, right?"

"If we just need to soothe her soul, isn't there some other way to accomplish that?"

"No, this is the best approach for her. Not that I'd expect *you* to understand, *Kanami*."

As I wasn't "Sieg," I had no reply. I decided to trust Lastiara, since I was sure that she and Dia had had a long association with this Sieg guy.

Lastiara smiled impishly. "Besides, if we can lure in Snow, we can get her disqualified before the match."

Maybe that was what she was mainly after.

"If you insist, I'll do it. I don't doubt you're the one who understands the situation best, after all."

"Good, it's settled. All right, I'm gonna go coordinate Dia's ensemble."

Lastiara moved to the adjacent room with a spring in her step, leaving me alone with Ms. Sera, who heaved a big sigh before approaching me.

“I’m left with no other choice—I’ll coordinate your clothes for you. You are to be Her Grace’s escort, so you need to dress appropriately.”

“Ah, right. Thank you.”

She sighed. “Why am I forced to play dress-up for a guy?”

Thanks to the marvelous job Ms. Sera did, I was now dressed as snazzily as a Whoseyards noble. I didn’t carry a weapon on me, but my clean and expensive-looking raiments would make anybody think I was in the upper echelons of society.

And that was how my day on the town with Dia came to be.



Dia and I paid a visit to one of the theater ships in Valhuura, which was more than just the combat arena. There were all kinds of entertainment facilities for the visitors who came from all over the world, and theaters constituted just one.

Lastiara had, before we left to hit the town, impressed upon me the importance of not straying off on my own. After that encounter with Snow, she figured we should all be in groups of at least two at all times. As such, I was careful not to take my eyes off Dia as we walked around. She seemed weirdly attached to me, so that in itself was easy. The problem was that in all this time, she exhibited no sign of ever letting go of my hand. Lastiara had informed me beforehand that Dia’s right arm was a prosthetic. Her left hand was grasping my right hand tightly. And the image of us walking around the theater ship hand in hand was the very picture of a date. When I tried casually letting go, her expression turned sorrowful, so there was no escape. What had my past self been thinking when he made a girl this innocent but this unstable so attached to him? I was extremely curious.

Dia was in a party dress not unlike a gown, which Lastiara liked. Dia had resisted the idea of wearing something so frilly right up until she was about to exit the room, having succumbed to Lastiara’s pushiness.

I had to give it to her—Dia’s solid white ensemble was something to behold. It very much suited her pale skin and golden hair, and she was attracting a lot of eyes. Lastiara’s clothing choices did well to cover the seams of her prosthetic arm, so unless she folded up her sleeve, no one would notice that she was missing an arm.

I myself was standing out more than I would’ve liked on account of my holding hands with such a beautiful girl. I couldn’t say we were family; our hair color gave away that we weren’t.

We finished watching a play that had been performed in the theater ship. As we exited the theater, Dia was wearing a big smile. Needless to say, we were still holding hands.

“Man, Kanami, it got so fiery!”

“Fiery? Oh, you must mean the play. Yeah, the story got heated. It was classic stuff. The lives of warriors. I think it was a fun, easy-to-understand production.”

“I’m glad you liked it. This story’s one of my top recommendations out of the stuff I know.”

“Wow, so you’re a girl who’s a lover of hero tales in general, huh?”

It wasn’t a hobby one usually associated with a girl as pretty as her, but after it was decided we’d go hang out, Dia had chosen a hero play almost immediately. And there had been plenty of love stories she could have chosen from, but she hadn’t hesitated one bit.

“A ‘girl,’ huh?” Her smile faltered for a second.

“Sorry, was that wrong of me?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t refer to me that way—actually, I guess it’s all right. Right now, I’m fine with it.”

“All right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

It might have been the case that my past self had just referred to her as “Dia,” without any gendered honorifics. And since I figured I should respect the way she was distinguishing herself in her own way, I had decided to keep using the honorific that cast her as a her.

“All right, Dia, where do we go next?”

“Er, let’s see...” she said, frowning in thought. She looked so cute, making that face. Coupled with how pretty she was, she was drawing people’s eyes and then some.

Furthermore, I was one of the participants in the Brawl. I was withering under the inquisitive staring, under the admiration and envy. Dia, meanwhile, wasn’t paying any attention to the people around her. Maybe she was used to having all eyes on her due to her being such a natural looker.

To be honest, as I wasn’t big into attracting so much notice, I would’ve liked Dia to fly a bit more under the radar, but seeing her derive so much joy from reading the contents of the Valhuura documents, I couldn’t say anything. And to be honest, I was also scared any little thing could make her flip out.

“Oh, hey, they made a play out of that story too! Kanami, let’s go to this one next! This one’s great too!”

“Hold on, Dia. How about we get some dinner first? It looks like this theater ship’s connected to a dining ship.”

After all the plays we’d seen, our sense of time was failing us, but *Dimension* was telling me it was pretty dark out, so I suggested we eat as a short break.

“Oh yeah. I don’t mind getting some food around here. Come to think of it, are you sure you should be eating? Did you and Lastiara decide you need to get as weak as possible?”

“Ah, now that you mention it, you’re right... Guess I’ll just have some water.”

“Damn, I feel bad... Should we go someplace else?”

“That’s okay; you don’t need to worry. I’m the one who’s asking you guys for help with the bangle, after all. Making this sacrifice is the least I can do.”

“You’ve got the wrong idea, Kanami! We’re not doing this because you asked us to. We’re doing it because we wanna help you!”

Apparently, it was a notion she felt the need to disabuse me of. She’d been trying to save “Sieg” since the moment we met. Not because she’d been asked to by anybody else, but due solely to her own will. That guileless affection left

me feeling a little warm and fuzzy inside.

“Thanks, Dia. We really must have been thick as thieves, huh?”

“Yeah, Sieg and I totally were. We both got hurt on Floor 1 of the Dungeon, so we formed a team. To me, Sieg was my very first and my greatest friend and ally.”

“A team... Say, did I have any family back then?”

“Family? Uh, no—you said you came to the Alliance by yourself from far, far away.”

“I see...”

While Dia had evidently been my first companion, there had been neither hide nor hair of my sister. That confirmed I’d stumbled into this world without her.

“What’s wrong, Kanami?”

“Oh, I was just thinking ‘Sieg’ must have been so alone...”

“Sieg isn’t alone. He’s got us. No matter what happens, I’ll be there by his side! Even if no one else is!”

“Gotcha. Looks like I was a lucky dog then, adored as I was by a girl who’s this cute.”

She got red in the face. “C-Cute? Wait, no, I’m not ‘cute,’ Kanami! I’m... That’s...” she said, using the male first-person pronoun.

I could feel my face getting redder too. I’d let my guard down and ended up saying a line that sounded like I was making a pass at her. As I started racking my brain to smooth this over, *Dimension* picked up voices I’d heard before.

“I do declare, Ms. Ragne, how immodest! Please be a lady and remain within reasonable bounds!”

Or maybe it was more correct to say a *speaking style* I’d heard before.

“Wait, huh? You mean I can’t even buy snacks? Doesn’t that take, like, all the joy out of comin’ here?”

The way Ms. Ragne spoke was also distinctive. The two came closer.

“If you’re feeling peckish, I’ll introduce you to a restaurant that’s quite tasty. Kindly bear with it until we get there.”

“C’mon, it’s only tasty when you get to eat the food that caught your eye right then and there. Besides, I don’t much enjoy fancy restaurants to begin with.”

“That’s only because you’re not used to the upper-class atmosphere yet. This is a good chance. It’s time I did you the favor of drumming upper-class manners into you.”

“Hold on, what? I’m thinkin’ I maybe don’t want you doin’ that for me...”

“Come now, let’s sally forth! It’s not far from here!”

“Urgh. She ain’t listening. Sera could be a pain, but Franny’s just as bad.”

A rich girl with blonde pigtails was pulling a girl with short hair by the hand. I knew their names. They were Franrühle Hellvilleshine and Ragne Kyquora. If I recalled correctly, they’d also called me Sieg in the past. Maybe interacting with them would help with the bangle or my memories.

Only, seeing that pigtails girl made my body freeze for some reason. I wondered what had happened between her and my past self that would cause me to want to keep my distance on a subconscious level. While I was contemplating whether to call out to her or not, Ragne Kyquora looked my way.

“Hm?”

Eagle-eyed, she spotted us in the crowd. I was taken aback. They were so far away that they were only barely within *Dimension* range. And *Dimension* was telling me that her magic energy wasn’t at play either. Her sheer intuition reminded me of Lorwen. Looking at her menu, I noted she also had the skill Magic Power Materialization. I also got the feeling that she had a somewhat similar vibe to Lorwen as well. Maybe they were distant relatives.

Ragne Kyquora’s face lit up; this time around, she pulled Franrühle Hellvilleshine by the hand, dragging her toward us.

“Hey there, kidnapper guy.”

“Nice to see you again, but could you not call me ‘kidnapper guy’...er, Raggie, was it?”

“Just joking. They’re treatin’ what happened on the Day of the Blessed Birth like it never happened, see. Looks like the folks at the top prioritized savin’ face and what they could get out of it. Which is why I don’t need to hesitate to talk to you. So how about it? As long as we’re together, we might as well have some dinner, right?”

“Dinner together, huh? Er...”

I didn’t think it was a terrible idea, but I did falter a bit when I remembered that, as they were two of the Celestial Knights, I would be facing them in my next match.

“Oh, Sir Sieg, it’s me! Franrühle Hellvilleshine!”

“Uh, long time no see, I guess? Ms. Franrühle?”

I didn’t bother correcting her about the “Sieg” thing. Moreover, since chances seemed high that she came from a respected family, I remembered to use a “Miss” for her.

She had tears in her eyes. “Oh my word! I knew it; you do remember me, Sir Sieg! I’m ever so moved!”

Well, now I couldn’t possibly say I didn’t remember her. I was sweating a little now.

“Sir Sieg, if it’s okay with you, would you be so kind as to dine with us today? We’ll be partaking of the finest cuisine in all of Valhuura!”

“Actually, uh, thanks, but I’m gonna pass... I have someone to keep company today.”

“Please, no need to refrain. Now then, come this way!”

I tried declining softly, as I also had the match the next day on my mind, but she wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Hold your horses,” said Dia. “What’re ya doing, deciding for us? Kanami and I are going to watch a play soon,” she lied.

Inevitably, they ended up glaring at each other.

“Oh, and who might you be?”

“I’m just Dia. No surname.”

“Is that so... Wait, have I met you before? I can’t remember, but I get the feeling I have...”

“Well, I ain’t never seen a bag of smiles like you.”

“Hmph. What a rude little kid.”

“I... I’m not a kid! I’m probably around the same age you are!”

“And yet your language remains so improper. You do realize you’re speaking like a little boy?”

“Yeah, because that’s what suits me! And I don’t wanna hear about language from *you*, of all people!”

From my point of view, I was the only one among this group of four that had a normal speech pattern, yet I could tell that they all thought the exact same thing of themselves, which was scary.

“No, it really doesn’t. You’re ever so pretty, but you’re ruining it like that... I don’t mind teaching you how to speak properly, if you like?”

“You telling me to speak the weird-ass way you do?”

“I say, it’s an ever so elegant mode of diction, isn’t it?”

“C’mon, Kanami, let’s hoof it. Let’s go see the next play. Talking to her makes my head hurt.”

Dia took me by the hand; she wanted to drag me off. I lightly bowed my head and said some parting words.

“We were actually right about to go watch a play, me and her. Let’s share a meal some other day.”

“In that case, I’ll come watch that play with you! Why, come to think of it, I’m not actually all that hungry after all!”

She stopped me by taking me by the hand.

Dia shouted reflexively. “Ah! Hey, let go! Don’t follow us!”

“Franny,” said Raggie, “we’ve been called to attend the ball at the center,

remember? If we don't eat dinner soon and head straight there after, we won't make it. We don't got the time to watch some play."

"We have Liner to attend for us, so it's okay! Right now, Sir Sieg takes precedence!"

"Wait, are you for real right now?"

"The Head Knight isn't around at the moment, so this is my chance! Raggie, please help me, as a fellow maiden!"

"Hm...maybe we *are* fine as long as Liner's there."

"Liner is a deft hand, so it'll be all right. Now then, Sir Sieg, we have enough time. We'll be accompanying you."

The sparkle in her eyes told me that she was absolutely not going to leave, no matter what.

"Well, uh...I guess it's not against my interests," I said.

Just walking alongside this *boisterous* young lady would probably be exhausting, and she might just be my ticket to exhaustion land. The moment I let go of Dia's hand—

"Sieg."

It was within the range that only I, who was right next to her, could pick up on it, but Dia's demeanor changed considerably. She'd whispered my name and grabbed the hem of my clothes, so strongly that I almost fell on my backside. I stared at her face. She was looking down but I could tell via *Dimension* that her eyes were hollow; she was on the brink of reverting to her prior state.

"I need to protect Sieg," she muttered under her voice. "Otherwise, *I*..." she said, using the other word for "I" this time.

I gripped her hand again, and spoke quietly so only she could hear. "C-Calm down!"

"That's right, I need to be the one to protect him. I need to protect Sieg. If I don't, he'll go far, far away again... I can't stand it. I don't want Sieg going so far away from me again..."

“N-No! I’m Kanami right now. I’m Kanami, so calm down!”

She looked quite puzzled. “Kanami?” Then she looked quite sad. She took some deep breaths, calming herself bit by bit. “I... I see... You’re not Sieg at the moment. You’re Kanami, not Sieg.”

She gently let go of my hand. Her sole true hand lost anything to grab hold of. She looked so lonely that it made me want to tell her I was in fact Sieg, but that wasn’t something I could afford to do. I never wanted to tell that kind of stopgap measure lie ever again.

Dia lifted her head and forced a smile. “Ha ha! I got a little confused there for a sec. Sorry, Kanami. But I’m okay now. I’m okay...” Then she allowed the other two to come, as though it was no big deal. “Hey, you. Blondie. It can’t be helped, so you can tag along. Just don’t get carried away, got it?”

“Heh heh heh, no worries. As if someone of my caliber could ever get carried away. Now then, which theater are we heading to?! If you like, I can guide you to one I recommend!”

As hasty and impatient as ever, she turned her back and led the way. Dia clicked her tongue but followed, and Raggie followed her, a smile on her face. And that was how it came to be that four of us would watch a play together. While Dia and Franrühle bickered at the front, they pushed through the theater ship crowds. Listening closely, they were arguing about what play to watch.

“We came here to watch hero tales, so that’s what we’re watching!”

“You’re behind the times, Dia! What’s in vogue with nobles at the moment is romance stories, so that’s what we ought to watch!”

Their argument meant it took a lot of time to choose a production. In the end, I found a play that was a compromise between the two, and everyone agreed to watch it. Just as I was about to buy tickets for the play, Franrühle secured VIP seating from somewhere. As I’d gathered from her name, it seemed she was from quite the prominent family.

We start watching the play in the special seats. At first, both Dia and Franrühle seemed dissatisfied, but they became absorbed in the play soon enough. At the end of the day, *any* play would probably have been fine for

either of them. I felt a little relieved. I was worried about what would happen if I let go of Dia's hand, but nothing seemed to change all that much. Both she and Franrühle were watching with a sparkle in their eyes. On the other hand, Raggie, who was watching right behind them, didn't seem to be having much fun. It was the story of a young man who came from the countryside to become a knight and fell in love with a noble's daughter, but in the end lost his life on the battlefield. She was watching it vacantly, like it was the evening news or something. She must not have been big into theater.

Time passed by at a leisurely pace, even through that enthusiasm gap. Once the play ended, Dia and Franrühle got right to their feet and applauded the performers. And on their way out, the two even started discussing the play.

"I must say, Dia, I don't like how the protagonist threw his life away in that scene. Seeing as his beloved was waiting for him, he should have done what he could to go back to her."

"No way, Franrühle. That was the kind of situation a true man can't run away from, so it was the right thing to do."

"That couldn't have been the right thing to do. Think of the misery of the lady he's leaving behind. That was nothing but self-indulgence on the part of a man."

"You just don't get it, huh? That's part of the epicness of it all. You don't think that's a beautiful way for their romance to come to an end?"

"We can't see eye to eye, can we? Beauty certainly is to be cherished, but it isn't everything. Besides, if two people with feelings for each other don't get a happy ending, I just can't accept it!"

"Really? In life, things don't go the way you want more often than they do. I like endings that aren't happy because they're more realistic."

Through their shared interest, they'd crossed the threshold into friendly terms at some point; a one-eighty from when they first met, they were practically congenial now. Whenever I wasn't in the picture, they just looked like two normal—if cocksure—girls.

As I was watching them from the back, the formerly silent Raggie spoke up.

"Mister."

She managed to speak at the perfect volume so that the two in front couldn't hear. Apparently, this was only for me to hear.

"I've got something to tell you about tomorrow's match."

I was surprised. What was this Brawl talk all of a sudden? "Tomorrow's match?"

"I want you to not let your guard down during the match, ever. I mean it. Please."

"Well, this got serious all of a sudden. I honestly thought you guys maybe didn't even realize you were fighting me tomorrow."

"Of course we do. You've beaten me twice now. Out of all the opponents in the Brawl, you're the only one that's got my attention."

"Oh, really?"

It seemed she viewed me as a worthy rival. I nodded even as I fretted over the deeds of my past self.

"So, in order for tomorrow's match to proceed smoothly, how about we settle on the ruleset now?" she suggested.

"You want to decide on the ruleset *now*? I mean, I don't mind, but..."

"Our team leader, the Head Knight, will probably want to go ahead with a three-on-one fight. And we'll go for the knocking the weapon ruleset too."

"I'm fine with both. It's a standard ruleset, so I really can't complain."

"Good, good. Now, here's the most important one—whatever you do, please don't put anything on the line. You're faint of heart, so I've got a bad feeling about this. I'm sure that the Head Knight is going to use every means to try to draw some kind of pledge out of you, so I want you to come right out the gate saying you absolutely won't bet anything. It's always possible that you lose, so please, ignore any and all provocation, okay?"

"Now that you mention it, she did say that. That she'd make me a knight of Whoseyards."

"I think she must've gotten orders to bring 'Aikawa Kanami' to Whoseyards."

And if you come to Whoseyards, it'll turn into a whole big thing. So whatever terms she puts down, don't accept."

Raggie was sharing the inside story of Whoseyards without any qualms.

"O... Okay, got it. But aren't you one of those Celestial Knight guys yourself? Can you get away with not supporting your superior in Ms. Quaygar?" I asked, confused.

"I consider myself a friend of Sera and milady first and a Celestial Knight second. I don't think those two will like it if Whoseyards gets its hands on you, so allow me to give you fair warning."

"Milady" was probably referring to Lastiara. Little by little, the circumstances of the girl before my eyes were coming into view.

"I see. So you're friends with those two."

"We're something like childhood friends. Only now, we're on opposing sides."

To her, Lastiara and Ms. Sera were such good friends that she'd go so far as to defy her boss, Ms. Quaygar, to help them. Sensing the warmth of their camaraderie, I strongly nodded.

"Gotcha. I won't get taken in by Ms. Quaygar's designs. I won't cause trouble for Lastiara or Ms. Sera. I promise."

"Thank you."

Raggie looked relieved and started walking ahead of me. It seemed she'd been waiting for the right time to say all this. She was light on her feet now, as if a heavy burden had been taken off her shoulders. It was then I heard the strange place the other girls' conversation had flown to.

"I do declare, can you really use a sword, with a body as small as yours?"

"Don't discount me! I'll have ya know I trained with the House of Arrace—and that you wouldn't beat me!"

"What, *the* House of Arrace? Well, if that isn't intriguing! Say, sugar, why don't we hit up an open arena?"

"I'll beat ya black and blue, Blondie!"

“You’re blonde too, you know...”

They’d thoroughly hit it off, and now they were off to an arena. Since there were no official matches at night, they were able to borrow an open one. That conversation about the play must have flown to the moon and back to get to that point.

“Oh, I have an idea! Sir Sieg! If you like, I’d love for you to show us your strength too!”

I found myself agreeing to it. “Huh? Sure, I don’t mind, but...”

“Lovely! Ever since that time, I’ve been beside myself wondering how strong you’ve become!”

“I’ll pass,” said Raggie without hesitation. “I’m the kind of knight who gets extremely weak when she reveals her cards.”

I kicked myself for my rash remark as I headed for the arena with a wry smile. Dia had excitement in her eyes now, so I couldn’t very well say no.

We arrived at an arena without anybody else in it and started our mock battle using blunt swords. As we didn’t want any injuries before the actual match, this match was truly nonserious. Our talk was lighthearted, and Raggie was tossing in quips from the sidelines. We boasted about our technique and didn’t go any further than that.

However, even in such play-duels, Dia’s win-loss record was abysmal. Not only did she fail to win a single time, she couldn’t even see a ghost of a chance down to the very end. In terms of stats, she wasn’t much different from Franrühle, but when it came to this, the gap was overwhelming. One could see the signs of hard work in Dia’s sword, but the gulf between their sense for wielding their swords was despairingly wide. So much so that it made even Franrühle choose her words carefully.

“Dia...er, chin up...”

“Sh-Shut up! Let’s do it again! Maybe I can’t beat Kanami, but I *will* beat you!”

But sadly, in this world, gaps in skill were just too numbers-based. Too absolute. In the end, the Dia vs. Franrühle mock battle unfolded over more than

ten rounds, and not once did Dia's sword ever reach her. Though she was chagrined, Dia tried to soldier on by competing against her with spears and what have you, but she got nothing but Ls in her column. It was as I vaguely felt —Dia was crushingly terrible at anything to do with physical exertion.

“Dammit! Why can't I win?!”

Dead tired, she fell on her backside. It seemed this long battle was finally over.

Franrühle extended a hand to the now-sitting Dia, a rare serious expression on her face.

“Heh heh. Even though you know I'm a Hellvilleshine, you never changed your attitude.”

“No duh. I ain't got no courtesy to show a self-absorbed woman like you.”

“By all means, you've shown some promise. When you realize you can't go on with swordsmanship that primitive, do pay me a visit. I'll make you my waiting maid. Isn't that nice?”

“In your dreams. I'd rather die than become your attendant.”

Though they were hurling abuse at each other, they were both smiling. I got the feeling that their relationship mirrored mine and Lastiara's. It was an odd sensation.

“Franny,” muttered Raggie exasperatedly. “She *still* hasn't noticed Her Grace is Sith the Apostle of the Church of Levahn. Even though I'm sure she must've seen her from afar before.”

“Apostle?”

Ragne had called Dia “Sith the Apostle.” To my recollection, Dia's menu did have her name as “Diablo Sith,” but I'd never heard this “apostle” term before.

“Nooo. Really, mister? Don't tell me you're with Her Grace not knowing anything about her?”

“I mean, I don't think I don't know *anything* about her.”

My past self must have known that fact. From that weird wording, Raggie

inferred more than a little.

“Uh-huh. Okay, so you’ve got your own issues. In any case, give milady and Ms. Sera my regards. All I’d like you to tell them is that I’m still fond of the both of them. Oh, and just so you know, I’m low-key fond of you too.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t need you to add that in...and yeah, I’ll tell ’em for you.”

Raggie gave me an amiable smile, which was illuminated by the moonlight and had a charm that was different from the other girls’. She wasn’t a peerless beauty, but she had a girl-next-door cuteness to her. Feeling a tad bashful, I turned my face away, and in so doing, my eyes fell on the black of the night. It had gotten so dark out that I couldn’t make out the edge of the arena. It was moving into the wee hours of the morning, so I decided to say my goodbyes.

“How about we hit the hay, guys? We do have that match tomorrow.”

“Right you are,” said Franrühle spiritedly. “I’ll be seeing you, Sir Sieg, Dia!”

With that, we parted with the two Celestial Knights, heading back to the room where Lastiara and Ms. Sera were waiting. On the way back, Dia, who was walking next to me, talked about nothing but Franrühle. Almost all of it was complaining, but it was all backed by a proper level of affection. I had been worried, as she didn’t seem to have many friends, but now I knew she was able to socialize. Relieved that she had a bright future, I walked alongside her on the moonlit deck of the theater ship.



That “date” (or whatever it was) now over, we met back up with the others. Dia must have been exhausted, because she hit the hay immediately. After seeing how peaceful and satisfied her expression was as she slept, Lastiara and I stepped out onto the deck of the ship to bask in the night breeze. This was the deck of a luxury hotel ship, so it was in a different league from normal ship decks. A large quantity of plants were situated all around to make use of the spaciousness, and there was even a giant fountain installed in the center. It was akin to a great big park. We sat ourselves down at a bench near the fountain and gazed up at the pitch-black skies as we conversed.

“So, now that I’ve gotten you and Dia to hang out until after midnight...how

are you holding up? Are you nice and exhausted?”

“Yep, I’m beat. It’s rough when you’re not used to that kinda stuff.”

“Fantastic. And Dia didn’t go cuckoo on you?”

“There were moments she toed the danger zone, but she did fine overall.”

“I knew it,” she said, with a serious expression. “It looks like as long as you’re by her side, she’s okay. Or maybe she’s just putting on a bold front when you’re around? Hm...”

“I’ll just say she looked normal to me.”

“I’m glad if she is, but...I guess we’ve no choice but to see how she does over time.”

Perhaps thanks to Franrühle joining us partway through, by the end of the day, Dia came across as a perfectly normal girl to me. Lastiara, on the other hand, still had her doubts.

“By the way, how much stamina have you got left in the tank?”

“Plenty more, I think. I’m tired, but not tired enough for it to hinder combat.”

“Ngh. Even just depleting your stamina’s a lot of work, since your supply’s close to inexhaustible. There’s nothing for it; you wanna try working out till sunup?”

She did some shadowboxing as she got to her feet. She meant to whittle away my stamina through a spot of sparring.

“I don’t mind. Only, won’t that tire *you* out too?”

“No worries, my friend. You shouldn’t sleep, but I’m gonna. Besides, in terms of simple physical specs, I’m above you.”

“That’s true. Your stamina’s got some stupid ridiculous numbers behind it.”

I looked at her menu. Based on the raw numbers, her physical prowess outstripped everybody else’s in Valhuura. They were nearly twice as high as Mr. Vohlzark’s, and he’d trained his muscles to the peak of perfection. The contrast really underlined how strange the workings of this world were.

“Heh heh. I’m pretty confident I can’t be beat in a long-distance race, you

know.”

“Gotcha... Then how about we do a dry run for the semifinals?”

I took a practice sword from my inventory and threw it over to her.

“Well, well, what have we got here?”

“I received one that’s used for training purposes from the guild.”

Since the blade was dull, we would be safeguarded against anything crazy happening.

“All righty, let’s hang out and stop right at the threshold, shall we? For the time being, you can put your heart into it, since I can heal you as long as you don’t die instantly.”

“Damn, you can use healing magic too?”

“Oh, I guess you don’t remember, huh? I should’ve hidden that until the semifinals. My mistake. Oh well, the cat’s out of the bag now. Now then, let’s have at it! No holds barred!”

“Yeah, don’t mind if I do.”

I brandished my blade as though I were facing Lorwen. That was how out of the ordinary the girl before me was. Her stats and skills made that abundantly clear. We pointed our swords at each other beside the fountain. Shrouded by the quiet of the deep dark night, we were about to fly in and fight.

But that very moment, I sensed a boy set foot on the deck. Since I’d already found Lastiara, I was keeping *Dimension* down to the bare minimum, but despite that, the animosity was nigh palpable. The boy appeared before us, and nothing good could be coming of this; he was holding a silver sword in each hand, and he was clad in a loose-fitting cloak. As I had *Dimension*, I could see the bevy of lethal weapons hidden in that cloak, as well as the magic tools he bore all over his body.

When I saw him, my heart beat faster and my head panged. It was nostalgia. And I could only imagine the cause of it lay within my lost memories. I immediately shook off my headache. “Liner Hellvilleshine?”

The boy who’d bared his fangs at me back during that ball.

His voice sounded strained. "...get, away..." Then he kept repeating those words at a volume we could hear, glaring at us all the while. "I won't let you get away with it! I won't, you hear me?! That's right! You're paying for what you did, Siegfried Vizzita! Lastiara Whoseyards!"

Lastiara took a step forward. "I know you... You're Hine's little brother, if I recall?"

I also made to step forward and assume a fighting stance, but Lastiara told me not to with a glance. She wanted me to hang back since I didn't have my memories. I nodded wordlessly and left it to her.

"Yes, I am. I'm Sir Hine's little brother, Liner Hellvilleshine...and that's why I can't let you get off scot-free! I don't care who looks the other way! I never will!"

Skin-piercing winds of magic energy came blowing from Liner. Judging by his menu, he was definitely using wind magic.

"Okay, I get the picture," said Lastiara. "You came here to avenge him? Well if you're gonna avenge him, I'd like you to go wherever Palinchron is first."

"Obviously, I'm gonna make him pay too. But you deserve to pay just as much. You sacrificed him, and now you're spending your days yukking it up like nothing happened!"

"Yukking it up? That's a gross mischaracterization. However we may look, we're shedding blood, sweat, and tears right now."

"Get that smug look off your face, 'god incarnate'!"

Liner pointed his blade at her. She looked at it and knitted her brows. "Is that Hine's sword? No, it's not just his sword..."

"You bet it is! I'm gonna take you down in his stead! Whatever Whoseyards has got planned has nothing to do with me! You're *going* to pay for your sins!"

"I really don't think we've committed any sins that we need to atone for."

"The gall! Sir Hine was the perfect knight. He was the ideal that everybody looked up to, and envied, and revered! And you two are the only reason someone so perfect could have committed treason! You were his instigators!"

“Hold on a sec. Let us speak in our defense, if you don’t mind. Hine was deceiving me from the word go, and that was weighing on his conscience the whole time. That’s why he tried to save us... Is that persuasive enough for you?”



“You can’t be serious! My brother did nothing wrong! All he did was educate you for the sake of the nation! So why’d he do it?! Why’d he feel the need to put his life on the line to save *you*?!”

“Wow, so you’re well-informed. And it’s all just as you say.”

“Listen here, ‘goddess among us’! None of it makes sense unless you incited him! You two used him for your own ends, and then you left him to the dogs! And thanks to that, his good name’s been tarnished as a traitor! My brother worked harder for Whoseyards than anyone, and now they’re all holding him in contempt! How am I supposed to just grin and bear such an outrageous injustice?!”

Lastiara replied calmly and solemnly. “I don’t want this getting out there, but Hine Hellvilleshine *liked* me. He liked the girl I became. And I think he probably came to like the boy named Sieg too. That’s why he gave his life for us. Not as a knight, but as a fellow human. I’m sure Hine would regard his ‘tarnished name’ with pride. And you haven’t got the right to barge into that.”

At hearing her say in no uncertain terms that his anger was unjustified, his fury only grew.

“That’s the motivation that has me the least convinced! And even if that *is* true, then it’s no different from you inciting him anyway!”

“Hm. I wonder. Depending on how you take it, it might be like we led him on.”

Liner’s wild and groundless remark was having an effect on her. She said her piece in such plain terms, but she’d instantly lost her confidence. Maybe she felt small whenever this Hine person entered the picture. I tried to step forward so that she didn’t take his absurd argument to heart, but Liner shouted at me instead.

“Siegfried Vizzita! You’re trying to take my sister away from me too now! Are you planning on doing the same thing a second time?! Then you can’t expect me to turn a blind eye!”

“Wait, huh?”

A strange line of attack. His sister? He was probably talking about Franrühle

Hellvilleshine. I knew about her bizarre attachment to me, so I was at a loss for words.

“That, I don’t know anything about... Kanami, is that true?” she asked, curious.

“I think I may know what he’s referring to...”

“You do, do you?”

“S-Sorry.” I figured I’d apologize, since I got the feeling I’d done something wrong.

“I’m gonna end you, Siegfried Vizzita, before you can trick my sister! I’m gonna end you before the match, right here, right now!”

He walked up to us, the swords in his hands instruments of death as opposed to our dull edges. Lastiara scanned the vicinity with a put-upon look on her face.

“Hngh, a fight to the death’s probably a bad idea in a place like this.”

Since it was the middle of the night, there were no guards around, but there could be no doubt that if things got noisy, people would come rushing onto the deck. And if that happened, it’d be a real pain.

“No helping it; let’s get him to pipe down a second, shall we? Kanami, can you go bare-handed?”

“Yeah, I think I can take him unarmed.”

I’d seen Liner’s stats. To be blunt, he was probably the weakest of the Celestial Knights.

“Let’s wallop him and tie him up. Once he’s cooled his jets, we’ll be able to have a bit more of a proper conversation. Since it looks like he’s received somewhat biased info, he ought to understand once we disabuse him of those notions. And we want to convince him, because if we do, he might become our ally.”

Both she and I had the power to gauge an enemy’s strength, and as such, we came to the conclusion that we could take him without needing weapons. I put the two dull swords back into my inventory and faced Liner, aiming to knock him unconscious.

“Don’t underestimate me...”

Liner interpreted our not drawing swords as holding back. But that wasn’t what we were doing. We were just avoiding drawing our real swords outside of an arena, since we were participants in the Brawl.

Then, when he’d come sufficiently close, Liner cast a spell, hatred written on his face.

“Ix Wynd!”

Gusts of wind burst from under Liner’s feet. *Wintermension* was up and running, but since his spell had originated from a magic tool, I couldn’t jam it. Riding that wind, Liner threw himself at me first, just as he’d said he would. He came flying like a cannonball.

I stood ready to grab him by the wrists. Lastiara was also reaching for him. However fast he was flying, we could both see his every move.

“Ix Wynd!”

But Liner knew that already. He cast another wind spell while in midair in order to change course at a ninety-degree angle, and he slashed at Lastiara with his twin swords.

“Huh?! You’re coming this way?!”

Surprised, Lastiara withdrew her outstretched hand and immediately dodged the enemy’s swords. However, she couldn’t fully avoid the heavy kick that Liner followed that up with, and ended up having to defend herself by crossing her arms. Using Lastiara as a foothold, he jumped back into the air and took out a number of knives from inside his mantle.

“Cannon Wynd!”

He fired them from above. The magic energy was even denser than the traversal spell. One of the rings he was wearing cracked, generating a windstorm from his palm.

“Grah! Blizzardmension!”

I ran up to the knives, whose speed had increased due to the wind tempest, and chose the optimal spell for that moment. *Blizzardmension* weakened and

slowed down the winds, allowing me to grab the knives that had threatened to rain down on Lastiara. However, while I'd blocked the knives, I couldn't avoid the storm magic itself, which threw me off-balance. I immediately adjusted my posture and waited for his body to fall back to earth, but...

"Ix Wynd!"

He used another wind spell to distance himself, returning to the position he'd been standing at originally and landing. His magnificently executed hit-and-run had us both voicing our admiration.

"Hm, now that's tricky. We're as weak to flying types as always."

"Wind magic's incredible, damn. Look at how it lets you fight."

We'd been under the impression that Liner would go down easy, but the wind magic proved more potent than we'd expected.

"No, that's not something you could normally pull off. *Ix Wynd* isn't a spell that's meant for movement." She turned to Liner, a little worried. "Kid, you do realize that making use of magic like *that* is gonna injure your body, right?"

"This pain's nothing... I live to break so another may remain whole. Who cares if a leg or two breaks in the process? That's not enough to give me pause!!!"

Shrugging off Lastiara's concern, Liner leaped once more. His wind magic-boosted mobility was a thorn in our side. Plus, if he was hurting himself, we had to put a stop to this immediately. Downloading information via *Dimension*, I moved to intercept Liner's fierce offensive. His unceasing onslaught—wind spells from above, twin sword slashes, tossed knives—I dodged them all, as did Lastiara beside me.

But while we could defend ourselves, we couldn't counterattack at all. Liner was intent on fighting from a distance we couldn't reach. As soon as we got closer, he'd flee right back into the sky. I knew that if we just kept defending, he'd run himself into the ground, but I wanted to avoid that outcome if possible. From what Lastiara had said, we could still maybe make peace. At this rate, I had no choice but to lay a trap.

"Lastiara, I need your help a sec! Spellcast: *Form!*"

I created a mass of magic bubbles. Liner was naturally on his guard so as not to let the unidentified bubbles touch his body. Seeing that, Lastiara seemed to infer what I was gunning for; she started running to cage Liner off. *Form* was actually a pretty pointless spell unless it was combined with another spell. In other words, the bubbles were nothing more than a decoy meant to restrict Liner's range of motion, and Lastiara knew that. She and I skillfully used the bubbles to corral him to a certain spot.

"You fell for it! Spellcast: *Wintermension: Frost!*"

It was only for a moment, but Liner had put his feet on the pond that contained the fountain. At that moment, I piped currents of cold into the water to freeze his feet solid. I couldn't freeze the entire surface, but I could keep him in place.

Lastiara, who'd been on standby nearby, swooped down on him. "It's go time!"

Panicked, Liner tried to get away with another spell, but it was too late. "*/x Wynd—* Augh!"

Lastiara's merciless blow interrupted him. Then she put him in a submission hold and dislocated his shoulders.

"Argh!"

Gripped from behind by Lastiara, Liner had been rendered helpless.

"Phew. Finally caught him. Kid's nimble, gotta say..."

There was no wresting himself free from her brute strength. He couldn't stage a comeback from this position. Relieved, I made to come closer—but then *Dimension* picked up on someone coming our way at abnormal speeds, sending a chill down my spine.

"If you'd surprise-attacked us, you would've had a chance of winning," said Lastiara. "Compared to Hine, you've got a long way to go. Now then, let's—"

"Lastiara! Watch out!"

A sword I'd seen before came flying for Lastiara's arm.

"Huh?!"

Lastiara heard my cry and got wind of the flying sword; she leaped away, thrusting Liner aside in the process. The red sword stuck itself into the edge of the fountain. Liner fell to his knees in the fountain pond, and a young man came down to step over next to him. There was no mistaking who he was.

“Yeah, one little kid’s not gonna cut it. So how about I lend ya a hand?”

It was the Guardian of the Thirtieth Floor, Lorwen Arrace.

Lorwen picked up the mithril sword he’d thrown and smiled as he thrust the blade our way.

“Lorwen?!”

He waved at me. Then he helped Liner back up and popped his shoulders back in.

“Ow! Who... Who or what *are* you?”

“I’m with you, little boy twin blades. Rest easy—our interests align.”

So, Lorwen was saying that he was on Liner’s side, and as such, he wasn’t on ours.

“You’re on the back foot, ain’t ya? Fighting one-on-two like that. I’ll take on Lastiara for ya. You can focus all your attention on fighting Kanami.”

“Wha? What’s going on here?”

Liner was surprised and bewildered, but Lorwen didn’t explain. He just entrusted his back to him and faced Lastiara.

Things could hardly have gotten worse. Liner and Lorwen were now in the middle, separating me and Lastiara. We’d been completely split up. At this rate, Lorwen and Lastiara really would clash. She must have hated the idea too, because she said, “What’s the big idea, Guardian? I thought I was gonna fight you during the tournament?”

“Don’t fib like that. The way the brackets are set up, I won’t be able to battle you *or* Kanami. I can get to the finals, no problem, but the fact you two are fighting in the semifinals is bad news. It’s *real* bad news.”

“What’s there to worry about? You’ll fight whichever one of us wins.”

“Lies. If you win your semifinals, you’re not showing up for the finals. You won’t have a reason to. And you guys are actively planning for you to win... I can’t let that slide. That plan’s just not something I can overlook.”

Apparently, Lorwen didn’t like the layout of the fights. And he had a point—if he did beat Mr. Glenn’s team, the team of the so-called strongest, there was a good chance he’d have a no-show for a finals opponent. If Lastiara resolved my bangle problem, she’d have no reason to continue fighting in the Brawl.

“If Lastiara drops out, though, it’s a different story. Kanami will have no way to destroy the bangle, and he’ll have no choice but to take down the Guardian during the finals. And he’ll have to go all out too.”

I never thought Lorwen would resort to such coercive measures.

“I’m gonna take out Lastiara,” he continued, “and fight Kanami in the finals. That’s the sweetest outcome for me.”

Lorwen was a sincere guy. He wasn’t the type to go against the rules. And yet here he was, picking a fight outside of the tournament in what was damn near a surprise attack. That was how far he was willing to go.

“It’s a bit earlier than I’d have liked, but the circumstances are favorable. For some reason, the ley line where this kid is isn’t functioning. It’s the perfect opportunity to settle this once and for all.”

I knew that he prioritized his own wish over my memories, but I didn’t think he’d been feeling cornered enough to pull a stunt like this. Or maybe I’d just wanted to believe he wouldn’t do something like this. Not after I’d called him my friend.

“Lorwen...”

“Sorry, Kanami. This is the path I’ve chosen,” he replied without turning to look at me.

Liner addressed the enigmatic swordsman he’d entrusted his back to. “I can’t trust you...”

“I don’t need you to trust me, really. Just make use of me.”

“I can’t trust you, but I *will* make use of what I can. I’ll take Sieg, you take

Lastiara. You good with that?”

“Yep. Let’s do this, twin blades.”

Without turning to face each other, they decided to cooperate. I was getting flustered; there went any kind of easy victory.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash!* Spellcast: *Snowmension!*”

As I ran at full speed, I crafted my spells. At the same time, the other battle also commenced. Lastiara used the sword at her waist to block Lorwen’s. There was no time to waste. Now that Lorwen wasn’t holding back, who knew what could happen? I tried to zip over to help her, but—

“You’re fighting *me*, Sieg!”

Liner barred the way.

“Sorry, Liner, but no more going easy on you!” I shouted as I retrieved the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from my inventory.

Liner’s two swords swung for me, and in response, I released all of my magic energy.

“Spellcast: *Blizzardmension!*”

I spent all of my magic energy not to jam the enemy’s magic, but to impede his movement. Due to my unprecedented energy expenditure, magical powder snow started forming wherever I moved. While causing sprays of white with every step, I swung my sword with all my might. Liner blocked it with his twin swords, his expression changing when he saw the magic powder snow falling to the ground. Icicles rose up where that snow fell. He seemed to have realized that they contained a level of energy that was in a different league compared to the magic bubbles from earlier.

I strengthened the energy even more. I generated *Snowmension* and limited where my opponent could move. Through *Blizzardmension*, I dulled the motion of his limbs. Using that panoply of ice spells, taking down the immobilized Liner was simple. Dodging the twin blades with the minimum possible movement, I laterally slashed at one of those swords. And since I was wielding one of the world’s greatest swords, it shattered like so much ice.

“What?! My brother’s sword!”

Liner was shaken by just how easily the sword had broken, and I exploited that moment to take him by the arm that was gripping his other sword. Then I struck his abdomen with the hilt. When I tried to shoulder-throw him, however, *Calculash* detected a magic energy that wasn’t Liner’s. It was the point of a sword made of magic energy that was flying at me from afar, and it was threatening to imminently pierce my legs.

Giving up on the shoulder throw, I moved away from Liner to dodge the sword. Then I checked where it had come from. Lorwen was stretching a magic energy sword from one hand without even looking my way as he crossed swords with Lastiara using the other hand.

“Lorwen!”

More so than the fact Liner was no longer powerless, I was frightened by the sheer ease with which Lorwen was able to do something like that while fighting an opponent as formidable as Lastiara at the same time. When it came to simple close-quarters combat, he really was unmatched.

“Gah, augh! Siiiieg!!!”

The newly freed Liner gripped his remaining blade tightly, about to throw himself at me once again.

“Kid! Use this!”

Lorwen, having grasped everything that was happening on my side, threw him the other sword he’d had at his waist. I recognized it. I was the one who’d picked it up.

“Wait, Lorwen! That sword!”

【RUKH BRINGER】

Attack Power 7. Mind Taint +2.00

The blade that had been broken was now very much whole again thanks to Lorwen’s magic energy. This was different from his usual Magic Power

Materialization; I detected earth-element magic energy there. He'd mended it using a special method available only to a Guardian like him.

"That oughta fit you like a glove, kid!"

Liner snatched the tossed sword from midair.

"You just had to give him that!" I grumbled, intercepting a blow from the boy who sprang upon me, wrapped in wind.

"SIIIIIEG!!!"

Rukh Bringer's magic energy and the wind magic energy mixed together, and Liner's magic energy turned progressively more fiendish and vicious. But from what I could sense via *Dimension* and his menu, he was keeping the sword's energy under his control for some reason. He wasn't succumbing to madness like I almost had back when I'd taken it in hand. All it seemed to do to him was increase his agitation a little. Of course, that was vexing enough in its own right.

Together with the sinister winds, Liner slashed at me. I blocked Rukh Bringer with the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword, bending over to avoid the second sword. His offensive wasn't over, though. He used that momentum to launch a kick with his right leg. Figuring this was my chance, I used my empty left hand to try to grab his leg. The impact of the kick would shoot pain into my hand, but it'd allow me to throw him. But before I could...

"Wynd!"

My left hand was thrown off, the gale that blew from his feet bending my ring finger and pinky in the opposite direction. I grimaced at the acute pain, but I was in the middle of combat, so I immediately stuffed the pain into a corner of my mind.

"Urgh!"

Liner utilized that windstorm to fly away. The timing of that spell had been perfect; he'd definitely cast it right before I could grab hold of him. Unfortunately for him, he was clearly overdoing it.

"Gah!"

I wasn't the only one groaning in agony. His legs were gravely injured. The

winds had shredded his flesh, causing him to lose immense amounts of blood. But he still wasn't stopping. He wove yet another wind spell and came rushing at me. As long as he had that wind magic in his arsenal, it didn't matter if his legs were mangled—his mobility would remain unimpeded.

“This is crazy!”

I wanted to run to Lastiara's aid as soon as possible, but the boy who was prepared to die had the potential to be even more pesky than Lorwen. I had no time to think of a way around this deadlock; I was struck by Liner's third midair assault. This time, I dodged Rukh Bringer, which whooshed right in front of my nose, and destroyed Liner's other sword with my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. But that didn't shake him; he immediately discarded the broken blade and punched me with his now free hand. I defended myself with my left elbow. Needless to say, there was another blast of wind.

“Wyyyyynd!”

Battered by another tremendous burst, my whole left arm grew numb. Considering the snapped fingers as well, that arm seemed to be out of commission for the fight. I looked at Liner, who had once again flown away with his wind attack. To be exact, I was looking at his fist, which had been rendered into a bloody pulp by his own wind magic.

“Stop! That's a ridiculous way to use your magic!”

“So what?! If it lets me kill you, I'll gladly do it, even if it destroys me!”

Liner tried to repeat the same kamikaze attack, and I could understand why. The difference in ability between him and me was like night and day, and he was aware of that. With this suicidal assault, however, he could effectively ignore the power gap and deal damage to me. As long as Liner believed that damage to himself was of lesser concern, it was his best option.

Liner swooped in with wind magic, hit me with a bare-handed attack, and then hit me with point-blank wind magic. He did that over and over. First he paid for it with his right hand, then his left hand, then his right leg, then his left leg. The way he was rushing toward his own death, gushing more and more blood as he went, made me feel like throwing up. It was a revulsion I couldn't name, and I was getting that familiar headache again. My patience had reached

its limit.

“Don’t talk about your own death like it’s no big deal! Linerrrrr!”

I chose an attack that similarly exhibited no regard for my own health. I discarded the Straight Sword and used my now-free hand to grab his body.

“W... Wynd!”

Naturally, Liner went with the usual point-blank wind spell. He was forced to. It was his only means of attack that would work on me. The gale bent the fingers on my right hand backward too. It got my pinky, my ring finger, and my index finger as well. But I put my strength into my remaining two fingers and held on.

“I’ve got you!”

I slammed into him and jumped into the pond with him in tow.

“Spellcast: *Wintermension: Frost!*”

The water in the pond started freezing over, trapping Liner’s body in the ice. He tried to get out of the water before the encroaching ice could bind him. However, I hit him with a full-power headbutt and elbowed him in the solar plexus.

“Gahagh!”

Liner’s brains rattled in his skull, and he expelled the contents of his lungs. Confident his strength was leaving him, I completed the freezing magic. The pond was only waist-deep, but it was all I needed to freeze his limbs in place. Leaving him to his concussion, I wasted no time getting out of the pond.

That had eaten up more time than I’d expected. Who knew fighting somebody willing to do kamikaze attacks was so hard to deal with? Since I could only move my thumb and middle finger, I couldn’t hold anything but a light weapon, so I took out a dagger instead of a sword from my inventory and dashed to rescue Lastiara.

“Lorwen!”

I closed the distance toward the two who were crossing their swords at inhuman speeds. In response to my call, he fell back. He must have gotten a

read on what had happened through his Responsiveness skill. He kept his eyes forward, not looking at me, as he muttered, “Looks like my time’s up. Gotta say, Lastiara Whoseyards, you’re tougher than I thought. Or maybe I should say it’s a bad matchup for me.”

Bearing more than a few slash wounds, she beckoned me over. “Kanami, come quick! I need help! Fighting this guy’s a ton of fun, but today ain’t the day!”

I moved to her side and brandished my dagger. Lorwen responded by sheathing his blade.

“I thought I’d strike while the iron was hot, but I guess I got a bit too impatient.”

His eyes fell on the heap on the floor that was Liner. Gradually, without taking his attention off us, he moved toward him. That signaled to us that he didn’t wish to take this fight any further. Lastiara didn’t give chase, and I didn’t care to either. If we did, one or more of us would wind up dead. That was how much power Lorwen possessed.

“If only Reaper were here,” he murmured. “Or, well, if only Snow didn’t dislike me.”

Just like during the match the day before, he had a forlorn, limp-wristed vibe to him. But he quickly buried that expression and jumped a good distance away, landing in the fountain’s pond. He cut the ice with his sword and hoisted the groaning Liner onto his shoulder before making to leave the scene.

“Wait, Lorwen!” I didn’t want to fight, but I still had a whole lot to say. I condensed my thoughts and yelled out to him, “You okay with this?!”

I stretched my arms out wide, indicating this terrible spectacle and thrusting it in his face. The clash of superhuman sword-wielders had made a mess of the park, the fountain and its pond were frozen solid, my fingers were mangled, and Lastiara had gashes all over, not to mention the gravely injured boy knight.

“Is all this really okay with you, Lorwen?! Is the glory you want so bad really worth going this far for?!” I shouted, appealing to his conscience.

Lorwen was a kindhearted dude; he understood what I was getting at, and he

clenched his teeth and grimaced guiltily. Nevertheless, he looked me straight in the eye and replied, “Kanami, you can’t know the true worth of something you haven’t even obtained. I’m fighting in order to *discern* its worth. That’s right—I’m gonna discern all of it for myself. And I’m sure that if I fight Kanami the Hero during the finals of this tournament, I’ll learn the truth.”

My words had reached him, but he was determined to walk this path regardless.

“Sorry, but I’m taking the kid. If I leave him be, either you or the sentries will capture him.”

Lorwen took Liner and put this place behind him. We had no choice but to watch them leave. After ascertaining that he had moved to the south area via *Dimension*, the tension left my body. Once Lastiara herself was sure we were safe, she spoke.

“D-Damn, that was dicey! What *was* that? Is the Guardian’s goal *not* just to win the tournament?!”

“Oh, it is. But he wants what folks call ‘prestige’ and ‘glory.’”

“Then why’s he getting in our way? It’d be *easier* for him to win without us around for the finals!”

She was genuinely perplexed. I reflected on what everybody had said and done thus far and arrived at the reason, which I explained to her as clearly as I could. “He probably thinks of me as a prototypical ‘hero of legend’ figure...and he thinks that it’s only by surpassing that hero in the Brawl that he can let go of his regrets.”

Snow treated me like “the hero” at every turn, and Lorwen never said otherwise. He’d always looked at me, the boy who had summoned him after reaching the thirtieth floor, with somewhat expectant eyes, as if to say it was only natural for the one who had summoned him to be “the hero.” No matter how much I denied it, the two of them would view me as their ray of hope. That was why we were in conflict now...

“Lorwen’s got a case of tunnel vision. I know his true wish is smaller and simpler than all that...and I’m sure he’s vaguely aware of it himself too! Yet here

we are. He feels chained by a sense of duty to become a legendary hero, and now all he can think about is beating me!”

That attack had solidified what was previously just a supposition. There could be no doubt anymore. He’d become blind to the things around him. Just like the feast after the dragon quest, he’d lost sight of what was truly important to him.

“Gotcha. So he’s got two goals—to win the Brawl and to beat you... That’s not terribly complicated, so color me relieved.” She’d calmly summarized the words that had spilled out of me in the heat of the moment. “Hm,” she continued. “I considered bringing this attack to the attention of the admins of the Brawl and getting him disqualified, but maybe that’s not a great idea. If we crush his dreams outright, who knows what he’ll end up doing?”

To her, Lorwen was just another enemy. Unlike me, she didn’t have any emotions leading her astray when it came to him, so she was able to contemplate countermeasures dispassionately.

“You know what, let’s just let the Guardian keep fixating on the Brawl. Hine’s little brother, on the other hand, we’ll get disqualified. If we take the fight that just broke out to the admins, they should be able to chase him out of Valhuura for the duration of the Brawl.”

“Yeah, let’s. I’d have liked to have had a nice long chat with him if possible, but...I’ll worry about that after the Brawl.”

Lastiara stooped down to a ley line on the floor, putting her hand on it to search for something. “Given he attacked us on a ship full of ley lines, he can’t talk his way... Wait, what?” Her expression stiffened.

“What’s wrong?”

“Th-That’s weird. It hasn’t recorded anything? Hold on, was the ley line not online until just now?”

“Now that you mention it, Lorwen did say ley lines don’t function wherever Liner is.”

“Little Liner might’ve tampered with it beforehand.” She sighed and got to her feet. “No wonder he attacked us so brazenly. Let’s mosey on back.”

She urged me to return to her room. It seemed she wanted to rejoin Dia and Ms. Sera so we could be a united front against the possibility of another Lorwen sneak attack.

“Okay. It’s dangerous out here, so let’s hit your room again.”

There was no guarantee that we wouldn’t be attacked by new enemies, so we hurried back. After that, we decided to stay on our guard until dawn, refraining from stepping outside. After she healed my fingers, Lastiara foisted the night vigil on me like it was only natural and fell asleep in her soft, fluffy bed. It was reasonable for me to be the one to do it, and the plan did need me to be tired, but it still irritated me a little. I envied the three girls for how soundly they were sleeping, fighting my own drowsiness as I kept *Dimension* up. And with that, another night passed.



The morning of Day 2 of the Brawl.

Hazily, the others woke up, and I was there to see them. I was slumped over the table as they tucked into their breakfast over cheerful “good mornings.” They were in perfect form after getting a good night’s sleep. I, of course, was in horrid form due to my hunger and lack of sleep. That morning, the four of us worked out an action plan for the time leading up to the semifinals. For the most part, the plan was to end the match quickly and join up with the rest immediately to remain on standby.

After our discussion, I headed to the north area while the others headed to the arena in the west area. Just like the day before, I was in the waiting room when a staff member called for me, and I started walking down the corridor leading to the arena. Round 3 would soon begin, but I was feeling pretty enervated. It had been a single all-nighter, but it had been rougher than I was expecting. The fight against Lorwen and Liner in particular had left me dog-tired. My sword felt so much heavier in my hands, and my clothes felt like they were drenched in water. The mere act of walking caused a nasty sweat, and it made me crazy thirsty. Moreover, the magic energy in my body was unreliable. My MP was probably on the verge of depletion. That limited the amount of magic I could use in this match. I stepped into the arena with a little anxiety in

my heart.

“Now then, Round 3 in the North Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball is upon us!” came the (overly) lively voice of the presenter. “Allow me to introduce both teams!”

The sun was shining brightly, the cheers and applause thundered. And currently, it was all so tiresome.

“First, we have our representatives of Whoseyards, the Celestial Knights team! This year, we have a team composed solely of female knights, and they’re the talk of the town! The seats for the matches of these beautiful ladies were sold out in a day, and they’re head and shoulders above the competition when it comes to attracting customers! The management side of the Brawl is practically shrieking with joy! Now, let’s see how many matches the battle maidens who light up the stage will win!”

On the other side, the three knights were waving to the crowd. There was the blonde-pigtails girl with the twin swords at her waist—Franrühle Hellvilleshine. There was Ragne Kyquora, the girl wearing many layers of ethnic-looking skirts. And there was Pelsiona Quaygar, the tall woman wearing a suit of black plate armor and holding a matching full-face helmet in her hand.

“Facing them are the representatives of Laoravia, the team of the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, Aikawa Kanami! Though of course, his ‘team’ consists of him and no one else! You heard that right, folks—he doesn’t balk at fighting all three by himself! Is he a fool or is he a hero of legend?! People are calling him the *trickster* of this tournament!”

I smiled wryly and waved to the crowd weakly.

“I also have a news flash for you, folks! You won’t believe it, but I’ve received information that just the other day, Aikawa Kanami slew the dragon in the west! What on earth was this man up to in the lead-up to the tournament?! Everything he does is airheaded! Now that he’s a dragon slayer, will he reach the other dragon slayer, Glenn Walker, who’s on the opposite end of the tourney?!”

Personal information about me was now out there, all so the presenter could fuel the hype, and that information was half rubbish anyway. I’d really have

loved it if he'd stopped painting me as some bonehead. It was rather an outrage. But the crowd cheered even louder when they heard him call me a "dragon slayer hero." I scowled as I walked to the center of the arena.

"Now then, contestants, please decide on the format of the match!"

Ms. Quaygar walked over from the opposite side, and we faced one another.

"The tournament brackets bless us, Sir Aikawa. To think we would cross paths this quickly."

"I look forward to our match today, Ms. Quaygar."

"Now, about the ruleset..."

"Yes, about that. I don't wish to accept anything other than the standard ruleset. Let's agree on a three-on-one 'knocking the weapon' match."

It was the ruleset Raggie and I had decided on beforehand. Ms. Quaygar frowned a tad.

"We aren't total strangers. I certainly wouldn't mind going for something more involved than such a dull ruleset. What say you?"

"No, there's no need for that. I'd like a standard ruleset with nothing at stake."

"But think of the festival spirit. As the master of a guild that serves your state, wouldn't you like to liven this festival up?"

She was refusing to back down. As Raggie had warned me, she was clearly trying to get me to agree to something.

"I'm sorry. I'm not participating in the Brawl as a representative of my guild. I'm fighting for very personal reasons, so..."

"Hm. So even if we win..."

"You're not getting anything out of me, no."

At that, Ms. Quaygar seemed distressed. She must not have expected me to be so obstinate. Maybe she figured I would be easy to talk into doing things after watching Round 2. The silence between us dragged on, and Franrühle cut in with a disappointed expression.

“If you truly insist, I suppose we can’t force it.” But then her expression turned cheerier and she proffered a hand as she said, “I do declare, it’d pain my heart if the three came a-slashing at you and there was nothing in it for you! So if you can beat us, we’ll ordain you a knight of Whoseyards! Heh heh, now that’s an honor!”

“So even if I win, I lose? Allow me to politely decline.”

“Huh?! Th-That’s no good either?!”

“It’s no good either.”

Why would she think I’d give the nod to that anyway? I really did not like this girl.

“But... But if neither side has anything to gain or lose, that’d make for a boring match!”

I didn’t much care for her, but there was something I wanted out of this Franrühle Hellvilleshine no matter what. I pretended to cave, but it was actually a condition I’d come up with that morning. “You’re right—putting nothing on the line might be a bit too dull. Let’s see...” Before the girl before my eyes could take back the reins of the conversation, I finished my thought. “If I win...I’d like you to come to my room later. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Huh? You want me to come to your room?”

I wanted to tell her about her little brother’s attempt on my life. And I wanted to get her to curb him so that I’d never be attacked by him again, if possible. While exploiting her crush on me like that wasn’t great on the conscience, I figured it was necessary in order to resolve the Liner thing in a swift manner.

She suddenly started getting all fired up. “Th-That sounds reasonable! Let’s go with that! Let’s do it! In fact, I welcome it! Now then, let’s get the match rolling!”

“Ah, uh, sure. Let’s start the match, I guess.”

I recoiled a bit at the steep climb in her enthusiasm, but I was relieved that the bet was now set in stone. And it seemed I could fight without any funny business being thrust upon me.

“Don’t approve the bet without us, Fran...”

Ms. Quaygar, who was watching from behind, sighed and slapped her subordinate’s head. With that blow, Franrühle came to her senses and ran to hide behind Raggie, an embarrassed look on her face. Ms. Quaygar ignored that and spoke to me.

“I must say, that’s an intriguing proposal. So then, Sir Aikawa. If we win, would you come to my room to hear what I have to say?”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“I don’t hate it. May I interpret that as you giving me an hour or so to try to persuade you?”

“Sure. And I’d like to borrow Ms. Franrühle for around an hour myself.”

“Then it’s settled. You might have beaten us one-on-one, but we’re going to show you that the true might of the Celestial Knights is only unleashed when we fight together.”

It seemed I’d fought against Ms. Quaygar in the past too. Now I was even more curious about what on earth my past self had gotten up to.

The presenter took that as his cue to inform the crowd, “Good heavens! He wants to bring a scioness of the one and only House of Hellvilleshine to his room! During the last match, he obtained notoriety as the ditzy and timid guildmaster, but it seems there must have been extenuating circumstances! After all, being that way might just be unavoidable—when the apple of his eye is participating in the same tournament, that is! By the way, Mr. Kanami, I get the feeling Ms. Quaygar was being a bit forward with you too! As you can see, he’s *very* popular, folks! In this standard ‘knocking the weapon’ ruleset match, whoever loses will get whisked away to the winner’s room!”

“Whisked away,” he says... I sensed he was choosing his words with less than the purest of intentions. Sure, hyping up the crowd was his job, but I’d have liked him to exercise a little more prudence. Look, even the straight-laced Ms. Quaygar’s red in the face. She’s fuming...

We subsequently reported to the presenter which weapons fell under the “knocking the weapon” victory condition. It didn’t take long to decide, as we

were all holding our respective trusty blades in our hands. I didn't neglect to use Analyze on my opponents' equipment.

【ORNAMENTAL MAGIC GEM SWORD】

Attack Power 1

Surprisingly, Raggie's sword was much weaker than it looked. The other two, on the other hand, were wielding inarguably excellent blades. They were a match for my proud possession, the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. And their team boasted another piece of equipment whose power was even more off-the-charts than those high-quality swords.

【BLACK ARMOR ALFENLYTE】

Defense Power 6 Magic Resistance 7

Increases user's AGI by 10%

It was Ms. Quaygar's armor. I had no doubt that it was among the highest-level suits of armor in the world. It could very well be impossible to deal any damage to her when fighting with a sword as normal. And they had a whole host of other arms as well. All three of them were holding a large quantity of magic tools in their clothes. I could only assume they had worked out strategies against me based on the information acquired from my first match. And I should probably have expected my opponents to use magic tools against me in all future battles.

As I was revising my battle plan while poring through their menus, my eyes met Raggie's.

"M-Mister, you ignored my warning..." she said, lamenting the fact that her efforts had gone in vain.

I apologized. While I'd had the largest say, I'd still ended up agreeing to a bet. "Er, uh...I'm really sorry. There was a bit of a change in circumstances. It'll be all right, though. I'll do as you advised and go all out. As such..."

Unlike the day before, I wasn't going to let my guard down in the least during this match. I had a reason I absolutely could not afford to lose, so I fully intended to hit them with everything Aikawa Kanami had in his arsenal.

"I won't be losing."

I said it. Of course, I knew that there was no such thing as a battle I literally couldn't lose. Regardless, I vowed I'd win. Raggie must have sensed the strength of my resolve; with a reluctant expression, she nodded and withdrew. With that, the prematch talk was over, and the Celestial Knights and I distanced ourselves from each other.

"Now then, let's commence Round 3 of the North Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball!"

Round 3 was on.

"Spellcast: *Wintermension!*"

The second the match started, I distanced myself even more while crafting a spell. I was confident that if I'd attacked from the word go, I could have finished it in an instant, but for this match, I planned to leave absolutely nothing to chance. Raggie said she had experience fighting me, which meant there was a decent chance a surprise attack wouldn't work on her. It was safer to gather intel for the time being.

I surveyed the Celestial Knights from afar. They were also casting their support spells at the moment. I looked at their menus once again, noting the changes in their Condition sections.

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Body Boost 0.70

They were all getting the same buff cast on them. That magic was thanks to Pelsiona Quaygar's *Growth*. Since it was the type of magic that permeated their bodies, I couldn't obstruct it. I grasped the exact amount their physical abilities had risen through the numbers.

The fact that I could gauge my opponents' strength before the fight started was a huge advantage. It was the same in my world—if you already knew the boss's HP or attack power or the like going in, it changed the difficulty level. My weapons were more than just my swords and magic. I also could also gather information through menu-sight, and I enjoyed the adaptability that my inventory afforded me. In addition, my brain's processing speed and analytical ability had been great enough to surprise even Palinchron, and Lorwen had dubbed my powers of observation and understanding "superhuman." These were all weapons in my arsenal, and there was no reason not to make use of them.

"Growth. All right, that's all of us. Now we just need to assume the formation and attack!"

They started to assume their battle formation, with Ms. Quaygar at the center.

"Yes, understood," said Franrühle.

"Got it, boss," said Raggie.

Ms. Quaygar stepped out in front, and the other two flanked her from the rear. Then all three started running. I observed, analyzed, and memorized it all—their muscle contractions, the shifting of their centers of gravity, the movement of their eyes, the words they spoke, the subtle changes in their facial expressions, their body temperatures, their heart palpitations. No matter how granular, I detected and memorized every vital sign. It was essentially the same process as the time I'd mirrored all of Lorwen's techniques, but my goal now wasn't to emulate them. Instead, I focused on ways to counter them.

I brandished my blade, ready to intercept the incoming enemies.

"Reys Wynd!"

The first shot was Franrühle's wind spell. It was a vacuum blade, like the cuts the vacuum formed by a whirlwind could inflict. Though the magic was invisible to the naked eye, my dimensional magic could accurately perceive it. I dodged it with ease, then evaded Raggie's follow-up attack—the extensible energy sword borne of the Magic Power Materialization skill. Since Lorwen had once shown me that skill, I was able to evade it with time to spare. Knowing my opponents'

skills in advance truly was a strong power to possess.

The third of the rapid-fire attacks was Ms. Quaygar's black sword. Her stats specialized in pure physical might. If I took any full-on blows from her, it would wreck me.

She swung her blade laterally from the side, and I straightened up and swayed back in order to dodge.

"Phew." I fled to the rear.

It had been a magnificent tri-pronged attack. The three were dancing to the same beat, attacking in perfect harmony. They must have done some serious training together. The next volley of attacks came quite quickly on the heels of that first one, so that was no fluke.

As I retreated, the three before my eyes unleashed their second tri-pronged attack. This time around, Raggie's magic energy sword came at me first, thereby restricting where I could go. Ms. Quaygar took advantage of that to come in with a heavy swing, once again slashing sideways but aiming for my legs. However, she clearly wasn't expecting to actually hit me; she was probably trying to make me jump into the air so that I could eat one of Franrühle's spells.

I cleanly dodged the spell without leaping up. By closely examining the information I gleaned via *Dimension* and continually making the optimal choices, I kept successfully evading their onslaught. And as I did so, I could feel my sleep-dulled cognitive faculties gradually becoming keener and keener. My fatigue had come full circle; in fact, I felt *refreshed*. It was a lot like the weird hyper feeling you get after staying up all night.

I was reading every move like a book, and I could tell that as I continued to dodge their attacks and observe, my analytical skills were steadily making my chance of winning tick up. I got the feeling that the more time I spent doing this, the more accurately I could predict the enemy's movements. By dodging and avoiding and evading, I was working to gradually but reliably bring the win rate closer to a hundred percent.

The trio's coordinated assault was a sight to behold. I felt the urge to just keep watching them at work, for the sake of the battles to come. But that wouldn't do. Not after I'd declared I'd go all out, and not after Lastiara had told

me not to take too much time.

I was finished analyzing them. My win rate had gotten sufficiently high, and now it was time to counterattack.

“Checkmate,” I murmured.

No longer on the defensive, I took a step forward. Naturally, the three didn’t even look at each other before attacking their now slightly closer enemy with a new combo. There wasn’t an iota of hesitation or misalignment. That was the greatest strength of the Celestial Knights team—the kind of teamwork that could only come to fruition through advanced training. But by the same token, if I could throw that teamwork off-balance, victory would certainly be mine.

“Spellcast: *Wintermension*.”

I used the paltry amount of MP I had left to make it “winter.” I deliberately reduced *Wintermension*’s spatial comprehension ability to its lowest limits, focusing only on cooling the space around us. Then I turned that cold on Franrühle. It wasn’t enough to totally obstruct her freedom of motion, but it would create that feeling that something was off. For example, if somebody was about to draw their trusty sword, it would feel like a strange, unfamiliar sword to the touch. And the more that one had trained with that sword, the greater the sense of incongruity.

As a result, their coordination went ever so slightly out of whack. Though the rhythm of Franrühle’s movements was only slightly slower, their teamwork was so tight that it mattered.

“Fran! What the?”

“I... I’m sorry, Head Knight, I’m cold all of a sudden!”

Needless to say, they tried to fix it. Grasping Franrühle’s situation, Ms. Quaygar changed her position to be more in sync with her now slightly slower comrade, and Raggie also slowed down the tempo of her attacks in accordance with the others. In terms of team play, that level of adaptability was ideal. Unfortunately for them, it was also a downright hopeless strategy against my magic.

After the other two slowed down to be in sync with Franrühle, I made

Wintermension stop interfering with her. And because they'd started dancing to the same beat again, Franrühle was out of sync once more, now stepping *ahead* of her group. That was what I'd been aiming for.

Naturally, the other two tried to rush to her defense, but this time Raggie was the one who lagged behind. And that was to be expected, given I was focusing *Wintermension's* chill on her now.

"Ragne!"

"Looks like it's my turn!"

Raggie calmly tried to make up the difference by speeding up her movements, but their tidy formation was crumbling bit by bit. Next, I made Franrühle's and Ms. Quaygar's movements significantly slower so that only Raggie was at the fore. Since she had the most potential out of the three, I was going to take her down first.

"Gah!"

A not so girlish grunt came out of Raggie when she leaped forward next to me without the other two. I put all my strength into my swing, striking up from below with a sword I created through Magic Power Materialization. Then I used the disarming technique I had learned from Lorwen to whack Raggie's mostly decorative sword from her hands.

She was out.

"Tch!"

"Oh no, Ms. Ragne!"

The remaining two attacked from both sides. In response, I picked up Raggie's fallen sword and blocked their swords with it plus my own sword. I poured all my magic energy into one and all my physical strength into the other. The *Wintermension* cold hit Ms. Quaygar to slow down her movement while I knocked Franrühle far away. Then I ignored the heavily armored Ms. Quaygar and ran toward Franrühle, planning to finish her off next.

I closed in on my opponent, who'd been thrown off-balance, and tried to steal her sword with my bare hands. However, the moment I grabbed her wrist, I was

thrown off-balance myself, as if some force were pulling me in.

The minimum-capacity *Dimension* caught it all. By lowering her hips, relaxing her hands, and sinking down, she'd used my own strength against me. I'd thought Franrühle was more of a mage, but it seemed that one needed to have at least some martial arts prowess to call themselves a knight. If this momentum held, I would get caught in a one-arm shoulder throw in short order, so I used *Dimension: Calculash* to analyze the flow of movement. Then, instead of trying to go against that momentum, I rode the flow, making a full revolution in the air and landing on my feet.

Franrühle was gobsmacked that I had managed to evade the shoulder throw through my bizarre response. "Huh? You... You can't be serious?!"

That created an opening, and I tossed her into the air using just the power of my left hand. There was no martial arts or any sort of technique to it. It was just the power of my stats run amok.

Franrühle flew through the sky. "Wait, whaaaaat?!"

It was an artless, crude attack that relied on pure power, but it seemed to have been pretty damn effective. Since I'd caught her wrist in a death grip, she dropped her sword from the pain. I'd done it to merely divide the pair, but now Franrühle was out of the picture too. In fact, she had flown up so high that it put *me* off.

Seeing that she was neutralized, I confronted Ms. Quaygar, who was closing in from behind me. It had turned into a one-on-one duel. There was no more need for any little tricks, and it seemed Ms. Quaygar had picked up on my fighting spirit. She unleashed a beastly war cry and slashed at me.

"Dimension: Calculash!"

The big black sword and my own blade collided. Naturally, I was the only one who got blown back; I was no match for her insane 11-point STR stat. It left me off-balance and wide open, and she attacked a second time. But in a one-on-one, I could essentially dodge her indefinitely.

I wrenched my body to the limit to evade the blow, and with that momentum, I slashed up at her sword from directly below. I hit the middle of her black

armor, and a dull clank rang out. The impact shifted her off position a bit, but the armor itself was undented. Sure enough, destroying this black armor would be no easy task.

I changed my target from the armor to the gaps in it. As I dodged her sword by paper-thin margins, I stuck my blade into one of those gaps.

“Grah!” groaned Ms. Quaygar.

But that didn’t stop me. The gaps between the armor that protected her fingers, the gap between the gauntlets and the rest of the armor, the gaps in the shoulder joints—I relentlessly slashed my way through her sword-wielding right arm. And then, for the finishing blow, I hit her sword while she took a big swing with it. Unable to keep it aloft due to the slashes on her right arm, she released her sword.

“Rgh. I suppose one-on-one was a losing battle,” she muttered bitterly, dropping to her knees.

To round out the match, I turned my attention to the sky. Franrühle, who had been in the air for a few seconds, was about to drop back down.

“Franrühle!” I shouted.

My eyes met with the slightly teary-eyed mage girl. I communicated my intention to catch her by sticking my sword into the ground, and she nodded in response. I figured out the landing point with *Dimension* and ran with all my might. Then I gently broke Franrühle’s fall, holding her in what ended up being a princess carry, before I came to a stop.

“Phew.”

My eyes met hers. I had tried to catch her as gently as possible, but I knew she might still be in pain. Her teary eyes were trained on me.

“Uh, are you okay?”

“S-Sir Sieg... Ow!”

She’d glomped me out of nowhere. I ended up dropping her due to my innate discomfort with her, and Franrühle fell on her backside.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to...” I extended a hand.

“No, it’s okay. That was better than falling to the ground without someone catching me.”

After I pulled her back to her feet, I scanned our surroundings. The presenter was just about to make his announcement to the crowd.

“Th-That’s a wrap, folks! It was so fast I don’t know what order he disarmed them in, but after an impartial review, we’ve determined that the last one to relinquish their weapon was Mr. Kanami! And what’s more, it seems he only dropped it in order to catch the falling Hellvilleshine maid! All of the ladies in the venue are deeply moved by his gentlemanly demeanor!”

Once again, I sensed an exploitative streak to his commentary. It seemed he meant to ignore the fact that I had recklessly dropped Franrühle almost as soon as I’d caught her. He must have figured it’d get the crowd more worked up that way.

“The winner is clear! Mr. Aikawa Kanami has fulfilled the victory condition! He’ll advance to Round 4!”

And so the match came to an end. Raggie and Ms. Quaygar sheathed their fallen weapons and came over to me to ask for a handshake, their expressions peaceful.

“Man oh man, you really got me. Guess the third time’s *not* the charm, huh? Damn!”

Judging by her expression, she didn’t actually seem too chagrined.

“Tell the truth, Raggie. You weren’t going all out.”

She’d told me to give it my all, but she herself had definitely phoned it in. I had a high opinion of her, partly because she was a lot like Lorwen and partly because her easygoing demeanor had me feeling there was something...immeasurable about her, for lack of a better term. It was hard to put into words, but I felt a strength in her that couldn’t be expressed in mere numbers.

Raggie just laughed my comment off. Then Ms. Quaygar gave me some praise for a fight well fought as we shook hands.

“That was a fine showing, Sir Aikawa. I can scarcely believe we were defeated head-on with these terms...”

“Oh no, your teamwork was superb. It frazzled my nerves and then some before I could trip you up.”

Ms. Quaygar’s genuine and good-faith attitude helped me relax. Were it not for that weird lingering tension between us, I felt like we could have even been on friendly terms.

“I see... Now, as promised, you may take Franrühle with you. To the winner go the spoils.”

“Yes, ma’am. Allow me to talk to—”

But unfortunately, my favorable impression of Ms. Quaygar was about to end there.

“You can ask her out or do whatever else you want! I don’t particularly mind if you ask her to marry you, even. Whoseyards will back you wholeheartedly. Whatever Laoravia tells you, just know that we’re fully prepared to make you one of the Celestial Knights!”

She’d spoken so loudly that her voice had reached the mic the presenter was holding.

“Hey! Could you please stop doing that?! I mean, for real!”

Unsurprisingly, upon hearing that, the presenter went to town. “I knew it, Mr. Kanami! You intend to bring her to your room so you can ask her out! And that’s not all, folks! He’s received permission from the state itself! But that’s just the vaunted hero of Laoravia for you!”

I was starting to feel like this guy was my greatest foe.

“Now that he’s won on this grand stage, we can’t stop him! While it’s a shame that such an interesting contestant is now *taken*, let’s send them off with a round of applause! So long, Kanami! So long, Lady Franrühle! And take things nice and easy!”

This guy was getting awfully chummy after only two matches. And he was only getting that chummy with me, to boot. I heaved a sigh lamenting this

dismal state of affairs. And right by me, Ms. Quaygar also heaved a sigh.

“Ragne,” she said, “I’ve done everything that was in my power, haven’t I?” She was beginning to let herself gripe, as if to say a pain-in-the-ass job was finally over.

“Yeah, I think you’re okay now, boss. It totally looked like you did what you could, however awkward you sounded.”

“I was never any good at this kind of mission to begin with... I always left it up to Palinchron and Hopes, so I’m extremely ill-equipped. As such, I’m returning to Whoseyards to resume my knight training. I leave the rest to you.”

“You got it, boss.”

Ms. Quaygar left the arena a step ahead of the others, and Raggie led Franrühle by the hand to me.

“Okay, mister, let’s head on over.”

“Wait, you’re coming too, Raggie? Did... Did I miss something, or...?”

We eventually left the yapping presenter behind, and I took Franrühle and Raggie out of the arena. While I did hear some very unwanted comments from the spectators behind us, I ignored them all, and together we headed for my room.



Now that Round 3 was over, my concentration, which had reached a peak during the battle, was waning as we walked. At the same time, all of my underlying physical complaints were coming back with a vengeance. I was assailed by high-intensity nausea and drowsiness, and I was too dizzy to walk straight.

I’m so hungry...and thirsty too...I want some water, and fast...

The bile was rising in my throat, and it felt unpleasant. I could taste the acidity on the back of my tongue. The inner part of my nose was painfully prickly too. I’d never felt worse in my whole life. Scratch that—I couldn’t say that until I regained my memories. Suffice it to say, I was suffering more than a little, and I couldn’t imagine how it could get worse.

I kept my hand to my mouth as I staggered onward.

“Wh-What ever is the matter, Sir Sieg?!”

“It’s okay... I’m just a little tired is all...”

I stopped Franrühle from coming any closer with a hand. Then we kept walking without a word. Sensing my not-so-welcoming mood, neither of us said anything, and in time, we reached the luxury hotel ship. I was planning to talk to the two in the room that the Brawl staff had arranged for me early on. Franrühle was being strangely fidgety, so I intended to get our little chat over with quickly.

I opened the door to my designated room.

“Welcome back, Kanami!”

I had company—Dia was sitting on the sofa. I’d told my allies that morning that I was planning to talk to Franrühle in this room, so it seemed she’d come here out of concern for me. But she’d come awfully early. My match hadn’t taken that much time. The negotiations before the match might have taken a little while, but that was it. I assumed that that meant Lastiara’s team had finished their match even faster.

“Dia? Where are the others?”

“Lastiara and Sera are taking a walk outside. They said they’d keep an eye out while they talked.”

“Gotcha.”

Apparently, Lastiara had taken on the watchdog role. That meant I could focus on my discussion with Franrühle.

“So the talk won’t just be the two of us, then,” said Franrühle dejectedly.

For some reason, it was Dia who replied. “Of course not, Blondie.”

“Never mind that, Dia. Why are you in Sir Sieg’s room? Could it be you two are staying the night *together*?!”

“Heh heh. Kanami and I are buddies, see. We’re on the same ride in life, so we’re always together.”

“I... I don’t believe it! Though for some reason, I feel like I can approve as long as it’s you, Dia. You’re a little like a difficult younger sibling to him. The type of friend who’ll never turn into something more!”

“H-Hey, I resent that! You making fun of my height?”

Figuring they’d keep trading quips this way, I cut in. “Hold on. Let me talk first... This is really important stuff.”

I wanted to get this over with, and that desire was all the stronger thanks to my headache. Besides, we had a time limit to beat. While I was sure Franrühle wouldn’t mind waiting for me for days if I asked her to, according to the terms of the bet, I had her for maybe an hour.

“You’re right. My bad. Kanami, Blondie, sit over here and chat your hearts out.”

Dia guided us to our seats. Seeing how admirably Dia was behaving, Franrühle buried her indignation.

“Ah, come over here, Kanami. I’ll heal ya.” Dia patted her seat, urging me to sit. The magic energy about her transformed into a warm light. It seemed she meant to cast a healing spell on me.

“Nah, you don’t have to. My duty right now is to get even more tired.”

“But healing magic doesn’t cure your fatigue. All it does is heal your wounds. So come over here.”

“It’s just, I didn’t really take much damage, so...”

“You can never be too careful.”

She took me by the hand and forced me to sit beside her. Her magic energy flowed into me, and the scratches and bruises on my body faded away. During that time, she gripped my hand tightly, with no sign of letting go. I got the feeling that just being away for a bit to do the match, her mental condition had reared its head again. Dia didn’t let go even after her treatment was over, as if that were only natural. She was more than willing to chat this way, and since Franrühle was on the other side of the table, she didn’t notice. I figured there was no helping it and that I might as well get to talking while holding Dia’s hand.

I'd gotten tired of thinking about all this stuff.

Franrühle saw that I was done healing. "Now then, Sir Sieg, what is it you would like to talk about? I'm getting the sense that it isn't what I was hoping it would be."

"Right, let's talk. So, uh, it's about your little brother, Liner... Do you know what he's been up to lately?"

Franrühle tilted her head, puzzled. "Liner? He's volunteering as a Brawl security guard. He said he wanted to kill time while we were participating in the matches."

"A security guard, huh?"

Maybe that was how he'd been able to stop the functioning of that ley line. And if that was the case, he'd been planning that sneak attack for quite some time.

"Ms. Franrühle, I want you to stay calm as I tell you this. The truth is, last night, he tried to take my life."

"Wha?" It seemed what I'd said wasn't sinking in right away.

"It looks as though he can't find it in himself to let us live at our ease. So he made an attempt on my life to avenge his brother Hine."

"Huh? Is... Is that true?"

"It is. And an acquaintance of mine can testify to it. There's no mistake."

"Oh my goodness!"

The news of the vicious crime her little brother intended to commit had her trembling. Judging by that reaction, I could tell that Liner honestly hadn't told her anything.

"If possible, I'd like you to stop him, Ms. Franrühle."

"Of course! I'll go stop him right away!"

I was hoping she could persuade him so it didn't have to come to a fight. Raggie, who'd been waiting in the back, calmly asked a question.

"Mister, was Liner really trying to avenge Mr. Hine?"

“Yep. He said so himself.”

“Avenge Sir Hine?” Franrühle managed. “But that was... What happened was unavoidable.”

“Well, Liner doesn’t seem to think so. He clearly views me, Lastiara, and Palinchron as enemies.”

After turning it over in her head, Raggie muttered, “Those three specifically? Looks like he knows what happened that day. Which is weird.” She took Franrühle by the hand. “C’mon, Franny, let’s go look for Liner.”

“Ah, right, yes, let’s go. We need to find that dummy as quickly as possible.”

In order to provide what aid I could for their search, I gave them a suggestion. “Oh, before you go, I think that if he’s hiding someplace, it’s not in the west area since my detection magic isn’t picking him up.”

“Got it. Thanks for telling us about Liner. ’Kay, bye, then.”

“Thank you very much, Sir Sieg! Allow me to properly apologize to you next time!”

They flung the door open and flew right out. I was relieved for the moment. While I didn’t consider the Liner problem resolved, I’d done what was in my power.

Franrühle and Raggie were quickly replaced by Lastiara and Ms. Sera, who must have seen them leave before they entered the room.

“I see your chat’s over. I hope that’s helped at least a little to lower the general danger level,” said Lastiara as we started going on the move as a group (Lastiara’s hotel, where we had a floor to ourselves, was more convenient for anything we might do).

“Depends on our luck, I’d say. There’s no guarantee Liner will relent just because his big sister gave him an earful. It was better than doing nothing, but that’s about it.”

“Now I guess we defend Dia like our lives depend on it while also weakening you, Kanami. By the way, how’d your match today go? Was it rough without any sleep?”

“Actually, I felt dead on my feet at first, but during the fight itself, I feel like I came alive again. Maybe it was the adrenaline from the battle.”

“Hm? ‘Adrenaline’?”

It seemed the word wasn’t widely known in this world. “Er, you know how, like, your concentration goes up when you’re on the verge of death, or when you get that rush of strength during a crisis? Or do you ever get weirdly amped up after an all-nighter? It’s like that.”

“Oh, yeah, totally. I do feel like I can concentrate super well when death approaches! I know what you’re talking about. So that’s called ‘adrenaline,’ then? And that’s why today’s match was easy?”

“Yeah, it was no sweat. My head was clear, so I was able to win the match using the minimum amount of magic.”

“Your head was clear? You did beat them in no time, and it looks like you’ve got energy to spare too. I’d honestly thought that since Pelly was there, you’d have a slightly harder time of it.”

“Me too, honestly.”

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it a flawless victory. Then again, looking back, I got the feeling that Franrühle was the only one of the three that had been giving it her very best.

“All righty, it’s time to push you around even more. Gotta get you real, real weak!” she said with great relish. That wasn’t the kind of line you wanted to hear coming from someone with a smile on their face.

“Um, uh...Lastiara? What do you plan to do to me?”

“Oh, you don’t need to be so scared. I’m not gonna do anything too weird to you.”

“I’m barely holding it together outside of combat, so please be gentle...”

“I’m only planning to enjoy a nice long conversation with you so you don’t fall asleep. Look, I bought a bunch of expensive sweets, so let’s have ourselves a tea party, the four of us!”

Lastiara laughed while holding up confections in one hand. A chill ran down

my spine. My gut was warning me that what was about to unfold was akin to a torture session. Sensing that was a glimpse of the Responsiveness that Lorwen had taught me, and as a result, my body tried to flee of its own accord. However, the hand that Dia was holding prevented all escape. She continued to show no sign of releasing me anytime soon, and her smile told me she was looking forward to the tea party.

We eventually reached Lastiara and company's hotel room.

"Ready for some *fun*? Tell me you're not happy right now, Kanami. You're joining in on a pajama party with girls as cute as us!"

"Hey, uh, why don't we go with some other method? I'm pretty sure staying on the move would drain my stamina more."

"Nope. This is the best method. I'm sure of it. I can tell by the look on your face! Hee hee hee!"

Lastiara entered the room and immediately set about preparing a space for a tea party. I was left with no choice but to step into that ring of hell. This would be more excruciating than the Dungeon, and that was no exaggeration. To be shaken awake every time I started nodding off and subjected to trivial blathering without any end in sight? Hell on earth.

Being deprived of a wink of sleep when sleep was all one could think of—I'd heard of torture methods in my world that sounded a lot like that. You could call this a subcategory of that form of torture. Three people would take turns talking to me. I was clung to by a needy Dia, teased by Lastiara, and taken to task by Ms. Sera. Even worse, most of it was stuff about "Sieg" that I had no recollection of. This would continue until the next match. That was how I spent my second night in the bowels of hell.



It was the wee hours of the morning, and right now I was chatting with Lastiara. Dia had hit the hay fairly early, and Ms. Sera was accompanying her sleeping comrade so that she wasn't alone.

Lastiara yawned. "Nobody's coming to attack us, and nothing's gonna happen. I'm kinda bored now."

She slumped onto the table. Maybe she'd simply run out of stuff to talk about.

I was on the brink of losing heart. "Hff... Hff..."

"You're breathing heavy, Kanami. You sound like a panting pervert."

"In that case, let me rest a little, tiny bit... Please..."

"No; if I let you rest now, all this effort goes to waste. This is necessary if we want to ensure you can't fight back at all. I'm really sorry, Kanami."

Her face stiffened a tad at the sight of my extraordinary weariness. It wasn't her usual amused expression; she seemed genuinely apologetic.

"I know, man, but...it's still rough, you know?"

"How, uh... How about you take your mind off it by doing something? Oh, I know! Since the four of us are together and there are no enemies attacking us, you could try expanding your detection magic a bit. Maybe you'll spot somebody nearby who's preparing to take us by surprise."

"Good idea. And I'm a little worried about Snow too. Is she getting some square meals in?"

Snow was so lazy that from time to time, her desire to avoid work would beat out her hunger. I hoped she wasn't going to collapse from lack of food...though come to think of it, that would kind of help us out.

"Oh? So even in the state you're in, you still worry about her."

"She's a handful, but she's still been my partner this whole time. And that reminds me—I wonder how Lorwen's doing too. But expanding *Dimension* to cover the south area's kinda too much for me right now. For now, let's go with Spellcast: *Layered Dimension*."

I used the MP that had ticked back up over the last few hours and expanded my magical perception field. I tried finding Snow in the west area, only to soon find somebody I wasn't expecting. Two familiar faces were conversing on the deck of a nearby ship. Snow and Reaper were talking so close by. I was curious about what they were discussing, and when I tried to focus some more magic energy on them, Reaper took note. Her body jolted like a startled cat, and she

started scanning the vicinity. Since she was effectively a mage of the same element as me, she seemed sensitive to my *Dimension*.

Knowing that I was watching them, she beckoned to me and said, “Come over here.”

“Lastiara, Snow and another acquaintance of mine are pretty close by.”

“Wait, they are?”

“And the acquaintance is waving for me to come over.”

“Whoa, for real? I mean, you can’t, can you? I don’t think it’s a trap, but it can’t be a good idea to go anywhere near Snow, right?”

We looked at each other, but as we were wondering what to do, one of the magic gems in the room started vibrating.

“You can relax. I won’t be here for long.” It was Snow’s voice. She must have listened in on our conversation, and she didn’t beat around the bush. “Reaper wanted to know where you were, Kanami, so I told her, that’s all. I’ve got no interest in anything besides tomorrow’s match.”

“Okay. I trust you, Snow.”

I didn’t want to thoughtlessly inflame tensions, so I figured I’d take her at her word. Hearing my reply, Snow’s expression turned pained. She looked like a child who’d been driven into a corner. My heart cried for her. I knew she was being stupid right now, and for both our sakes, I couldn’t afford to humor her driving desire. But as her partner who’d done guild work with her, I still didn’t want to see her suffering.

“Kanami, I, uh...” She opened her mouth, and sounds came out. She wanted to tell me something, but she just couldn’t get there. Her expression kept changing at dizzying speeds, until at last: “Uh, okay, so, see you later...Kanami...”

Maybe she was feeling ashamed after all the sharp words she’d hurled at me the day before. But she probably wouldn’t stop the constant eavesdropping because of it. That was just how the idiot was.

I warily watched Snow leave the scene. Soon, black energy pooled inside the

room, and Reaper emerged from it.

“Howdy, big brother!”

“Hey, Reaper. Sup?”

She looked like her usual self, but since she did have a habit of brooding in secret on her own, I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Hey, so did Snow say something to you, or...”

“Yeah. She just asked me to help her out with something.”

“I had a hunch.”

“But I turned her down. Said I’m taking no one’s side,” she continued without hesitation.

No one’s side, including mine, was how I took that.

“Yeah, I know,” I said quietly. I knew that she had her plate full to the brim with her own problems, so I didn’t ask her for help.

“But you guys are watching out for a surprise attack by Lorwen, right? That, I’ll help you with. It’s why I came all the way to this huge ship!”

“You wouldn’t mind? Don’t you have yourself to worry about?”

“I mean, I do, but if Ms. Lastiara’s team drops out here, that won’t be very good for me.”

“Lastiara dropping out isn’t good for you? But wait, aren’t you on Lorwen’s team? Shouldn’t you be giving him a hand?”

“Lorwen’s team? Oh yeah, I forgot. But this silly Brawl thing’s got nothing in it for me. If anything, I feel like throwing obstacles his way. I hate to see him being so petty and small-minded.”

When I had mentioned Lorwen, her expression had turned truly disappointed. And given Lorwen’s remarks the night before, chances were high that the two of them had gotten into a bit of a spat.

“Gotcha. But what’s this about you being worse off if Lastiara’s team loses?” I didn’t get it. As far as I knew, Reaper had never interacted with any of them.

Reaper went quiet for a second, then casually told me about her circumstances. “It’s because Lastiara’s team members are magic specialists. I wanna do something nice for them so they do something nice for me in the future. I’ve come to realize that studying books at libraries and listening in on lessons at schools can only get you so far!”

Reaper’s body was made of magic. In order to solve a problem related to the body she inhabited, she had to rely not on a seasoned physician but a seasoned mage. That made sense. Something did feel a bit off, though.

“Dimensional magic’s my specialty, so leave the surveillance to me. Believe me, I’ve gotten stronger again! Heh heh!”

She poured power into her black magic energy, and the darkness grew thicker and denser before my eyes. She wasn’t lying—her energy had gotten stronger before I knew it. I was amazed.

“Is that about all?” said Lastiara. “I must say, I wasn’t expecting you, Reapy. To think this would be the time when we meet again!”

“Nice seeing you again, miss!”

“Lastiara, you know her?” I asked. “Where on earth...”

“I met her in town a bit ago. I taught her about magic, and in exchange, I had her help me search for somebody.”

“When I spot people with clearly unusual magic energy like her,” said Reaper, “I can’t not talk to them! Because they might be able to solve my body problem!”

Their encounter sounded friendly enough. Lastiara rejoiced in their reunion, stroking Reaper’s black hair.

“That’s why I also know what’s up with Reapy’s body. And I guess that’s why I can trust her. Ah! I don’t mind, but be sure to give Dia a satisfying explanation, okay?”

A pause. “Okay,” I replied.

I figured Lastiara trusted Reaper because Reaper wouldn’t want to get on the bad side of the magic experts who could help her with her spell-body. I also

considered her reliable on that front. And only on that front.

In any case, as long as we had somebody else who could use *Dimension* on our side, the chances we'd get ambushed went way down.

Lastiara and Reaper really clicked with each other, and they started talking cheerfully between themselves. The innocent little girl's general mirth was a good fit with Lastiara's personality.

Reaper brought up the topic of her body to Lastiara, and she got the opinion of a magic expert. I'd thought she'd shown up because there was something in it for her, but that was just on the surface. I understood that wasn't all there was to it. The curse-link on my neck was tingling slightly with the emotion that lurked in the recesses of Reaper's heart.

"Hm? What's wrong, mister?" asked Reaper after noticing I was staring.

"Oh no, it's nothing... It's nice to see you again, Reaper..."

"Yep, same here!"

On the surface, she didn't show any sign of what lay within; she was maturing at speeds I hadn't anticipated. While she still looked like a toddler on the outside, she was nearing adulthood on the inside. The newborn was picking up knowledge from everything she saw and growing up at an alarming rate. She'd started feeling farther away from me.

If I had the time and the mental energy to think about it, I might have been able to pick up on something important through the curse-link, but my skull was full of sludge just then, and I was in no condition to be pondering anything. As such, I had no choice but to take Reaper's gesture of goodwill as exactly that. And even if the emotion hidden deep in her psyche was a far cry from goodwill, I would have wanted to help her anyway if I could.

With Reaper's aid, I made it to the morning of Day 3 of the Brawl, my exhaustion dragging me down more and more with each passing minute.

Chapter 3: Day Three of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball

It was the morning of the third day of the Brawl. Reaper had done us the favor of keeping *Dimension* up throughout the night, and now she intended to sleep, so I was forced to deploy *Dimension* using my own MP again in order to ascertain what was happening on Valhuura as a whole.

Snow was actively preparing for her upcoming match just fine, but Lorwen, not so much. While I had expected Liner to be nearby, it was oddly hectic around them, as they were surrounded by a drove of people, preventing the two from moving about.

I had an immediate guess as to why. It must have been because Lorwen had beaten the so-called strongest, Glenn Walker, in Round 3 the day before. Thanks to that, many were looking up to Lorwen as the next favorite to hold the title. Some of them were merely fans, but others were trying to make his acquaintance with their own agendas. It was pretty much the same situation as I'd faced during that ball.

As a man with no connections whatsoever, Lorwen had been unable to so much as change his place of lodging, so he couldn't ward off the mobs of people. It had possibly even been this way since yesterday's match ended, which would certainly explain why he hadn't made any moves that night.

Lastiara was in the room with me. "How ya feeling, Kanami?"

"Horrible. The nausea and headache have got me all dizzy. My brain's foggy, and I'm starting to not be able to process what's going on anymore."

The more I checked in with my poor body, the more I felt a grim laugh coming on. To be honest, my eyes weren't working properly. My vision was blurry, like I was underwater. I'd also lost my sense of balance, unsteady like I was aboard a ship rocking in a storm. At this point, I could no longer expect to be able to think with any clarity. Trying to meditate would only make my situation rougher.

“Fantastic. Best case scenario, you can’t even stay on your feet tomorrow.”

I was in a state where even just hearing the high-pitched voice of a girl got me on edge. I myself was aware that my temper was quicker; I’d lost my composure. My expression had turned sour and annoyed.

“Kanami,” Dia stammered, worried, “are you really gonna be okay?”

“Thank you, Dia. But this is necessary, so you don’t gotta worry. I’m more worried about you guys.”

There was something that took precedence over my physical condition in my mind. It was today’s match—the battle between Team Lastiara and Team Snow.

Lastiara thumped her chest, brimming with confidence. “We’ve got you covered there. Dia and Serry will be fighting too, and we’ll be going full bore from the word go. If you ask me, we can’t lose.”

“Gotcha.”

But I already knew that. It wasn’t Lastiara’s team I was worried about.

“Hold on. Don’t tell me you’re fretting over *Snow*? I’m sorry, but I can’t go easy on her. There’s even the possibility I’ll have to kill her to stop her.” Lastiara understood I was worried about Snow, but even then, she wouldn’t promise me not to kill her.

“Look, she’s just feeling a bit cornered, that’s all. If possible, I’d like you to at least not injure her too badly. Please.”

“Be reasonable, man. Honestly, though, it’s ultimately down to Dia.” She regarded Dia with a sullen look.

“Who, me?!”

“Let’s be real,” said Lastiara. “The only actual scenario where Snow dies is one where you go berserk. You absolutely mustn’t fire your magic at full power until I say you can.”

“I know, I know! In battle, I’ll follow your orders...”

“Good. The fact that you’re calm right now is a huge help.”

I reckoned that if Dia’s life was on the line, Lastiara would indeed try to kill

Snow. I hadn't known her for long, but I knew where her priorities lay. I was the only one out of those present who was genuinely worried about Snow. And it felt so frustrating that I couldn't fight alongside her during an important juncture.

"This is the critical moment," Lastiara continued. "You end your match quicker than Lorwen, then meet back up with us. We thoroughly trounce Snow, and then we destroy your bangle during the semifinals, where nobody can intervene. All right, team, let's *do* this!"

With that, Lastiara ended the discussion. I gave up on persuading her and started concentrating on my own match.

"Yeah. Let's go end this."

We split up and headed for our respective battles. Round 4 of the Brawl was on.



A staff member led me out onto the arena, the same as the day before. Now I was at the center of the battlefield, facing my opponent for this match: a highborn knight. It was Elmirahd Siddark. I'd managed to walk all this way, but just standing there in the arena, my ears wouldn't stop ringing.

Plus, my vision had gone from underwater blurry to deep sea blurry. I was in worse than horrible shape. It appeared as though my body had already reached its limit during the match the day before. My consciousness was dipping in and out, like I was trapped inside a suffocating dream. The arena looked even bigger than before, and there were more spectators now than before too.

Perhaps because this was the quarterfinals, the volume of the cheering was cacophonous. The arena was utterly packed with spectators whose spirits were alive with anticipation for the fight that was soon to unfold. But none of that nonsense mattered to me. I didn't have the energy to give two shits. My body was past the realm of heavy on its feet; now it felt like it wasn't even mine anymore. At this point, even just checking my general status made me want to scream.

Amid the chaos of cheering I couldn't even make out, I somehow managed to

pick up the voice that got the show on the road.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Who should grace us but Lord Elmirahd Siddark! He’s the eldest son of the esteemed House of Siddark, Top Knight of Eltraliew Academy, *and* the master of the guild that presides over many an elite, Supreme! From his pedigree, to his achievements, to his skill with both pen and sword, to his looks, and everything in between, he’s the picture of perfection! There have been more than a few upsets, but his team is a favorite to take this tournament, and they’ve racked up win after win!”

Those introductory remarks were getting longer and longer, probably because the tournament was nearing an end. That said, nothing he’d said concerned me. All that weighed on my mind was the match Lastiara’s team was fighting in a different area.

“That’s not the only reason his matches are so popular, though! Lord Siddark has pumped up the Brawl and then some! The way he’s worked the crowd by pledging his love to his fiancé and dedicating his victory in each and every match to her is all the crowds are talking about! What’s more, I hear they’re thinking of getting married at the end of the month! And who should his betrothed be but a scion of the House of Walker, Lady Snow!”

When I heard Snow’s name, my attention snapped back to my own match.

“It’s a Brawl tradition, folks—a brave warrior who declares his love for his lady shall obtain his reward by emerging victorious! And Lord Siddark is a good sir knight who properly embodies that! He’s declared his love for Lady Snow at every match, and stirred up so many of our wonderful spectators! Let me say, folks, as a member of management, he has our eternal gratitude!”

Mr. Siddark walked closer to the presenter, taking the mic-like thing the man was holding. Then he shouted for all the venue to hear, “Here stands Elmirahd of the House of Siddark! Let me take this opportunity to make a declaration to everyone in attendance!”

He started waxing on; it was the love declaration that the presenter had just mentioned. For some reason, I wasn’t able to follow along. I heard all the lofty words peppered throughout: the “love” and the “destiny” and the “vow” and the “glory” and what have you. I could also tell the speech was very dignified

and solemn, like some clergyman's felicitations. Beyond that, though, it was all a haze. Then I realized it was because I was so pissed that I simply didn't *want* to understand what he was saying.

To round it off, Mr. Siddark raised his sword. "On this blade, I vow never to lose to anyone! I dedicate my every victory to my beloved Snow!"

This is the shit he's been doing this whole time?

If so, then Snow must have heard it over and over thanks to her abilities. And she might have heard similar declarations even before the Brawl. The thought that this very oath was what was making Snow feel so cornered made me sick to my stomach. I remembered how she had been smiling with tears in her eyes on the balcony of the castle during the ball. Maybe that ingratiating smile she'd thrown my way was something she'd only just barely managed after suffering as greatly as I was suffering now. She was cornered, crammed into a box by the people around her. And when that thought crossed my mind...

It put my teeth on edge.

Not to dodge responsibility, but it seemed I simply lacked that kind of composure at the moment. My consciousness fell deeper and deeper into a deep dark pit, like someone had pushed it down the stairs. And all the while, Elmirahd's oath and the presenter's address continued.

"But wait, there's more! Believe it or not, the two contestants are *both* fiancés of the same woman! Mr. Kanami is also Lady Snow's fiancé, as recommended by the one and only Sir Glenn Walker! What's going through his mind now that he's heard the oath of his rival in love?!"

All eyes were suddenly on me, and the mic in the presenter's hand was pointed my way. Was he demanding that I do the same thing? Was he telling me to declare my love and to dedicate my victory to Snow? That was when my foul mood reached a breaking point and the words spilled out of my mouth.

"Enough already," I said to no one in particular, too quietly for anyone to hear. "How do none of you understand that this pushy bullshit's been tormenting Snow for ages?"

Even if what I'd just said eluded him, the presenter stepped back, exposed to

my wrath.

Mr. Siddark stepped in between us. “We know that. I know that, and so does the House of Walker,” he said, like he’d prepared the statement beforehand. Maybe he knew what I’d say from the beginning, so he hadn’t actually needed to make out my muttered words. “Still, all of it is par for the course.”

“Par for the course? Snow’s suffering?”

“Living as a noble is no easy thing. But Snow accepted her adoption into the House of Walker knowing that to be the case. As such, it’s a matter of course that she should suffer. I have no choice but to live out my days in gratitude for her devotion to her duties as a noble.”

His words were so calm, the exact opposite of mine, and they stuck to my skin.

Seeing I had no reply, he continued. “And the same goes for me. As the eldest son of the House of Siddark, it’s my duty to take on whatever hardships I must. If it’s for the sake of my clan, I’ll walk down any path, no matter how painful. I have that determination. And if the House of Siddark desires it, I’ll even aim to become the hero myself.” As he orated, he pointed his sword at mine. It was clear he had no intention of backing down. “I, Elmirahd Siddark, will drag Snow Walker into a long and agonizing battle so that my clan may thrive. But I’ll do so without hesitation or remorse.”

“I... I see...” I replied feebly. I didn’t have the energy to shout. His determination was too strong; I couldn’t keep pace. And I couldn’t relate in the least to his lack of doubt in his convictions. Everything about him was so bright that I couldn’t even look directly at him.

Holy shit, he’s annoying.

I respected the strength of his will. I even looked up to him. But right now, my sheer irritation eclipsed that. My head was already close to its limits, and now it was heating up even more, my thoughts set on fire, my hazy consciousness fumigated. The unpleasant sensation stuck to me like clay, as did my dull aches and pains. My thoughts were all over the map. My limbs were trembling. My vision was blurry.

God, talk about infuriating.

“All right then, sir, I’m going to take your dreams and your vows and crush them. I’m going to destroy it all...because I just don’t like you.”

“Oh?” He seemed pleased to hear it. He was so unperturbed that it got under my skin.

“You couldn’t beat me in a million years.”

“Heh. Heh heh. Heh heh heh! Gah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

I had no idea what had made him smile and laugh so suddenly. I frowned questioningly, and he replied.

“Ha ha ha! Yes! Finally, the hero that Palinchron chose is getting real with me!”

There it was. The word that at the moment, I most hated to hear. The word that had been afflicting me so much over the past few days. The word “hero.”

“Now we’re talking! Now if I beat you, I’ll become the hero!”

That was what caused me to lose what little tranquility I had left. I started shooting straight from the hip. “Again with that hero crap?! You’re telling me you dream of being the hero too?!”

As he’d said, I was finally getting real. The stuff I wanted to say was coming right out of my mouth by reflex.

“Of course I do! Every noble-born knight does! I’m going to take you down, become the hero, and take Snow as my wife!”

“Ugh! That pisses me off! I hate that kind of shit! I really hate that about you dumb noble types!” I vented my pent-up anger against him, my standin for all nobles. “Oh, it’s for your clan! Oh, it’s for your country! It’s for wealth or fame! Well, I’ve had it up to here with that shit! Fuck that noise! I can’t be bothered!”

I couldn’t stand a single rotten thing about that whole constricting philosophy that robbed people of their freedom. It was what had royally messed up all of my friends. All over something so goddamn stupid!

“There’s another way to have a life of happiness out there! A more modest

life! A quieter, more peaceful life! Why can't you nobles see that?! Why're you all so obsessed with the hero, Elmirahd?!"

Coveting glory would never do a damn thing for anybody, but nobody seemed to understand that. I vented all of my frustrations on him, even though I knew I should be telling all this to Lorwen and Snow. Elmirahd, for his part, took it all with a serene smile.

"Kanami, pal, you really are like a hero out of a fairy tale. But not everybody can live their lives that way. Everyone has to face the circumstances of their birth, and everyone has their own life to live."

"Oh, shut up already!"

I was sure that the more we talked, the more ground this Elmirahd dick would gain. I shut down the conversation and thought about nothing but crushing his designs to dust.

"I won't let one of you stupid nobles marry Snow! Mark my words!" Taking a page out of Elmirahd's playbook, I swore an oath of my own. "I've got my own declaration to make! It's me who Snow Walker wants to marry! If there's anybody who wants to go down the aisle with her, they'll have to go through me! So long as I wield this sword, nobody's marrying her!"

I violently waved the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword around and shouted loud enough for the whole arena to hear. In response, the roar of the crowd got many times louder. I got the feeling I'd gone overboard and stepped past a point of no return. But I didn't care. Right now, I couldn't see past the nobleman before my eyes. I just didn't want Snow to suffer anymore. I couldn't think of anything else. Driven by pure emotion, I glared at the enemy.

Elmirahd was trembling. "So this is what you're like when you lay down the chips... Such magic energy! Such an intimidating aura! As befitting the hero!"

He was staring at me, red in the cheeks. His expression irked me.

"Even if you beat me, don't think that'll make you the hero! Because I ain't the hero! Not that that's even the half of it!"

I'd made up my mind. It was time to devote my energy to laying the beatdown. I looked at his menu to gauge his strength.

【STATUS】

NAME: Elmirahd Siddark

HP: 198/201

MP: 280/299

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 20

STR 4.79

VIT 2.82

DEX 4.12

AGI 7.29

INT 7.19

MAG 18.10

APT 1.67

INNATE SKILLS: Elemental Magic 1.93

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Magical Combat 1.89, Swordplay 0.89

The gap between us was clear. “Elmirahd! You don’t stand a chance against me! You can’t win this!”

“That may well be true... I may not hold a candle to you! But I’ve never once gone into a fight thinking I can’t win! And today’s no different! I’m going to beat you and become the hero! All for the sake of the House of Siddark!”

I left the back-and-forth at that and took a step forward. Elmirahd likewise started walking forward.

The presenter interjected disconcertedly from the side. “Er, um, does that mean you’ll be fighting one-on-one, staking your honor as the hero and your right to marry Lady Snow? You’re starting right now with no ruleset?”

Neither of us stopped. In our eyes, nobody else existed anymore besides the enemy. We kept closing the distance between us without a word in reply to him.

“I... I’ll take that as a yes from both contestants! May Round 4 in the North Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball commence!”

We took those words as our cue to begin fighting. We were less than ten meters away from each other now.

“Ice Phalanx!”

“Spellcast: Wintermension!”

Before we made contact, we each fired off a spell as a test run. Needless to say, Elmirahd had picked a countermeasure against my magic—the magic tool he was wearing shattered, releasing the unjammable ice spell toward me. A myriad of ice stakes came flying my way. I had no choice but to look at them directly and run past them. Elmirahd was clearly a knight who leaned more toward the mage side. As such, close combat was definitely the better bet for me. I closed the distance and got within sword range of him. However, right before my sword swing could hit him, he cast another spell.

“Lightning Rain!”

The magic came into effect at high speed, a flash of light bursting before me. I twisted to avoid a direct hit, but half of my body did get shocked, and I grew numb all over. But that hardly mattered. It didn’t matter if it was a bit harder to move now. After all, my body could barely move to begin with.

Then came the high-pitched, headache-inducing chink as our swords locked; I tried to overpower him and knock him down, since I had the edge in terms of physical strength, but he quickly tilted his sword and turned mine aside. I knew he was going to parry thanks to *Dimension*, but my body didn’t react. It wasn’t cooperating with me, like I was stuck in some especially sticky tar. In addition, I’d exhausted all of the MP that had replenished overnight, and so *Dimension* went away. I lost my balance and nearly toppled to the side of him.

“Wynd Burst!”

Another incantationless spell was hurtling my way, and it was *fast*. Elmirahd’s

strong point was how well he'd integrated his flexible sword style with his high-speed spellcasting. All of his movements were consistent with the theory, and his attacks flowed into each other perfectly.

"Grah!"

The gale-force wind blew me away to the side. A shock like that might have put any normal person down for the count, but at my current level, it was no decisive blow. It did, however, position me at the optimal distance for him to use magic.

"Aqua Spread!"

A water current trailed on the ground, but I simply ran straight for him just like before, because my only mistake had been trying to avoid the lightning magic. That sort of attack didn't need evading. When the spell came out that quickly, it wasn't a big deal if I tanked it. My leveling up had rendered my endurance inhuman. What I ought to have done was simply eat the spell and just push through with my own offensive. It was stupid of me to think of myself as a normal, fragile human being.

I leaped over the water attack and closed the distance again.

"Flame Arrow!"

I crushed it with my left, non-sword hand. Not only was I used to getting hit with fire magic, but I was also wearing that Red Talisman around my neck. The fire scorched my hand, but I ignored that, swinging my sword with my right hand. Elmirahd hadn't been expecting me to fend off the *Flame Arrow* like that; he had no choice but to block my sword with his. The impact left him wide open. I pressed the advantage, striking his sword over and over from above until his grip gradually loosened. Then I promptly delivered a final blow from the side, sending his weapon flying and disarming the enemy. I thrust my sword at his throat. Game, set, and—

"Why yoooooooouuuu!"

He let himself drop, and in the process, he kicked his left leg up. I was too slow to react to the surprise attack and ended up taking his kick on the right arm.

“Impulse!”

The spell fired from his left leg, the magic tool attached to his ankle broke, and the vibration magic ran down my right arm. The shock wave carried all his magic energy, so I dropped my sword as well. It seemed my grip had gotten weaker than I was expecting, making me unable to withstand the impact. I had known my body was on its last legs, but I hadn't thought it would be this bad. That said, I didn't have time to wring my hands over it. Elmirahd was right in front of me, and I had no choice but to respond to the right hook flying at my face. I shifted and the punch landed on the side of my left arm. Next, his left fist aimed for my flank. I fell back to avoid it. Elmirahd didn't try to grab me, most likely because his muscle strength was outmatched. He was clearly intending to fight purely through body blows.

Sadly for him, I was also keen on some fisticuffs. It was difficult to fire magic during such a claustrophobic fistfight, and if one attempted to force through a spell, the other party could stop it by punching them in, say, the gut with the proper timing. Now that Elmirahd was bereft of a window to cast magic, I had as good as won.

But honestly, more than anything else? I just wanted to punch the bastard. And maybe he felt the same way. So we just started slugging each other, driven by primal instinct, without any plan or strategy or tricks or anything. We both swung our fists, a left, then a right, then a left, then a right, punch after punch after punch as we screamed.

“Ha, ha ha ha! Aikawa Kanami, the hero! KANAMIIIIII!”

“Shut your trap, Elmirahd!”

My punching fists. The arms taking all the punishment. They hurt so bad. But the pain was accompanied by a strangely pleasant sensation, like the mud clogging my body was getting washed away. This was the Brawl, where gifted and talented warriors duked it out. This stage was supposed to play host to the dancing of swords and spells, not some crude fistfight.

Even so, the cheers didn't abate. On the contrary, for whatever reason, the electricity was only rising. The din of the crowd hurting my head, I frantically tried to punch Elmirahd in the face, but it wasn't going my way. Sure, my body

was hardly firing on all cylinders, but my STR and AGI stats still significantly outstripped his. Plus, I was pretty sure I had him beat when it came to reflexes and dynamic vision. On the other hand, his martial arts training meant his technique was far better than mine, so we were actually evenly matched.

I thought about trying to understand and imitate his moves, like I had during Lorwen's training, but I gave up on the idea right away. There was no way I could make any such calculations when my brain power was so dampened. In the end, my only real choice was to rely on my overall superiority. I'd decided I was going to crush the man in front of me with all my heart and soul. Which meant one thing.

It was time for *Blizzardmension*.

I tried to deploy my strongest spell, incantationless as always. I understood that I lacked all of the stuff I needed to use that magic. But for some reason, I was confident I'd be able to cast it regardless.

【STATUS】

HP: 102/316 MP: 0/751

HP: 95/309 MP: 0/751

HP: 89/303 MP: 0/751

I'd never seen that happen before. Somebody's Max HP was ticking down. But my body already understood. I was cutting into my life force to use my magic. Sparks were flying inside the boiling soup inside my skull, and a fire was igniting. I could practically feel my brain cells sizzling into crisps, and I could taste death on the back of my tongue.

I successfully cast *Blizzardmension* and it hung around me and him. However, I didn't have the presence of mind to process the information it gave me and calculate the best move; I merely engaged him reflexively. All I did was read how he would move and dodge, then hit him, dodge, then hit him. I was doing the same thing as before, but my reflexes and visual acuity had improved dozens of times over.

This was in addition to *Blizzardmension* slowing him down. It was little surprise that my fists alone hit paydirt. I started clobbering him all over—his head, arms, chest, abdomen, everywhere. As the coup de grâce, my fist landed on his chin, rocking his skull. He finally fell to his knees, groaning. All he could do was slowly pitch forward. When I saw his hands on the ground, I dispelled my magic. He'd given it his all, but he was down. Looking at his menu, I confirmed he wasn't getting back up again.

I had won.

Elmirahd looked up at me. The victor was literally standing over the loser. There could be no doubt that I'd just thwarted his dreams and vows. I was prepared to incur his hatred. Yet the look in his eyes was no different from before.



“Ah. Ah, I lost, huh? Ha, ha ha, ha ha ha...”

As usual, he laughed while looking at me, or rather, at “the hero.” After hearing that declaration of defeat, my jets cooled down rapidly. I realized that I’d won the match but lost the battle. Because in the end, I’d merely brute forced a win by relying on my inhuman talents. And how could I expect people to stop seeing me as the hero if I won that way? In order for me to truly win against him, I had to use another means—my words.

“I’m disappointed in myself,” he said. “Ah, to beat the hero... I truly wanted to beat you. I’ve been waiting for who knows how long. I’ve trained and trained, believing it was possible... But this is as far as I go, huh?”

He regretted not being able to become the hero from the bottom of his heart. The blazing ardor he’d exhibited before the match was nowhere to be seen, and I was in a similar situation. We’d both regained our presence of mind as though we’d taken a cold shower, and various points to reflect on started coming into view. I’d gotten carried away in the heat of the moment and made that ridiculous oath, despite not having my memories back yet. I stood there, drops of cold sweat trickling down me.

Elmirahd spoke, weak and out of breath. “Kanami. To you, as the hero, she might be a nobody of little importance. But take it from me, she’s a girl to be pitied... If you can, I’d like you to save her.”

His attitude toward Snow was completely different from what he’d said before the match. Maybe all those lines he’d prepared beforehand were just an act to push me to get serious. In fact, maybe everything about him was just the performance he was forced to put on as the eldest son of the House of Siddark.

I replied with a bitter look on my face. “I’m not the hero. All I can tell you for sure is that I was Snow’s friend and partner. And all I can do is be by her side as her ally.”

I didn’t know what would happen once I got my memories back. There was nothing else I could tell him with any conviction.

“You truly never change, good sir hero. Just like always, we have different ways of seeing things.”

“I keep telling you I’m not the hero. I’m gonna deliver the finishing blow, Elmirahd.”

He started cackling. “Keh, keh heh. Heh heh heh! Heh heh, fwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

When I glared at him, Elmirahd smiled from the bottom of his heart. It was the first innocent smile I’d ever seen on him. He fell on his back, still laughing. A posture of total surrender. It looked as though he was done with the small talk. That had to mark the end of the match. All that was left was to get confirmation from the presenter and have him call it.

I sighed. “Thanks to Elmirahd, it feels like I lost the fight. But since I won the match, I guess I’ve got no choice but to be content... I wonder if Lastiara over in the west area was able to beat Snow?”

Heavy on my feet, I shuffled over to the moderator some distance away, and he was heading my way. It seemed he’d distanced himself quite a bit due to Elmirahd’s barrage of magic. I griped and grumbled as I went to end the match—only for a thunderous roar to shake the whole venue.

What the?!

It was the howl of a living creature. A cry that beggared belief as it rattled everything like an earthquake. The attendees all plugged their ears. I was the only one who understood the nature of that bellow. It was the same as the one I’d heard in that abandoned castle in the west a few days prior. It was the magic energy-laden roar of a dragon.

I spoke the name of the person who had probably unleashed that cry. “S-Snow?”

It was certainly coming from the west area. Lastiara’s and Snow’s teams were currently fighting their match. Which meant that that roar wasn’t directed at us—and that the battle was so fierce that the ripples had made it all the way here.

Chapter 4: Lastiara Whoseyards's Battle

On the other side of the diagonal line dividing the battle arena, Snow was staring at me, Lastiara Whoseyards, with a frightening look in her eyes. She must have been thinking, "Kanami's mine."

Ugh, Snow, I swear.

"And in the west area, it's the Epic Seeker team, led by Lady Snow Walker! The girl's a legend to those in the know! And she's heading a well-rounded party, whose composition is very solid indeed! How far up the Brawl brackets will this descendant of intelligent dragons get her team?!"

At long last, the Brawl had begun in earnest. Everything had proceeded predictably. What awaited me now was a battle in the true sense. I jumped a little on my toes and checked how my body was doing. I turned my head and shook my hands to loosen up my muscle stiffness. To be honest, I wasn't at a hundred percent. While Kanami had been tough on his body, I'd given my own a rest this whole time. Despite that, it just wouldn't fully recover. That was how grievous a state I'd been reduced to back then.

On the Day of the Blessed Birth, I'd lost every last scrap of my magic energy, and I'd been forced to flee while healing the even worse-off Dia. We'd shaken off our pursuers from both Whoseyards and Vart, hiding out in the southern nation of Greeard. Dia had wanted to hunt for Palinchron immediately, and I had stopped her by dint of force. Then we'd figured out where Kanami was.

Seeking to use the Brawl to our advantage, we entered the Dungeon from the Greeard side to train. Ultimately, we were able to evade the eyes of the authorities and sign up for the Brawl by the skin of our teeth. And up until the Brawl, I'd been on the move without any real time to rest, thereby overtaxing myself to the point where my body remained in pitiful form.

I was still uneasy. Through the ritual of the Day of the Blessed Birth, many of the spells that had been binding me came undone, and that meant that a lot of the protection and boost enchantments I used to possess were gone too. I

could no longer fight as fearlessly as I once did. In other words, I had no choice but to fight not as Saint Tiara's future vessel, but as some person named Lastiara.

As I calmly assessed my own strength level, my eyes fell on the opposing team. There were three people on the Epic Seeker side: Submaster Snow Walker, a veteran warrior, and a veteran mage. I was gauging their strength using my Pseudo-Divine Eyes skill when I overheard their conversation.

"All right, Mr. Vohlzark, Ms. Tayly, please stand back."

"Hold on, Snow," said the female mage. "We're going to fight alongside you."

Snow shot her down coldly. "You shouldn't. Or rather, you can't."

The male warrior was wearing a stern, harsh look. "Walker sister...are you planning to go all out?"

"That's right. For this match and this match only, I'm going all out. And I'm planning to use my limited draco-form for the first time in ages." For her part, her expression was also stern. It seemed she really did mean to crush us.

Draco-form... Semifers with thick enough blood had the ability to transform. It was the same as Serry's wolf form. As a dragonewt, a subcategory of semifer, Snow was also capable. And as far as the Alliance was able to ascertain, she was the one person in the world who was able to turn draconic.

The mage looked alarmed. "Snow! You can't! That's the one thing you mustn't do! If you use it continually, you won't be able to revert back, right?!"

Snow tried to reassure her, a grim smile on her face. "I won't transform past the point of no return, so it's okay. Granted, it *is* risky...but today, I'm willing to take that risk. Today's the one day I have the resolve for it. So please, I'm asking you nicely."

Upon seeing that deathly smile on Snow's face, the mage was left speechless.

The warrior spoke next. "So you're saying those two young ladies are about as strong as that dragon?"

He looked at us, and I responded with a *whatever* smile. Seeing my expression, he smiled wryly, weirded out. Talk about rude...

“Oh no, they’re well past dragon level. If I’m a dragon incarnation, they’re incarnations of gods.”

The warrior sighed. “Then we’re no help whatsoever. Got it. Tayly and I will sit back and watch. Just don’t go overboard, you hear me? If you go past the point of no return, it’ll spell the end of everything you know.”

“I’ll be careful not to.”

The warrior pulled the mage by the hand and they moved to a corner of the arena, but not before the mage imparted some final words.

“Snow, if this is the path you’ve chosen, I’ve nothing else to say. But never forget that everybody in Epic Seeker is on your side.”

“Thank you very much. Thank you for looking after a mess like me.” Snow looked surprised; she chewed on those words. Then she pasted a sorrowful, insincere smile onto her face. “But the folks at Epic Seeker won’t cut it. I’m sure they’d all die immediately, so...”

That reply was basically a farewell. Snow didn’t have faith in anybody within her guild on account of her own overwhelming strength.

The mage must have understood that too. She smiled sadly. “I suppose so. See you, Snow.”

“I’ll be back, Ms. Tayly. *Bloodspell: Flysophia!*” She started walking toward the center of the arena as she incanted.

I surmised it was the start of her draco-transformation. The backs of her hands split open, and blood spilled out before evaporating and turning to mist. The deep red haze shifted into the shape of a dragon and enveloped her body. It was hard to tell thanks to her thick clothing, but to my eyes, it looked like her back was expanding. Almost certainly, dragon wings were sprouting. Her pupils changed too, into an inhuman shape. Hers were now the eyes of a rapacious dragon.

Any ordinary person would freeze up upon seeing such eyes fall on them, but I smiled faintly. “Hmm. Snow’s not holding back. Serry, be sure never to come out from behind me.”

“I know, milady.” The knight behind me nodded without needing to hear my reasoning.

Dia, on the other hand, looked puzzled. “Hey, Lastiara, is that chick really that strong?”

“Yeah, kinda. They don’t call her the strongest on the continent for nothing. She’s not just strong. She’s *the strongest*.”

“The strongest? Doesn’t that title go to her brother, Glenn Walker?”

“Nope. Glenn just claimed Snow’s feats as his own to obtain that title. Snow Walker’s the actual strongest. She’s the most promising child prodigy in the history of the Alliance.”

“Huh. Who knew?”

“Wait, huh? I was expecting more of a reaction than that. Here I thought I was revealing a shocking truth.”

“Oh, I’m surprised. It’s just that it doesn’t change what I’m gonna do. If she’s the strongest, I’ll surpass the strongest, that’s all. In fact, if I don’t fight strong opponents, I’ll never stand shoulder to shoulder with Sieg.”

“Is that it? Heh heh. You’re so dependable, Dia.”

Dia had his impulsive side, but he was reliable in times like these. He wasn’t the type to lose his nerve over small stuff. He’d probably keep fighting by my side without flinching before Snow’s draconic might.

Relieved, I proceeded toward the center of the arena myself, having Serry transform into her wolf form on my way there. I didn’t need to keep Serry in reserve; her role was to be Dia’s mode of transportation. By placing Dia atop his steed before the start of the match, we could reduce at least a little of the danger.

After reaching the center of the arena, I looked Snow square in the eyes. “Hey there, Snow.”

“Allow me to take the liberty of beating you today, Lady Lastiara.” She bowed respectfully.

Eerie, hair-raising magic energy was whirling at her back. It looked powerful

enough to smash anything it touched. Like always, everything about her was *heavy*, though maybe we didn't have room to talk when it came to that.



“Actually, and I’ve been meaning to say this, but do we really need to be using the formal register anymore? We’re already hitting each other with what we really mean,” I said.

“That may be so, but...I see no reason to act so close to you either.”

“Well, I like you. I think you’re relatively swell, and I do mean that.”

“I...don’t like you,” she replied.

I loved unstable and tragic people like Snow, but it seemed those feelings didn’t hit home at all, what with how readily she gave me the cold shoulder.

“Can I ask *why* you don’t like me?”

“I... I don’t wish to say. It’s not relevant right now, so...”

I could work with that. It didn’t look as though she disliked my personality or way of life or anything. It had to be some other reason. Most likely, her reason was stupid but something she couldn’t compromise on. Something that I was standing in the way of.

“What matters the most now is Kanami,” said Snow with a serious look. “He’s the sole reason I stand here today.”

“I know that. For this match, we fight over...”

“Kanami.”

“Kanami...or I suppose, Sieg, to us.”

Thus we’d reaffirmed what we’d decided beforehand.

“I won’t be giving you Kanami. Not ever! He’s mine to have! Mine!!!”

“Yep, that’s fine. Let’s stake this fight on that.”

When I said yes, Snow’s face contorted; she glowered at us with that intense ire. It was the kind of look that could paralyze somebody with fear. I myself got the willies. Apparently, the needling of the past few days was paying off. She was seeing red now. Very red. With a smile on my face, I vigilantly assessed her condition. If she lost her composure, the match would probably become much easier.

While Snow and I were staring each other down, our own axes to grind, the presenter cut in from the sidelines. “Er, uh, is this ‘Kanami’ you’re fighting over a person’s name, or...?” As always, it seemed he had a hard time talking to me.

“Yes. And?” Snow, who was beside me, was averting her eyes.

“Is it referring to the north area’s Aikawa Kanami?”

“Of course.”

“So in other words, you two are fighting over the same gentleman?”

“If you include Dia behind me, it’s actually us three, though in reality, it’s more than a mere three people who have their sights on Kanami in the Brawl. It’s downright entertaining!”

Upon hearing that, his face lit up. “Wow, as presenter, I really must inform the spectators of that little tidbit.”

“That’s fine by me. Break a leg. It’s loads more fun for me that way too.”

For whatever reason, it was such a blast watching Kanami get drawn and quartered by the million girls pursuing him. While it was thanks to him that I was a brand new person, it seemed some of my—ahem—*proclivities* hadn’t fallen by the wayside.

“What excitement, ladies and gentlemen! Do we have a match for you! It appears they’re staking the man they both hold dear to their hearts on this fight! I’d have liked to have asked that man to come to this venue, but unfortunately, he’s in the middle of a match himself! For he’s none other than Aikawa Kanami, Guildmaster of Epic Seeker and the great *hero* whose fame as a dragon slayer is spreading far and wide!”

I ignored the presenter and continued talking to Snow. “Let’s do a you-lose-if-you-faint-or-can’t-go-on ruleset. Oh, and if you die, you lose, okay?”

“Yes, let’s do it that way, please. I would like to take your lives during this match, if at all possible, so...”

“And whoever loses promises not to interfere with what Kanami decides.”

“That’s all I need.”

Snow took out a large sword from her back. With one hand, she effortlessly gripped the gigantic slab of steel that was as tall as her. I also drew my blade. While this sword was one of some renown, it was a tad undependable compared to the one I used to wield: Noah, sacred celestial blade of the Church of Levahn. It could be the case that Snow's sword would break it and remain unbroken after a clash.

The presenter saw our bloodthirsty glares, and he looked distressed. "Wait, I'm sorry? Isn't that the *death match* ruleset?! Could you perchance choose a different ruleset?"

"Nope. Let us do it this way. Otherwise, Snow will never be satisfied."

"But, hm, how do I put this? If people of your stature die on us, that would put us in quite a difficult position. Say I presided over the match that let the Church of Levahn's living god die. My life would...how do I put it...go off the rails, maybe?"

"Sounds like you're outta luck. Sorry!" I said with a radiant smile.

I couldn't budge on this ruleset. I'd been so cautious and deliberate about agitating Snow, and as such, these rules leaned in my favor. If I changed this ruleset now, any hope of conquering her would go up in smoke. I wanted Snow to suffer an injury so grievous that it'd take longer than a day to heal. And if possible, I wanted to snap her heart in two as well.

"In the face of Lady Snow's and your staggering bloodlust, there's nothing a mere emcee like me can say. I suppose it can't be helped. Now then, may the Epic Seeker versus Team Lastiara Whoseyards match, in this, the fourth round of the West Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball..."

His head hanging, he distanced himself from us, and then...

"Commence!"

That instant, Snow's head tilted, eyes glowing red. Tearing through even more of her thick clothing, azure wings projected from her back. Her entwining magic energy swirled around and swelled. The light purple energy permeated the entire arena in waves. It'd happened in the blink of an eye—the arena was now dominated by Snow's magic energy.

Meanwhile, the moment the match began, I shifted to the side. The line of fire secured, Dia, who'd been behind me, and Snow locked eyes.

"Flame Arrow!"

A flash of light slashed out from Dia's hand. The beam contained a colossal amount of heat, and it traced a line faster than the eye could see. How would Snow respond to an undodgeable light-speed spell?

"HAAAAAAH!!!" she bellowed.

She stared it down and deflected it using the back of her hand. When the beam hit her hand, it broke off into ten-odd smaller beams, some of which threatened to hit the stands. They hit the barrier erected by the ley lines, but since this was some of the world's strongest-ever fire magic, they left cracks there.

The hired mages in charge of the spectators' safety rushed like mad to repair them. And who could blame them for panicking? More time and money had gone into this barrier than those they used for war. It was supposed to be indestructible, even by a whole group of skilled mages, and yet some stray beams that had been deflected had caused cracks. That was some frightening stuff. I knew just how through-the-roof Dia's abilities were. And then there was Snow, who'd blocked that attack so casually. I could see that arm was no longer human due to her draconification. Her arms were now bluer than the sky above—they were azure. Snow had repelled Dia's magic with her hard skin and thick, bulky magic energy. The surface of her hand was a little burnt, but that was about it.

"Ahhh, aughh, arghhhhh!!!"

This was no ordinary roar. It was a shock wave wrapped in draconic magic energy. One could even call the roar itself elementless vibration magic. A normal person would probably faint upon hearing it.

Seeing how hard the enemy's skin was, I modified my orders. "Dia! Lower the firepower for all your arrows so they don't leave holes in that barrier!"

"O-Okay! But won't that mean I can't land a decisive blow?!"

"That's fine! Just back me up with rapid fire for the time being!"

After Dia fired the first *Flame Arrow*, he'd fallen back a significant distance thanks to Serry's sheer speed. Since Dia was our glass cannon, I'd have him attack from far away for the entirety of the battle. As soon as I was done issuing my orders, I broke into a run in order to slash at Snow.

Snow held out her greatsword to the side in one hand, parallel with the ground. Then she flapped her beautiful wings of blue once and only once. That was all it took for her to bring all the wind in the arena under her command, transforming it into what was called draco-wind. The air wriggled and writhed as though it had a life of its own, and it tried to coil around my body. I ran through the stuff, shaking it off as I went, and I drew ever closer, intent on cutting Snow to ribbons. The attack itself was nothing more than a sword slash, but with my STR and AGI, it passed the realm of sword slash, becoming a blow that even a seasoned soldier couldn't block.

But Snow blocked it with ease using the flat of her greatsword. I rode the recoil and jumped backward—I wanted to avoid locking our swords in a contest of pure strength. My muscle strength was world-class, but now that Snow had gone all draco, she definitely took first place over me in that category, and by a wide margin. I didn't see myself winning that way.

In order to close the gap, Snow started moving. She herself didn't have an amazing AGI stat, but the draco-wings and draco-wind were boosting her movement speed to cannon fire levels. Each of her strides was scary long. At this point, it was more accurate to call it flying than walking. She was flying within a whisker of the ground, coming toward me for an attack while roaring.

“AHHHHH! RAHHHHHHH!!!”

The shock wave blasted my skin even as Snow swung her very heavy sword with incredible speed. I clenched my teeth and endured the roar that made me want to cover my ears, dodging the blow. After a thunderous explosion, the ground where I had been standing was pulverized. The greatsword cut into the earth as easily as a spoon digging out the flesh of a fruit. The sediment burst like fireworks, clouds of dirt forming in the air.

Not to be outdone, I tried to use the opening that the hearty blow made to mow her down with my own sword, but my swinging arm felt heavy for some

reason. It was the clinging quality of Snow's magic energy, which wrapped around my arm, and in addition to the power of the draco-wind, it threatened to push my arm back and away. As a result, before my sword could reach her, her counterattack would reach me. I had no choice but to stop attacking and concentrate on evading.

Stormy gale after stormy gale swept across...and that roar! The ground beneath our feet was shattered once again, and my footing was getting less and less flat. Snow's sword was a calamity more terrifying than any tempest. It was practically this world's symbol for nothing-could-be-worse—a dragon—in and of itself.

Snow restrained my movements with draco-wind and swung her great blade with abandon. As I parried her relentless attacks, I could see that my sword was gradually getting damaged. At this rate, it would break. I played one of the cards in my hand—if Snow meant to rush me with brute-force, then I had something up my sleeve...

“Bloodspell: *Fenrir Arrace!*”

I had no choice but to rely on magic. I had many cards in my hand, and I chose the one that was the opposite of the brute-force approach. When I incanted that spell, my heart started pounding, and my field of vision turned red. Just like Snow's draconification, the back of my hand split open, and blood streamed out, evaporating into a red mist and enveloping my body. If Snow was going dragon, I guess you could say I was going human. If she was half human, half dragon, I was half magic gem, half human. My body, which had been crafted using magic gems, was now getting closer to being human—the effect of my blood magic.

Over a thousand humans' memories dwelled in my blood, but I chose those of the current Blademaster, Fenrir Arrace. This body was originally meant to house the soul of the Saint, but I was using it to perfectly recreate the strongest swordsman of the modern era. My eyes started changing from gold to a dark gray, and red hair started mixing in with my golden locks. The memories flowed in from my blood, and my body familiarized itself with a mastery of the blade I'd never attained myself. Currently, the Blademaster was nearly sixty years old, but I channeled the world's best swordsmanship in the world's peak body in the

prime of its life. This was what the “jewelculus” planned by Pheydelt of Whoseyards and Leki of the Senate was made of. My magic specialized in transforming into *somebody else*, and this was part of it.

“Snow!”

Time for a counteroffensive. Instead of the self-taught swordsmanship I’d been using until now, I parried Snow’s greatsword cleanly using a finely honed technique, and then attacked with a flash of steel so skilled one might kick themselves for doubting me. Snow grimaced in surprise at this abrupt turn. And there was something besides surprise there too—in the midst of this death match, she was regarding me with *envy*.

Snow swung her greatsword around and tried to shut me down with pure force. However, I dodged, parried, and sidestepped all of her attacks with my sword skills. Her blade swinging vainly through the air, my own was about to reach her, and Snow responded not with her weapon, but a roar.

“*Impulse Howling!*”

Dragon scales formed on her neck, and the world contorted.

“Ah!!! AAHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

It was barely even the voice of a living thing anymore. The bellow had turned into weaponized deadly vibration, and it warped and distorted the arenascape. The surrounding barrier trembled. The ship—no, Valhuura—no, the sea itself trembled. I put my hands to my ears. Though my body could take it, my hands flew up to protect my hearing by reflex. Snow was about to follow up by chasing us down, but then a rain of flames poured down.

“*Flame Arrow: Petalrain!*”

Dia must have concluded that I’d been caught off guard because he backed me up from behind. Using that support, I retreated a good distance and started from square one. But the ringing in my ears was still there, like a pesky buzzing insect. Dia and Serry were likewise grimacing behind me.

Snow didn’t chase after me, as I was too far away now. Instead, she glared at me with envy and resentment.

“That power...it clearly isn’t *yours!*”

She probably had a rough idea as to what I was doing due to how plainly my skill with the blade had improved. I knew blood magic was also one of her areas of expertise. Her grim and ghoulish magic energy turned more vicious than ever, and the rolling shock waves rocked the arena. Those waves then condensed before her eyes into a spherical shape. She flapped her wings and used draco-wind to stabilize the globe of magic energy.

“Why’d it have to be you people?! *Dragon Ardorrrrrr!!!*”

The compression caused by the draco-wind was undone, the vibration sphere unbound. Both raging winds and vibrations strong enough to distort space came for us. Against that fiendish and brutal magic assault, I did nothing. I merely watched, unperturbed. There was nothing to fear when we were battling with magic at this distance. I had the most powerful mage in all the Alliance backing me up.

“*Divine Wall!*”

Thanks to Dia, a barrier of holy light unfolded right in front of me. The magic energy in the wall was so startlingly dense that it had no problem defending against the vibration spell.

“Again?!” Snow cried with irritation, glaring at me with envy. As we fought, I came to understand her emotional headspace more and more. She was jealous of us, as we were fighting with the power of multiple people.

“Snow, are you really that envious of me?” I asked, keeping my distance.

A pause. “You’re always protected by someone. Always and every time!” she said as she formulated another vibration spell. She was trying to refine multiple vibration spheres now, but they still wouldn’t be a match for Dia’s magic. While Snow was a world-class mage, Dia simply had her beat. That gave me plenty of time to keep her talking. I figured that what I needed wasn’t to overpower her. I would win with my words instead.

“Well, Kanami’s been protecting you, hasn’t he?”

“What’s important is what’s to come,” she replied. “If he doesn’t *keep* protecting me in the future, it’s all meaningless.”

“You want him to protect you indefinitely? When you’re this strong? I’ll be blunt: you’re not so weak that you need protecting. You’re so strong, you might just be the most powerful person in the Alliance right now. With that much power, you can manage almost everything yourself with some effort. So why’re you so obsessed with getting someone to protect you?”

I was indirectly encouraging her to give up on Kanami. If I could dampen her spirits simply by talking, there was no better strategy.

“If I *could* manage by myself, we wouldn’t be here. As if you could possibly understand how tough it is for a coward like me to live on my own! I don’t wanna hear it from someone so many people lavish attention on!”

“On your own?”

From what I remembered, she was rarely ever unaccompanied. She was always protected by one or more people from the Walker Clan or the guild. In fact, the only time she could have been alone was that rumored time she ran away from the House of Walker. I’d heard about it once about a year or two ago from Glenn.

“You talking about that time you ran from the House of Walker?”

A pause. “If you know about that, then please go easy on me.”

I didn’t know much about it, but I could sense that this had to do with the core of her mindset, so I kept going.

“Uh, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Snow. I mean, I don’t know too much about it, so...”

Another pause. “It’s simple. It was impossible for me to run from the very beginning. Nobody can do anything by themselves. The House of Walker’s fully capable of sending so many pursuers that I can’t even sleep. They’d keep on scheming until I threw in the towel. And it’s just not possible to endure that. There’s just no way! How could I keep resisting when everybody keeps dying on me?!”

It sounded to me like they’d used an extremely heartless method to bring her back into their little fold. I felt like I could predict the general gist of her story, and I attempted to persuade her.

“You can’t be sure of that. If you’d continued standing up to them to the end, and it stopped being profitable for them, they’d have given up. What with your power, if you never gave in, I’m sure—”

“And how many people would’ve died in the meantime, do you think?! Enemies and allies alike, dropping one after another! I’m strong, so I won’t die. I won’t die, but...the friends who fled alongside me, the people who helped me out of the goodness of their hearts, they all die so easily! Do you *know* how torturous that is?!”

“And yet you still would’ve gotten away eventually if you hadn’t given up. With your power, you could even have kept everybody alive—”

“It’s because I couldn’t protect anybody, and it’s because nobody would protect *me* that I’m even HERE right now!!!”

She unleashed a sizable quantity of vibration magic spheres, even one of which could hit hard enough to tear a house to pieces. And now a whole load of the things were rushing around the cramped arena.

“Divine Arrow! Divine Wall!”

Dia used holy magic to cancel out Snow’s vibration magic. There were some spheres she couldn’t counter, but Serry whisked her away from those. Snow’s magic had left the ground of the arena on the verge of collapse. It looked like rough and rocky mountain terrain now, and the view was blocked by clouds of dust.

Snow charged forward, slipping into the smoke screen. I instantly intercepted her sword with mine, our blades locking. Our faces were so close that we might even touch. She twitched her cute little lips and smiled pitifully.

“I’m begging you, Honorable God Among Us. Please give me Kanami. He’s the only one with the strength to stay by my side. He’s the only one who’d never die on me. Far from it, he’ll be protecting *me*. You already have all the citizens who revere you, and the Sainted Apostle behind you, don’t you? So please, let me have Kanami. Pretty please. Heh heh, heh heh heh...”

It was neither a polite smile nor one from the heart. What was pasted on her face was a half-baked smile so creepy it made me sweat.

“Wh-What’re you talking—”

“Let’s find a compromise here. If you give me Kanami, there’ll be two of us in our group, and you have the Apostle, so that’s two in your group. Two and two. That’s nice and even, don’t you think? You and Lady Sith are so strong, and you shine so bright. Everybody adores you two. Isn’t that enough? Please give me Kanami. I’m begging you! Give him to me!”

What asinine logic. But I was guessing she meant it as a genuine proposal. I was beginning to understand this girl, little by little.

“Flame Arrow!”

A beam of light pierced Snow’s side, blasting her away.

“Enough of your nonsense, ya dumb woman!” shouted Dia.

I’d expressly told him to refrain from talking to Snow as much as possible, but it appeared he’d reached the limits of his patience. Maybe that had been too much to ask of the belligerent Dia.

“Snow Walker!” he continued. “You’ve got to be kidding me! If you’re just gonna sponge off Sieg for the rest of your life, then you don’t deserve him! If you want him, get strong enough to be worthy of him!”

“You heard Dia. He’s very against it...and I guess I am too.”

Amid the flurry of dust, Snow staggered to her feet, dragon eyes glowing red.

“I’m begging and pleading so desperately, so why? Why won’t you help me?” Snow looked genuinely baffled. She honestly didn’t understand why we’d shot down her “fair” proposal. After a moment’s puzzlement, she started walking shakily toward us. “Fine, then I’m just going to kill you. I’ll get Kanami back if I have to kill you to do it. You’re giving him back to me!”

Her veneer was peeling away, and her polite register of her speech was going too. Now she was saying what she wanted. It struck far more of a chord than the self-abasing polite language she’d been using up until now.

“Over the past few days, I’ve been listening in on Kanami...and overhearing *you*.”

It was clear to see that she no longer had any intention of negotiating. Along

with a piercing bloodlust, her magic energy transformed. The waves of energy became stickier, and they clung onto everything there.

“I hate you people for trying to turn Kanami back into Sieg. I *loathe* you all.”

Her draconification continued, her wings swelling in size. The winds turned stronger still, and the blasted earth began to tremble. The magic energy around us told us in no uncertain terms that Snow was now truly determined to kill us.

“If you die here, it was just an accident. Happens all the time in the Brawl. I don’t need you people in my world. I’m gonna sever Kanami from his past! And from everything else!!!”

This was no longer a conversation; it was a declaration of war. Her bloodlust lodged itself in my skin. There was no more scope to negotiate...at least, that would be the surface read.

“Lastiara! We can’t hold out any longer!”

Dia was asking permission to use his magic at full strength. And the now beast-mode Serry was probably of the same opinion.

“Just wait a little longer! Let me handle this, Dia, Serry!”

Maybe I’d read too many hero stories, too many fantastical works of fiction. But I wanted to believe that this clash of unguarded, unvarnished feelings was the first step toward a real solution. So I tried to stare Snow down. And in the next moment, she was brandishing her greatsword right in front of me. By making the draco-wind at her back explode, she’d jumped forward with lethal speed. At the same time, the shock waves she’d generated when she’d moved also racked my body.

I met her sword with my own as I endured the wind and the impact. I tried to parry it with my Blademaster sword mastery, but it wasn’t enough to fully block the sheer power. When I lost my balance, Snow kicked me. I managed to avoid it, her leg swooshing inches from my nose, and I broke out in a cold sweat. However, even though I avoided the kick, it rocked my skull regardless. It was the kick’s shock wave. Merciless, Snow attacked me again and again. She swung her sword down, slashed at me horizontally, and swung it up too, with occasional body blows and grappling techniques mixed in. I dodged it all by a

hair, choosing my words instead of my sword to counterattack.

“Snow! If his memories return, and he starts going by Sieg, Kanami’ll still be Kanami, you know?! You’re smart, so don’t tell me you don’t understand that! Why can’t you accept his past?!”

I changed my line of argument. Kanami wanted Snow to stand on her own two legs, so I’d tried persuading her based on that, but now I realized that would definitely never convince her. This girl was a welfare case through and through. Harsh words weren’t going to reach her; I got the feeling she would never stop unless I babied her. So I kept enduring her attacks and throwing more words her way.

“You’re saying you understand that if Kanami gets his memories back, he won’t choose you, right?!”

Snow’s expression started stiffening. As I surmised, she had no interest in listening to sense.

“Let’s say you win this match and manage to live a life fleeing from his past... Do you honestly believe he’ll never remember anything?! Do you *really* think you’ll be able to have a peaceful life and nothing will ever crop up to burst your bubble?! That’s a pipe dream! His memories are bound to come back eventually!”

“Shut up! I don’t wanna hear it! As long as I make him totally mine, then...”

She was furious. Just as planned. One of the fundamentals of persuasion was to get one’s opponent down. I could always pick her back up later.

“What you’re doing right now’s a stopgap measure! You’re being real stupid, trying to protect an illusion that’s sure to break one day!”

“But that illusion is the only way I can find happiness! It’s out of reach for me otherwise! So that’s why I...I—!!!”

Snow gritted her teeth, swinging her sword with even more power now. I continually parried her blows. Her reckless and wild strikes left her with plenty of openings, so I could counterattack if I wanted to. But I could still withstand this. It wasn’t time to pull the plug.

“I don’t know you very well, Snow, but I see loud and clear that you want to hang onto somebody stronger than you. I know just the thing... Blestspell: *Extended Growth!*”

I poured all of my magic energy into the holy sorcery. Brimming with light, the boosting spell soaked into me from head to toe. I ignored the toll it took on my body as my physical abilities were amplified to the limit. This was an extreme and dangerous thing to do, and it wouldn’t last long. But what I needed right now wasn’t staying power. This wasn’t the Dungeon. This was a combat arena. I could go ahead and stake it all on one moment!

“Snow!”

“Living God, Lastiaraaa!”

Using my magnified might, I brushed off her sword. This was the only window of time where I could outmuscle her. I’d overpower her, responding to her body blows with body blows, her grapples with grapples. Powerful sword strike met powerful sword strike, and devastating punch was answered with devastating punch. We gouged each other’s flesh and sent cracks into each other’s bones. When two absolute powerhouses butted heads, that was all it took to chip away at each other’s lives.

Snow was bewildered, and I couldn’t blame her. A second ago, I was dealing with her using polished sword mastery, and now all of a sudden I was going with pure brawn. I saw my opening and took it, discarding my sword to grab her by the arms. Then I headbutted her in the forehead with all my strength, leaving her unsteady on her feet. Then I walloped her in the stomach with a full-power flying knee strike, and we got into a tangle and fell to the ground. I had her pinned. Our faces got closer again, so much so that our lips might touch.

“Well?! Am I strong enough for ya?!”

For a moment, Snow was dumbfounded. Then she pulled herself together and attempted to shake me off. I brute-force restrained her, whispering softly as I stared at her.

“Hey, Snow. How about I be the one?”

“Huh?”

Snow's power slipped a bit. Phew. My holy magic-induced strength was temporary; if Snow had kept pushing through, she would have broken my grasp eventually. This was my last attempt to convince her, so I chose my words carefully. It was time to pick her back up.

"If you want someone to protect you that bad, then I'll be your hero! I'll be the one to save you!"

"Wait, you? The living god? Become the hero?"

"Yep! I'm not a wuss like Kanami. I've got a case of hero-itis and I've got it *bad!* I think I'd do a better job of helping you than Kanami would anyway!"

"Th-That's obviously never gonna work... You're completely different from that whole thing. You're too perfect, too much of a living god; there's no way you'll ever be seen as the hero. Nobody's gonna think of you as fitting that role!"

"Ah, don't sweat it. I'm gonna quit being a stupid old 'living god' sooner or later! You can rest easy; I'm planning to become the hero as just a regular old human named Lastiara! And you'll be the first damsel in distress the hero Lastiara ever did save. If you ask me, you can consider things sorted!"

"Hey, hold on, wait up! Why're you doing this for me?"

Snow's might ebbed from her body. It was plain to see that the abrupt helping hand had left her confused.

"Because I've totally come to like your sorrowful wailing! I mean, c'mon, the hero always crosses paths with the distressed and unfortunate! I can't go without a tragic heroine to save! You and me, we were made for each other! I'm thinking we're SUPER compatible!"

I knew it; to get Snow to listen, just pamper her. I could practically taste my words reaching her.

"That may be true," she stammered, "but I feel like that's just not gonna work for me. Something about it's..."

"I'll kidnap you from the House of Walker! Anything you don't want to have to decide on, I'll make all those choices *for* ya! I'll drive off your pursuers for ya

too! I promise you'll have both safety and freedom! I'll destroy anything and everything that gets in the way of your dream! I don't mind if the repercussions fall entirely on me either!"

Snow sobbed a little, her face flushing red as she averted her eyes. It looked as though I'd hit the jackpot—as was to be expected of the lines that had saved *me* once upon a time. If I just transferred her codependency on Kanami to *me*, that would tie a bow on this whole mess.

"I... I can't! I could never go with that. You wouldn't be a *true* hero. And most importantly, I can't even trust you!"

Yet still she rejected the idea. From the look of it, while she did see some appeal in my proposal, *something* within her wasn't happy with it.

"I've got my reasons for rescuing you, Snow! I'd do it to advance to the next round! And for Kanami and Dia's sakes! And 'cause it sounds right up my alley! So trust in me!"

"It's... It's no good... I can't accept!"

"But why?! Tell me, Snow!"

She was trembling, grimacing. "Why? I... I wonder myself. I just want Kanami to save me. Not you, Lady Lastiara, but *him* specifically. But... But why is that? Why do I want him to be the one?"

I'd tried emulating Kanami, but it appeared as though that still wasn't enough. Snow and I lacked the bond that Kanami and I used to have, which was why it was close but no cigar. But although I hadn't crossed the finish line, I *had* paved a path to it. Snow had found a convenient avenue of escape that had popped up out of nowhere, and she was feeling an emotion she'd never felt before, so she didn't know what to do. Using that as my opening, I concentrated on drawing her focus away from the battle. Now was the time to tell her what everybody and their uncle had realized but her... This had gotten a bit *fun*!

"Gotcha. So you do just like him, then. You like Kanami."

"Huh?"

Snow looked flabbergasted. And that clinched it for me. Because of her

personality, I'd had a hunch she wanted to get married to Kanami not because she liked him, but because it'd make things easy for her. Judging from her reaction, she herself must have been thinking the same thing. But that wasn't the case. It couldn't be. Not when she was *this* fixated on him. Snow was a little like me, albeit in a different direction. That was why I could interpret her psyche.

Snow's heart was childish. Physically, she was big and stronger than anybody else, but her heart hadn't done any growing up. Ever since the day her despair began, her heart had stopped maturing, frozen in time. Like me, she was a little kid in a too-big body. Which was why she could go on without realizing the nature of her own feelings.

"I'm saying you must...you know, *like* him. I'm guessing that's the reason you won't pick me over him. Tell me if I'm wrong, but you wanna be saved by the good-looking and nice hero, just like in a hero tale, right?"

"No, you're... That can't be..."

"All right, then explain why you're so dead set on him."

"That's... It's because he ticks all the boxes, that's all. There's just no way. I just wanna make him mine because it's a convenient way to make life easy. He's so weirdly strong, I wanna use that to my advantage..."

Her resolve was feeling the pressure. Something beyond merely fighting for herself had been thrown in the mix, and her conviction wavered. She desperately refused to allow anybody else to enter her self-centered world. But that wasn't something she *could* refuse, really. Maria and I had been that way too.

"I'm trying to *use* him, nothing more," she continued. "Kanami's strong, and kind, and he indulges me, and he's dependable, but he's also full of weak spots, and he's conve...nient... Wait, am I..."

"Yeah, all that? That's what people call liking somebody. Honestly, I only just found out myself."

Snow's draco-form started falling away. It couldn't be clearer that her thoughts were flying away from the battle toward something else entirely.

“I... I *liked* him, all this time?” she murmured as she shook her head in disbelief.

Her muscles relaxed more and more; fighting was far from her mind now. And I wasn’t one to let this opportunity slip.

“You’re wide open!”

I kned her in the stomach, hitting her where it hurt—where her organs were already damaged from my flying knee strike earlier. Her body tensed up from the acute pain, and I used that opening to spin to her back. Now we were both on the ground, with Snow above me. I wrapped my arm around her neck in a choke hold, intending to knock her out.

“Guh—haugh?!”

Snow tried to muster her strength again, but I was there, whispering in her ear, “Think about it, Snow. If you like him, you’ve gotta think about what he wants too, not just what you want. Otherwise he’ll hate you. I think you should understand the fear of having a crush.”

“The... The fear of having a crush?”

This was her first time feeling this way, so she was surprised and confused. Until now, she never balked at being disliked by somebody if it meant she got what she wanted. She was under the extremely troublesome impression that she was all that mattered. But now I’d slapped her with a ball and chain. I’d imposed the kind of constraint that everybody naturally operated with: the fear of being disliked by someone you liked. An emotion that was slightly on the adult end of the spectrum. And now that she felt it, her determination faltered, her strength dulling with it.

Naturally, I kept my choke hold on her the entire time. Snow’s doubt and hesitation had given me plenty of time to bring her down. She groaned as the last of her strength left her body. It seemed I’d knocked her out cold.

I gently picked her up and declared, “Aaand I win! Even though that victory was a bit dirty and hollow!”

As I’d made sure to keep our fight on the emotional plane, this “victory” didn’t feel great, but I did feel it was a necessary evil, considering what would

result from it. Without sowing those seeds of doubt in her, even if she lost, she might have come to attack us in the night in her desperation, despite depleting her magic energy through her blood magic and despite the damage to her bones and organs. I figured that the doubt my words had instilled in her would do wonders to bind her actions.

“Phew. I guess the next problem’s the Guardian’s match. I’d love it if it gave him a world of trouble...”

Carrying Snow in my arms, I headed to the presenter, who’d evacuated to the edge of the arena. I needed to show him that she’d fainted and get him to acknowledge my triumph forthwith. It’d been a tad suspenseful, but we could claim Round 4 as a total victory.

As I talked across the ruined arenascape, I heard voices from far in the south. South of these riled-up stands. They were probably coming from the arena ship the Guardian, Lorwen Arrace, was fighting on.

“Cheers. Or no, maybe jeers?”

I could hear the voices clearly, even from so far away. That was how loud they were, though it did take my exceptionally good hearing to be able to make it out. At Lorwen’s match, the crowd was absolutely losing it.

That filled me with unease; I turned my attention to my two companions behind me, and they legged it over. They must have been thinking that whatever had happened, we needed to join back up with Kanami as soon as possible, and I agreed. In order to end the match posthaste, we quickened our pace even more, and so ended Round 4 of the Brawl for us.



The Round 4 matches in both the north and west areas went as expected; I and Team Lastiara had advanced. In addition, I heard Lorwen had won the south area match too. It seemed that in the next match, the semifinals, I would be facing Team Lastiara, while Lorwen would square off against the team representing the nation of Vart.

I joined back up with Lastiara’s group, and the first thing I asked about was Snow’s safety. Lastiara told me that she was seriously injured and had been

sent to the hospital, but she wasn't dead. I deployed *Dimension* for a fleeting moment, and I could see she was on a ship with hospital facilities, lying in bed and wounded all over. Even after being tended to with healing magic, she wasn't going to heal completely overnight. Snow being immobilized for the night was certainly convenient for us, but we couldn't let our guard down. The way she was now, she might go so far as to drag her grievously wounded body somewhere to try to pull something on us.

As I speculated about what might come, I exchanged information with Lastiara, who was walking next to me.

"Hm...looks like that dumb Guardian Lorwen revealed his identity to the audience. Wonder what that idiot was even thinking."

She'd collected information about Lorwen from passersby before joining me and was relaying what she knew about the course of the south area match.

"What, he volunteered that information?"

"Apparently, he boldly declared it after defeating the Blademaster, Fenrir Arrace."

"He *declared* it? It's *not* that he was about to die and monsterified as a result?"

"Yep, you heard that right."

"Why'd he go and do a thing like that?" Why would he choose that moment to unveil what he'd been keeping a secret this whole time?

"The tournament admins obviously captured him afterward. But since the Brawl folks have insisted they won't bar anybody from participating, it doesn't look like his right to fight'll get revoked."

"He was apprehended because he's a monster, huh? Lorwen..."

I tried wondering about his motives, but my field of vision blacked out as I was assailed by a sudden bout of dizziness. My knees buckled, and I nearly collapsed.

"Kanami, you okay?!" Dia propped up my body at once.

"Y-Yeah, I'm okay," I said in a raspy voice. "Looks like I'm a bit exhausted after

that match.” At this point, I couldn’t even think, let alone move.

“F-For now, let’s go back to the room! C’mon, Lastiara, hurry up!” Dia cried.

“Makes sense,” said Lastiara. “Let’s go to the room for now; if we join up with Reaper, we’ll be safe and sound.”

I could hear their voices as though from afar. With Dia supporting my body, I forced my weak legs to move. I didn’t know where I was anymore; I just let them steer me. Then I entered a room and was made to sit in a chair.

“Glad you could make it, mister,” came a voice from behind. “It looks like everything’s going great, so I’m happy too.”

“Is that you, Reaper? Could you monitor Snow and Lorwen for me, if possible? If Snow can establish contact, I’ll talk to her. Maybe she’s cooled her head after her loss and she’ll understand now...”

Reaper placed a cold towel on my head. “Hm, I don’t think you oughta be talking with Ms. Snow right now. I mean, you can barely even talk at the moment. Besides, after Lastiara gave her an earful, she’s way better behaved than before. That talking-to worked so well, I wouldn’t be surprised if she solved her own problem if we let her be...so let’s focus on getting your memories back, okay? That’ll help Snow out more than any half-baked outreach!”

“Gotcha. So...Lastiara persuaded her during the match?”

Since I’d been fighting Elmirahd at the time, I didn’t know much about the battle between Snow and Team Lastiara. While she’d said some harsh things, it seemed that Lastiara had managed to get through to Snow in her own way.

“What about Lorwen? I’m worried about him too.”

“He should also be fine if we leave him alone. He can’t move, for one.”

“Ah, you know about his situation too?”

“Lorwen defeated the ‘strongest’ and surpassed the Blademaster. That’s what it means when you get this far in the tournament. You remember the brackets, right?”

“Yeah...”

Lorwen had been matched up against the so-called strongest, Mr. Glenn, and then he'd been matched up with the Blademaster, Fenrir Arrace. And he'd beaten them both.

"Isn't beating those two enough to gain the sort of glory Lorwen's after?" asked Reaper. "Maybe that's why he stopped hiding what he is. Maybe he won't interfere with us anymore."

Her optimistic way of looking at it nearly swayed me, but I wasn't totally convinced, and my brow was still furrowed. Seeing that, Reaper caressed my head from behind as she heaved a sigh.

"I'm sure Lorwen's got his reasons. He'll be okay even if you're not there. You don't gotta worry about a thing. You need to think about the semifinals tomorrow instead. Just think about getting your memories back for now..."

She was dead set against me contacting Snow and Lorwen. Dia was of the same opinion when she chimed in.

"That's right, Kanami. Preparing for tomorrow's more important right now than those knuckleheads. Whatever you might wanna do, destroying the bangle's your first priority!"

Clearly, I was alone in wanting to contact them. Maybe that was because my head was running too hot and I was the only one who couldn't make a rational judgment.

"Lastiara...should I just do nothing, then?"

I knew that out of everyone here, Lastiara was the one who could grasp the situation the most calmly. I figured I was in the safest hands entrusting the judgment call to her.

There was a significant pause. Then, "Yeah...let's just sit tight," she replied unhurriedly. "Nothing's more important than getting those memories back."

"Got it. If you say so, that's what I'll do."

It was a bit of a bummer, but it couldn't be helped. I didn't have the wherewithal to argue back or the energy to move. I was at my limit. But thanks to that, I was confident I could lose to her team in the semifinals.

A sense of relief washing over me, I leaned back in my chair and gave up on thinking. As even my sense of time increasingly dimmed, I heard Lastiara's final orders.

"Kanami, all you need to do now is keep yourself in that state. I'll come get you right before the match, so just stay in that chair until then."

I meant to do just that. If all I had to do was keep sitting, I could probably do that even in my current state. If I went to sleep, somebody would wake me up. It was okay if I just waited for time to pass...

"Good, mister. Get your memories back before anything else. Because when you do..."

My consciousness was hazy, but I could make out Reaper's voice. She seemed relieved now that she'd seen I wasn't moving.

"...my desire will come true too."

Huh. Her desire will come true.

I needed to think more about what that meant, but I couldn't think. I needed to rejoice more in the realization of her wish, as though it were my own, but I couldn't rejoice. All that happened was that tidbit of information—*Reaper's desire is going to come true*—being deposited in my head. Then I started sinking into the deep, deep dark, my consciousness detaching from reality. And there I sat, waiting vacantly for time to pass by.



It felt like years had passed. Amid the fog in my brain, I managed to grasp that there had been a change in my situation. It must have been the next day. Somebody had led me by the hand, taking me to another room somewhere. At least, that was the sense I got. I was in an unfamiliar room, and I could hear voices, but they sounded like pure noise to me.

"Now then, hang tight in this waiting room. Once the worker comes for you, if you could walk into the arena, the plan will be a success, so... Wait, can you even hear me? Hm. Reaper, if you could handle the rest, thanks."

"Leave him to me! I'll make sure to send him in!"

“Good. All right, we’re entering from the other side, so see ya later.”

“See you! Break a leg!”

The mystery voices abated, as did the vague sensation of people in my vicinity. I rubbed my eyes and checked my surroundings to find I was accompanied by a small, black-haired girl. The girl flew about, the picture of restlessness. From amid the deep dark, my eyes followed her, like I was tracking a butterfly through the twilight sky, and it was weirdly calming.

Time passed, and a new person entered the room. They called a name. “Mr. Aikawa Kanami, it’s time for you to enter the arena... I must ask, are you okay? You *are* participating, correct?”

Aikawa Kanami? Oh, right, that’s my name. It seems she’s asking me something?

“Mr. Kanami! Please answer! If you don’t answer, I’m afraid we’ll retire you from the tournament!”

Retire me? That sounded bad. I knew that I should avoid that, but I couldn’t remember why. Rather, I’d be able to recall eventually, but not immediately...

“Wait, hold on, please!”

The girl got in between me and the staff member. Then she came to me and whispered in my ear, “It’s only a little while longer now, big brother. Hang in there, okay? Muster the last of your strength. If you don’t participate in the match, your memories won’t come back, you know? You won’t be able to get home to your world. You don’t want that, right? If you don’t get back...”

I had a feeling that what she was saying was very important. My memories? My world? Coming back? It had to be very, very important.

“...what’s gonna happen to your precious, beloved little sister?”

My little sister? What was her name? I couldn’t remember. All I knew was that she was more precious to me than my own life. That alone I could always remember, no matter the circumstances. If my not entering this match put my sister in danger, there was no way I could abstain.

I moved my lips. “I... I’m sorry... I didn’t get much sleep. I’ll participate, no

problem. I'll do it. I'll fight."

I got to my feet and opened my eyes, scanning my surroundings to gather information. I remembered this waiting room. At the last moment, it dawned on me that the semifinals of the Brawl were about to begin.

"That's fine, but...Mr. Aikawa, do remember that if at any point you can't go on, you can always concede. Now then, please, this way to the semifinals."

It looked as though the staff member addressing me was from tournament administration. I followed right behind. Next to me, the black-haired girl—the death spirit—was waving.

"Guess you're awake now, mister. Bye, then! See you later. Fight for your sister. You're not fighting for anybody else. Don't forget that!"

"Yep, I'll be back, Grim Reaper."

I understood the situation and kept walking. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was still walking in the dark, but it was different from a second ago, because thanks to Reaper, I'd gained an unwavering will. In order to not mistake what it was I wanted, and in order to regain all my memories, I had to fight. I felt like I might stumble at any moment and fall back into the deep dark pit, but I gritted my teeth and bore it. I just needed a few more minutes. I didn't mind fainting afterward.

I walked through the long corridor and entered the arena. Ignoring everything from the presenter's address to the excited cheering of the audience, I walked briskly to the center. I couldn't hear anything but a ringing in my ears anyway. On the other side of the arena, I could make out the presence of my ally, Lastiara. I could tell she was relieved to see I'd walked my way here. That said, I might legitimately faint sooner rather than later. We had to start this fight, and we had to start it now.

"Th-The...rules..." I managed.

"Presenter, sir!" said Lastiara, who was in front of me. "We don't need an introduction, so why don't we get right to the match, huh?! Can we go ahead and decide on the ruleset? We can, right? You can say no and we'll still decide...so!"

Then she came right next to me and spoke to me under her breath. “Kanami, reply how we said in the meeting, yeah?”

“Yep, you’re good.” I recalled the ruleset we’d come up with a few days back.

Lastiara spoke loudly enough for the presenter to hear. “We of Team Lastiara suggest a ruleset that’s neither knocking the weapon nor knocking the flower. With the knocking the weapon rules, some are more suited to it than others, and with the knocking the flower rules, whichever side can use fire magic’s at an advantage. It’s just too lopsided, too unfair.”

She’d said her canned lines, and now it was time for me to say mine.

“Then what ruleset should we use?”

“Look, we’ve prepared some bangles for the occasion. And you’ve got a bangle like it on already. I reckon if we fight to take—or destroy—each other’s bangles, that makes for a fairer battle. What do you think?” she said, her acting transparent.

The presenter mulled it over before announcing, “It’s a ruleset with some precedent. It’s called ‘knocking the symbol.’ I can speak for tournament management when I say we don’t have a problem with it, but what say you, Team Aikawa Kanami?”

I nodded. “I don’t mind. Let’s make destroying each other’s bangles the rule.”

With that, our preparations for our fixed match had been laid.

“Both parties have consented. It’s decided. The ruleset will be ‘knocking the symbol,’ and whichever team breaks the other’s bangle wins!”

With that, the vibrations hitting my ears became stronger. The excitement in the stands was mounting to greater heights.

“Ladies and gentlemen, now that the ruleset’s been decided, what will they be staking on this match?! As the man who’s emceed all of Mr. Kanami’s matches, count me very curious indeed!”

He made it sound like that was the main question.

Sorry, but... “I’m not betting anything,” I said.

“I don’t think we’ve got anything to bet either,” said Lastiara.

“I’m sorry, come again?! You’re not betting *anything*?! In the semifinals of the Brawl?! You’ve made so many bets I couldn’t make heads or tails of until now! To not bet anything now... Are you in your right mind, Mr. Kanamiii?!”

“Yes, I am.”

Just like always, he was weirdly cheeky and overfamiliar with me. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, but I put up with it, prioritizing getting this over with.

“And you, Lady Lastiara! You’ve come to this point after winning a match that was staked on Mr. Kanami. You do understand that it’d be no problem at all if you demanded some sort of reward, correct?! It’d only be natural to be rewarded! In fact, it’s almost criminal if you aren’t! He’s in no position to refuse, what with the mood in the air, so you can say *whatever* you like! Please go with something! I’m sure all of our spectators are waiting with bated breath!”

“Nah, we’re good. If we want him to do something, we don’t need to use an event like this. We can just ask him in private. Isn’t that right, Dia?”

After giving it some thought, Dia voiced her agreement. “Yep. ’Cause we’re all gonna be together from now on. There’s no need to hurry anymore.”

Lastiara shouted with a smile, “You heard ’em! We’re not betting anything!”

Those words reached all the way to the stands, apparently, because there was grumbling mixed in with the cheering.

“Urgh! I’m sorry, folks! I’m so, so sorry! If both teams insist so strongly that they wish for no stakes, we can’t force them! So many people had high hopes for Mr. Kanami, the fighter who gave so many girls the cold shoulder and acted so suggestively, but...it can’t be helped. He seems strangely close to Team Lastiara, so I figured he’d gift us with another slip of the tongue, but alas and alack!”

Even with my mind so foggy, I could be certain this presenter was no ally.

Taking note of my anger, the bastard continued, panicked. “That said, it looks as though further discussion won’t get us anywhere! Now then, let’s begin! May

the semifinals of the North Area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball now commence!”

I dragged my heavy feet toward Lastiara, unarmed. She approached me as well, light on her feet and very much armed. We were still far apart. When she was just outside of sword reach, she said, “Here I come, Kanami! I’m gonna break your limbs for the time being, so don’t move!”

“Yep! Come at me!”

I screwed up my resolve not to move no matter what happened, and I waited for Lastiara to do the deed. We then entered striking range of each other, and the second we did, Lastiara’s sword came swinging. First, the sword neared my left thigh, nearly piercing it—and then a high-pitched *clang* rang out. Before I knew it, I’d taken the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from my inventory and deflected her steel. I knew that Lastiara’s aim was to destroy the bangle, and maybe that was why the curse reacted at an early stage in the fight.

Much to my chagrin, I even managed to repel her follow-up slash attack. My body was moving of its own accord. I caught incoming blows and brushed off grasping hands. I was defending myself expertly, even without the aid of support magic. Gritting my teeth, I desperately tried to keep my body from moving. By contrast, Lastiara looked unruffled. She must have been expecting this level of resistance.

“*Growth!*”

Lastiara buffed her physical abilities, and she raised her pace by a tick. My defense grew more and more brittle, and eventually, a savage hit from her threw me thoroughly off-balance. She drove a roundhouse kick into my torso.

“Guh!”

All the breath in my lungs came rushing out as I flew through the air, totally defenseless—which was Dia’s cue to fire a spell at me.

“*Symposion Noah!*”

A huge sphere of light fell down from the sky, its entire mass hitting my prone body, slamming me into the ground and squashing me down. My vision filled with white sparks, a sharp pain stabbed my brain, and my whole body stiffened

with the impact.

Lastiara had been waiting for that stiffening to take effect. She took me by the left arm and snapped it the opposite way without reservation.

“Gwahhh!”

That sound, not unlike the snapping of bamboo, reverberated in my head as pain (dull this time) attacked my brain.

“Sweet, snapped one of ‘em! Next!”

My elbow felt hot, and excruciating pain radiated from it. The bone was probably broken near the elbow. I tried to dwell on the pain as much as possible so as to immobilize myself, but sadly, my body drove the pain from my consciousness of its own accord. Lastiara closed in without hesitation, and I grabbed her by the wrists and counterattacked through a technique I had no recollection of. By sinking down to the lower limit and pulling her in, I broke her balance and began the process of tossing her. The move was similar to the aikido or judo throw Franrühle had used on me in Round 3. This curse’s level of perfection was astounding. I hadn’t absorbed that technique on a conscious level, but it was making me use it, even though I’d only ever seen it once. Lastiara tumbled ungracefully, but she quickly regained her footing by completing the loop and charged at me again. Yet my body deftly handled her attacks despite an arm being out of commission.

“Ugh, talk about stubborn! *Growth!*”

Lastiara spent some magic energy to go up yet another gear. With that magical buff to her body, she could slip in at such ridiculous speeds that she left afterimages, and she grabbed my hands with her overwhelming muscle strength. Naturally, I tried to shake her off, but Lastiara saw it coming and mercilessly punched me in the stomach. My whole body stiffened again.

Then, as a last resort, the curse chose magic. It made me wring out magic energy from the pit of my stomach and transform it into cold air. But when I attempted to eject it from my body and deploy *Wintermension*, the spell dissipated before it could start. I was in such bad shape that the gears in my head were too slow, causing me to fail to craft *Wintermension* properly. A refreshing breeze that couldn’t even be called cold caressed Lastiara’s cheeks.

Her bangs rose up, revealing her smile. It was the smile of someone who'd seen my spell fizzle and was now sure of her victory. I no longer had any means with which to defend myself. I was just as sure of my own defeat. This was the end of the line.

Lastiara's sword knocked the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from my hand. I crouched down to dodge her next stroke, but she planted a foot in my face right between the eyes. Suddenly, I was looking up at the sky as my feet left the ground. I couldn't move in midair, and her fist swung toward my eyes and nose. It was the perfect checkmate, just as planned. If this attack hit me, I'd be incapacitated for a long time. And I had no way to dodge that haymaker. Game, set and match.

Little by little, her fist inched closer. Relief washed over me as I watched it crawl toward me in slow motion. I'd finally be freed from these interminable days of extreme austerity. I loosened the reins of my consciousness, which I'd only had a finger on to begin with, knowing that in moments, that punch would spell my defeat.

I'd taste defeat and lose my bangle.

I'd regain my memories.

It was over now.

It was all over.

It's all over?

A mysterious stream of magic energy slithered down my back. It was neither dimension nor ice. Its element was darkness, and it was leaking from the bangle. I could feel it sink into my spine.

Are you sure you can let it end like this? I asked myself. *Are you sure it's okay if the bangle's destroyed?*

I was actively trying not to think, to empty my mind, but the questions floated up unbidden. I couldn't fight them.

Isn't this bangle more important to you than anything else?

I remembered one thing—that the bangle was important. Everything else was

omitted. I unfortunately remembered that and only that. At the same time, my consciousness ebbed, flying down into the dark abyss. The bottom of which was the curse's end goal. And dammit, I'd reached it. My scattered thoughts were brought back together again, and I found myself able to think about one thing to the exclusion of all else.

Must. Protect.

I'd definitely vowed to protect something, way back when. But when was that? When had I made that vow? When I was really young?

It was a memory from when my hands were tiny and everything towered over me. I could smell the stench of antiseptic. I must have made that vow in front of her while she lay in bed. My beloved. My sole reason to exist was to protect...

To protect my precious...

I swore I'd protect my precious bangle!

【LAST LINE OF DEFENSE: DARKSPELL *BERSERKER HERO* HAS NOW ACTIVATED】

All magic formulas are now devoted to Cognitive Impairment.

+10.00 to Cognitive Impairment.

In the depths of the darkness, at the very edge of the world of shadow, the text appeared on my retinas. And then, I felt cracks forming in the bangle that had endured everything I'd tried on it without a scratch. The activation of that high-level darkness spell must have exceeded the bangle's capacity to endure. It looked like it was on the verge of breaking outright, similar to when one cast a spell using a magic tool. No, not "similar." They were the same. This bangle was just another magic tool, an object created to cast a specific spell. As such, I couldn't stop it. Even *Wintermension* couldn't stop it.

In the bottom of that dark abyss, I heard a strangely gleeful voice. "Ah, and with that, the requirements have been reached. Now then, Kanami, my lad, why don't we take down the enemy right in front of us? You know, for the sake

of what you hold ever so dear?”

You don't have to tell me. It's obvious I'll protect what I hold dear to my heart. I'll protect this bangle, just you watch. And if I know to protect it, I don't need to know anything else.

I opened my eyes and ascertained the enemy in my field of vision. Right now, they were trying to break the bangle. That fist was right there before my eyes. There were three enemies in total: two beautiful girls and a wolf that was dashing around. I knew them. Those bastards had drafted a plan to incapacitate me and destroy the bangle. They were enemies that I absolutely had to beat!

“Ha ha ha! Tell me, laddie, can you reenact that one scene from your past?! C'mon, good buddy, let's sacrifice everything for the one you love! Even the whole wide world if you need to! Cuz if you do, you can get closer to your former self!”

That amused voice did something to dye not just my heart but my vision black. The enemy was now completely obscured by darkness; I didn't even know who they were anymore. But I did know what I had to do. The bangle was what was important to me. And the enemy was trying to destroy it. That was all I needed to know. I'd defend that which I held dear, and I'd sacrifice anything to do it. I'd even kill. This was the real me.

From amid the darkness, I cast a spell. No, I screamed it. “SPELLCAST: BLIZZARDMENSIIIIOOOOOON!!!”

I poured all my heart and soul into my most powerful magic.

【STATUS】

HP: 152/303 MP: 0/751

HP: 147/298 MP: 0/751

HP: 142/293 MP: 0/751

The numbers were dropping. At the bottom of the dark pit, I was currently setting fire to my own life force. But I wasn't even worried about surviving

anymore. Those worries were gone. That which I needed to protect was everything now. Nothing else existed to me. And that made things so simple and easy to understand that it felt awfully refreshing.

“Ah ha! Ah ha *ha ha ha ha!*”

I’d discovered the joy of being able to protect my precious and laughed from the bottom of my heart for the first time in a long, long time.



When he saw that my fist would definitely hit him, Kanami smiled, relieved. But it only took an instant for that look of relief in his eyes to change into...something else.

Pupils of obsidian black were now tinged with luminescent violet, making his eyes a strange dark purple. I knew what that color meant. I could see the purple magic energy creeping out of the bangle. It was entering his body from the back of his head and emitting a purple light from the inside. That magic energy turned his smile of relief into one of madness, causing him to scream out his *Blizzardmension* spell.

He crafted a high-grade spell composed of both space and cold. Of course, it soon dissipated. With the state he was in, there was no way he’d be able to maintain such advanced magic. That said, even though blood was gushing from his mouth and nose, Kanami *was* able to successfully craft the spell, albeit briefly. The “winter” only lasted a moment, but that allowed him to obtain information on the space around him as well as slow down my fist.

He proceeded to stick out his broken left arm to cushion my punch. There was no strength in that arm, but by using it as a meat shield, he mitigated the impact to his face. When the punch landed, I could feel his arm receiving a compound fracture before the blow sent him flying. I gritted my teeth and watched him hurtle through the air. I’d dealt a lot of damage, but the timing had been thrown off, so he wasn’t knocked out. Kanami slid across the ground, getting covered in dirt. A staggering black silhouette immediately rose from the cloud of dust. When the haze cleared, his creepy form was exposed to the light of day.

His broken and twisted left arm was hanging down, his face pallid and devoid

of vitality. After not sleeping for days, he had extremely dark circles under his eyes. Countless scratches and bruises covered his body; moving a single fingertip must have been excruciating for him. His magic energy should have been totally depleted, and there had to be nothing but water in his stomach and intestines. There should have been nothing within his battered body that he could convert into energy. Over the past three days, he had been fighting nonstop and had long surpassed the limits of a human being. He had to have been past the realm of pain and nausea now. The terrifying taste of death must have been rising up on the back of his tongue. He shouldn't have been able to put up a fight anymore. And yet he'd gotten back onto his feet and was walking toward me with a sword in his hands.

And that wasn't all. He was *laughing* too.

"Aha, aha ha *ha ha ha ha!*"

Clearly, something was wrong. My Pseudo-Divine Eyes skill ascertained my opponent's status, and I saw how his Cognitive Impairment condition had risen by an order of magnitude compared to before the match. I broke out in a cold sweat.

"Must...protect..." he murmured as he walked through the dust in the air. His strides were unsteady, but for some reason, I didn't get the feeling he was going to crumble. "Don't worry. I'll protect yOu, so don't worry... *Aha ha*, reSt assUred, I will pRotect you..."

His dark-purple eyes shining, he smiled faintly and caressed the bangle lovingly. Despite being on the brink of death, his expression was kind and gentle. Kanami's own will was no longer active. His smile looked insane enough for me to draw that conclusion.

"Look. The real him's out like a light. So why's he still moving? I'm guessing it's Palinchron's magic. Dia, it's looking like he's got a deepening-mind-pollution thing happening! Curb that status effect as much as you can through holy magic!"



I was shifting the plan away from what we'd formulated beforehand.

"Got it, Lastiara! *Strass Field!*"

A holy barrier stretched across the arena. The spell's light dispelled all darkness and calmed the mind. But it didn't reach Kanami. The purple magic energy was acting as a defensive membrane to block the light.

"I won'T let You!"

In response to the barrier of light, Kanami started running toward us. He was moving even faster than the first time. I could only assume the bangle was forcing him to fight past his limits. Before I could even breathe, our swords made contact. It was a strange sensation how slight the recoil was. Kanami's sword had no power to it at all. At first I figured it was his lack of strength, but I soon realized that I was wrong. Instead, his sword gently slid past mine and was approaching my neck. I knew that technique, and thanks to that, I could evade it.

"Was... Was that an Arrace move?!"

I knew because I'd wielded the power of Fenrir Arrace just recently. Kanami had unmistakably employed swordsmanship comparable to the current Blademaster's.

Without answering my question, he continued swinging his sword. I fended it off at the last moment as I fell back.

"*Flame Arrow: Petalrain!*"

Dia had concluded that he was overpowering me. The rain of fire forced Kanami to stop closing in on me. Some of the fire arrows rained down on me too. Dia's aim must have suffered due to how hurriedly he'd cast the spell. While blocking the flames with holy magic, I distanced myself significantly. Kanami, on the other hand, didn't employ any magic at all, using only his physical prowess to avoid them.

Even as he was hit by some of the countless flame shots, he was still moving his head unhurriedly, avoiding the rain of pain by eye. It was a rare spectacle. Kanami probably wasn't using even the slightest amount of his detector magic

right now. He'd probably decided that judging from his poor condition, he couldn't trust magic that might dissipate on him at any moment, so he was relying solely on his eyes.

That served as ample proof that he'd run out of magic energy. I felt a little relieved. Kanami was a mage first and foremost, and a mage with no magic energy was no threat. When he used tactics that hinged on his dimensional magic, they were hard to beat. But by the same token, he could be said to be nothing without his dimensional magic. When he didn't have access to it, Kanami was nothing more than a swordsman of some skill. And even when he was using the swordsmanship of the Blademaster himself, it was still within my capacity to beat him.

I screwed up my resolve and attacked. "Bloodspell: *Fenrir Arrace!* Blestspell: *Growth!*"

I spent more magic energy and funneled my fighting capabilities toward close combat. Kanami, who had pulled away from the rain of fire, closed the distance without giving me a second's pause. He was starting to move oddly. Before I knew it, his sword stance had turned into something else. With the tip of the sword on the ground, he was trying to intercept me. It was a unique stance I'd seen before. Lowering the sword and waiting for the enemy to make a move... Why, that was Sera Radiant's swordsmanship.

The second I was within range, he slashed up. I spun like a top to dodge it. It was extremely easy to do, most likely because I was used to being on the receiving end of the move.

Kanami resumed his stance and tried to repeat the up-slash move. It was Serry's swordsmanship, but it was reproduced robotically, completely lacking the necessary depth. As I dodged it breezily, I moved to deliver the finishing blow...

And that was when Kanami's left arm sprang to life. His right hand was holding the beautiful blue-and-white sword, and now his left hand was holding a second, less refined, more rugged sword. The deadly blade was sailing toward my eyes. I immediately pulled back my own sword to defend myself, jumping backward in amazement. Kanami's left arm was shattered, but he'd grabbed

another sword and attacked me with it regardless.

The way he caught me unawares like that... Is he mimicking Raggie now?

He'd been this close to taking my eyes. I distanced myself and observed him, thereby learning what was behind this impossible second sword. He'd frozen part of his arm. The broken elbow was now wrapped in ice, as was the hand holding the blade. That would prevent him from dropping the sword in pain. He couldn't bend his elbow, but he could use the sword to a minimal extent.

Kanami paid no heed to my astonishment and closed in. This time, he wasn't hiding the ice. He was freely wielding two swords.

He's going for a twin sword style now?!

It wasn't unlike the Hellvilleshine style. It was far from perfect, but it still reminded me of Hine. His ever-shifting sword styles baffled me. There was no doubt he held the reins of the fight at the moment. In order to take them back, I had no choice but to use more magic. It would take a toll on my body, but now wasn't the time to hold back.

"Layered activation! Bloodspell: *Hine Hellvilleshine!*"

When I found myself confused by a rare twin sword style, I had but to ask an expert in that style for advice. With Hine's knowledge at my disposal, I saw through all of the twin sword style attacks; I had the advantage once again. The skill difference was overwhelming. Kanami's clumsy and robotic twin sword moves soon proved inferior, and that blue-white sword flew from his right hand. Only the sword frozen to his left arm remained. Seeing this as a golden opportunity, I moved to grab his arm. So long as I kept real close, his unbending left arm would only get in his way. With my free left hand, I grabbed Kanami's so as to lock down his joints. But that very moment, I felt a weird floatiness—and found *him* grabbing *my* arm.

"Huh?"

The martial arts move he'd just pulled was flexible and fast. The moment I'd grabbed him, he'd somersaulted. That much I understood. What I didn't understand was how he'd managed to make me release my grip, or for that matter grip me back.

Was it that bizarre move from before?! Is that Glenn Walker's technique? Or maybe Snow's? Ugh, dammit, I've got no idea!

I didn't know the origin of the technique, probably because the martial arts of Eltraliew Academy were mixed in as well. *No, for my blood to not know of it...* Maybe it was a martial art from another world. One that didn't exist in the Alliance.

"Extended Growth!"

At this distance, under these circumstances, I couldn't predict what would happen next. I went on the move to turn the situation around through sheer force. With strength and speed that surpassed my limits, I brushed off his arm and kicked him in the stomach before immediately falling back. The boosting magic lasted only seconds, but still my body paid a price for it. Since I'd also leaned on it during the battle against Snow the day before, the recoil was something to behold. *Extended Growth* wasn't a play I could make lightly even when I was in tiptop shape.

Now that I'd distanced myself, Dia's spell rained down anew, keeping Kanami from coming after me. We were each back to square one, at our starting points. We'd exchanged quite a few attacks, only to return to where we'd begun.

"Must...pro...tect," murmured a staggering Kanami. "I'm gonna...protect... Aha ha! Ha *ha*, aha *ha* ha *ha* ha *ha*!"

He looked like he might crumple at any moment. He was definitely going past his limits. He couldn't even work his magic energy properly. Besides, even if he could, he'd only be causing himself so much pain that he might vomit blood just to force out a beginner-level spell. And yet here I was, unable to beat him. Was it because of that "adrenaline" stuff he'd mentioned before? No, that alone wasn't enough to explain it. From the look of it, there was a chance that the Kanami I was seeing wasn't thinking at all, apart from blasting the word *protect* on repeat. Maybe his head was otherwise empty—which meant every decision he was making was purely reflexive. He was simply using the skills he'd seen and learned in this world, one after the other, without thinking about the small stuff.

"Y-You're kidding me. Could it be? Is Kanami stronger than me when he isn't

relying on dimensional magic or thinking too hard?”

I broke into a cold sweat. Normally, a reduced capacity to think would make somebody *weaker*, not stronger! But this boy was far from normal. If given time to think, Kanami always allowed unnecessary stuff to clog his mind. And because he had a lot of MP, he wasted a lot of MP. He always invented reasons to be stingy with his abilities. As a result, he was letting his dynamic vision and reflexes go unused. He often tried to look cool, and for some reason, he always stuck with using a sword. Furthermore, his natural kindheartedness meant he was always feeling for his enemies. Not only that, his perfectionism was apocalyptic, and the tiniest things made him get all negative and pessimistic. And so on and so forth. Well, now all of those bad habits were gone. It appeared as though I couldn't view his inability to use magic as a handicap.

With a stern expression, I issued orders behind me. “Dia, no more kid gloves. Fire your magic with the intention of turning his limbs into charcoal.”

“Charcoal?! L-Lastiara...are you sure it's okay to go all out?”

“He's too dangerous. His power's like a knife—the blade's short, but it's definitely still got the capacity to kill us. And it's so sharp it makes Snow look weak. Right now, his muscle strength, magic energy, brainpower, and discernment are all super low, but even so, he's a force!”

“That's Sieg for ya. All right. I'll try and crush a limb or two.”

“And if you think the iron's hot, you can even hit me alongside him.”

A pause. “Roger that.”

I thought I heard the howl of a wolf in the back, criticizing that bit of the strategy, but I ignored it. If I prioritized my own safety now, I might end up snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Even if I got seriously injured, as long as Dia was okay, I'd just be healed in the end anyway. And this wasn't a battle I could afford to lose—even if I had to sacrifice myself to win!

“Let's go, Kanami! Dia, Serry!”

I started running toward Kanami, who skillfully moved his frozen hand and readied a bow that he'd pulled out at some point. Quickly and gracefully, he trained the arrow and fired. He was moving the way he'd seen me move at that

festival. How nostalgic.

That nostalgia only deepened my resolve. While he had aimed true, a piddly little projectile like that would have no effect. I bent to avoid the arrow as I ran. It hurtled by, to be answered by a *Flame Arrow* of Dia's own, fired from behind me. The spell packed a ton of magic energy, but Kanami had read the first move and already finished dodging it. The *Flame Arrow* passed him by, punched a hole in the barrier, and melted the wall behind it a little.

Now that was the power level I wanted! Dia had adjusted his output such that it was strong enough to fricassee Kanami without being enough to completely shatter the barrier. He wasn't the disciple of the Thief of Fire's Essence for nothing.

Kanami abandoned his bow and grabbed a sword from thin air. Our blades locked. I could tell by the feel of it that he was using the Arrace style, so I blocked his sophisticated Blademaster technique with another sophisticated Blademaster technique. The sword styles were the exact same, and my physical specs were higher, but for some reason I was still losing. Kanami's swordsmanship had clearly surpassed that of Blademaster Fenrir. This could only be that Guardian Lorwen's doing. His bladework stood way above what modern-day Blademasters could do. And it seemed that since Kanami had seen it up close, he was now at that level.

Again and again, his monstrously skilled sword swings came within a millimeter of me. In the blink of an eye, my body was covered in gashes. Just now, he'd come too close to lopping an ear off. After a few seconds so terrifying that my head was spinning, Dia saved me with another spell.

"Divine Arrow: Shinerain!"

Arrows of light poured down from the sky. While he'd cast the spell in support of me, the aim was near indiscriminate. Kanami tried to dodge the arrows by looking at them, but these shining projectiles were harder to look at than their flame counterparts. Seeing that Kanami was absorbed in defending himself, I cast a spell with the intention of taking the match with it.

I'm gonna save you, Kanami, no matter what, I swore to myself as I crafted the spell. I need to save you, at least!

Otherwise, Kanami would go unrewarded for saving me. He'd gone and rescued a dummy like me. But that was why Palinchron had been able to capture him, and Mar-Mar as well. If I didn't put my life on the line to save him, he'd have saved me in vain. When his memories returned, as they must eventually, I'd be unable to look him in the eyes!

"EXTENDED GROWTH!"

By casting a boost spell in excess of my limits, I was pulling from my very life force. My body ran hotter than fire, and even as my muscle fibers were torn apart, I was now able to wield the most strength I'd ever had. It felt like the good old days when my protective ward had enabled me to drown out my fear and fight while exposing myself to mortal peril. But now I was staking my life on fulfilling my vow, and that made me happy.

I fight for the boy who changed me into who I am now, and for myself!

Kanami watched me cast my full strength buff spell with indifference. He must have been thinking it was just another airheaded attempt to outmuscle him. With a big smile, I launched my fist with all my might—toward the ground!

The artificial earth in the arena crumbled. I'd gotten an idea of how hard the ground was during the match with Snow. And as strong as I currently was, I could punch a hole in this ship with my bare hands.

Our footing collapsed, and a mass of rocks of various shapes flew up in defiance of gravity. Arrows of light rained down from above while rocks "fell" toward the sky from below. Even Kanami wouldn't be able to keep track of all of them—or so I thought.

After all that, Kanami's power increased even further. He closed his eyes and dodged them all, despite clearly not being able to see them. Guided by a sixth sense, he didn't sustain a single scratch. Seeing the way he was moving, I decided to settle everything right this instant. The longer this went on, the more his power would grow. That was my hunch. So I let it all ride on the next moment...and dashed off!

Employing a rock in the air as a foothold, I attacked him. We were both in the air now, and the fight transpired in a split second. I slashed at him in a suicide rush. He intercepted and counterattacked, smiling. He slashed my left arm,

cleaved my flank, and stabbed my leg, but I kept slamming away at him with my blade. I took advantage of the gap in muscle strength and whaled on him over and over again until at long last, the sword in his right hand flew off. My lips curled and I tried to follow up, but my stance was thrown into sudden disarray.

Using his broken left hand, Kanami had yanked my long locks. Apparently, he could cancel the ice at will. The sword glued to that hand was gone now. I felt a strange sense of irritation I didn't understand, but I decided this was not the time to be fussing over my hair, and I cut it off, using my sword to free myself. Now he couldn't grab me by the hair. However, the openings that action had created cost me. After all, this was a fight where I couldn't afford a moment's unpreparedness.

Kanami kicked my right wrist, causing me to drop my sword. But that didn't faze me. What mattered now wasn't my lethality. I stuck close to Kanami and grabbed his shoulders. In response, he grabbed my neck with his right hand. And then we hurtled down to earth. He crushed my throat with his grip strength. In exchange, I could now do as I pleased with his body. As we fell, I used all my might to toss him down toward the ground.

"Gwah!"

Kanami slammed into the earth, cracking it. He was sprawled out on the floor, and I landed on him, mounted him, and wasted no time slugging him in the face. Unable to put up any resistance, his face was deformed with a liquidy squishing noise. But even though he was covered in blood, his right hand had a hold of *my* bangle. He was playing to his outs, figuring that if he destroyed my bangle, the match would be over then and there. But the bangle didn't matter to me. It didn't matter who technically won this match. If I could destroy his bangle in exchange for my own, victory was mine.

"RAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!" he roared. Putting all of his strength into his right hand, he gripped my bangle and broke it, at the cost of tearing his own muscles. At the same time, I delivered a final blow to the bangle on his left arm.

They both broke, settling everything once and for all, and the rumbling that accompanied that action filled the arena. Kanami's amazing grip had shattered my bangle, and he smiled as the fragments flew through the air—yet to realize

that his own was likewise shattered. In fact, my punch had smashed his left arm to bits along with it. Kanami slowly turned to face that decimated arm—and the demolished bangle. And with a twitch, his triumphant grin turned into a look of despair.

“Ah, ahhh, aughhhhhhh...”

He’d lost what he’d been trying to protect, rendering him utterly heartbroken. At the same time, the purple magic energy started fading away. I could see the curse binding him disappearing through my Pseudo-Divine Eyes.

At long last, I’d laid waste to the source of all our calamities. I thrust my right hand up into the sky.

“How do ya like that, Palinchron?! !! WIN!!!”

Seeing as my throat had been flattened, it actually came out as a sort of muffled howl. Still, I celebrated my victory without reserve. The Brawl was nothing more than a stage to me. I didn’t care about the semifinals, and Snow and the Guardian were far from my mind. My heart was brimming with a singular joy—I’d finally won my battle. The bitter and protracted fight that had stretched from the Day of the Blessed Birth all the way to today. I’d done it. I’d recovered the “protagonist,” the hero who had rescued me. That moment, that sense of accomplishment, that joy—I relished it all. I could practically feel the page turning. This was the moment when the prologue of my story ended and a new chapter began.

And I smiled.





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I felt like I'd been walking in the depths of darkness for quite some time. That world was oh so comfortable. I'd have loved to stay there forever and ever. In that world, I didn't need to suffer anymore. Because in that world, everyone was happy

But that was behind me now. I couldn't permit myself to stay. I'd vowed not to flee to a comforting lie. I'd vowed not to take a wrong turn. And I'd vowed that if I was lucky enough for there to be a next time, I'd never mess up again!

Ahhh... Finally, I remember everything!

A warm light burned in my world of deep darkness, and truth illuminated my surroundings.

"Wh-What a stupendously fierce battle, folks! It was truly bloody and bitter! I can't count how many magnificent and beautiful techniques we saw this match! It was one for the history books! That said, from what I can tell, it's ended in a draw... Which way have the scales tipped?!"

I heard voices bouncing in my skull. People calling my name. People worried about me. People putting their expectations on me. People wishing me luck.

Guided by those voices, I slowly opened my eyes and was greeted by the face of a beautiful girl peering at me with worry. She looked androgynous, but her short blonde hair contained the ornament I'd given her. It seemed as though she was letting me use her lap as a pillow. Maybe the light I'd sensed in the darkness was hers.

That girl was speaking with another, who was next to her as she kept the healing magic going. "Kanami! I'm healin' ya, so stay with us!"

"Ackh, we ended up destroying the bangle, huh? Guess there was no other way. It was just too hard. So, how's he looking, Dia? Does it seem like you can patch him up?"

“I think I can manage it...and he won’t have lasting effects either. Boy, am I relieved... No, I can’t let my guard down yet! I’m gonna purify him from head to toe using my magic energy!”

“G-Gotcha. Keep at it, okay?”

“Dia? Lastiara?”

These girls were Diablo Sith and Lastiara Whoseyards. They were my allies. My comrades.

Dia was sweating buckets healing me. She, or “he,” was using all of her magic energy in order to fix not only my injuries but also my status effects. As for Lastiara...she looked so battered I couldn’t bear to look. Her pretty clothing was all chopped up, and her gorgeous white skin bore countless gashes and wounds. The bruises and still-fresh blood were painful to look at. What pained my heart the most was that her beautiful long hair had gotten a crude cut job, and now it was short. She had a hand to her throat and was using healing magic on herself. And I was the one who’d crushed it.

“Oh, hey! Kanami—I mean Sieg, I guess? You’ve come to?”

Her beautiful voice was hoarse, a shadow of its former self.

“L-Lastiara... Your voice...”

“Who, me? You don’t gotta worry about it. It’ll heal soon. Never mind that; are your memories good and back?”

I raked up my memories. The process was accompanied by intense pain, but I examined my recollections regardless. I recalled the events from when I’d first stumbled into the Dungeon all the way to the time Palinchron had defeated me...and I plucked them all from the abyss—the sensation of my two formerly separate memory banks converging was an odd one. The sensation of the boy named Siegfried Vizzita and the boy named Aikawa Kanami fusing together again. But I’d finally restored the real *me*.

I’d restored myself, but... “I’m back... Oh man, I finally got my memories back...but that said!”

“Penny for your thoughts?”

My thoughts?

The memories of Siegfried Vizzita were the memories of an intolerable idiot. But the memories of the Aikawa Kanami who'd lived in Laoravia were even more intolerably idiotic. And that harrowing truth made me want to shriek.

"Ahhhh! AHHHHHH! I swear!"

In the process of tracing my two selves' memories, I'd passed the point where I couldn't endure it anymore.

"Ahhh! What the hell have I done?!"

My memories in Laoravia started off with me *thanking* Palinchron as a man to whom I owed my life. That, plus my "meeting" Maria, made me want to die. I denounced myself as I all but pulled out my hair.

"I thought Maria was my sister?! Why didn't I doubt that sooner?! Why didn't I notice?! Is my love for Hitaki that weak?! Ahhh! AHHH! I'm pathetic! I'm so sorry to both of them for conflating the two!"

That was hardly the end of my soul-searching. The memories I'd made while living as Aikawa Kanami flowed in like raging river rapids along with an unceasing stream of various other memories.

"And what's this guildmaster nonsense?! After I took so much care to keep my distance from organizations, not only did I get involved with one, I became its *leader*! If I wanted to earn money, there were other ways to do it! Palinchron duped me so easily! Am I an idiot or what?! No, but seriously, am I just *dumb*?!"

"S-Sieg, you're not an idiot!" said Dia. "You're a damn sight smarter than I am!"

But the more words of support I heard, the more pathetic I felt. My path through my memories moved to my encounter with Snow. Every aspect of those thoughts was so embarrassing. I was burning with shame. My lips were trembling and my voice sounded weird. "Thank you, Dia! But I was stupid! I was a total dunce! I told you so many times not to show your cards, yet I wound up using my dimensional magic unabashedly! And I was using it all over the place too! Was it because I wanted a cute girl like Snow to compliment me? Was it because I wanted my new friends, the guild members, to acknowledge me? I

understand how unique my power is, so I should've hidden it more!"

Ms. Sera was alone among them in that she seemed to be enjoying listening to me kick myself. And right now, I'd take someone laughing at me over someone consoling me.

"I used my position as guildmaster of Laoravia as an excuse to do whatever I damn well pleased! When I entered the Dungeon to do that government job, I was so smug, showing off my power to Elmirahd. What was I playing at?! Did I want him to tell me I'm hot shit?! Did I want all the Laoravians to sing my praises?! Ackh, I'm so pitiful!"

"Sieg, calm down a bit, would you?" said Lastiara, flustered. "For real, though, calm down..." It seemed she'd noticed my shouting was a little over the top, but I couldn't help myself.

"My Dungeon diving was way too sloppy! And I do mean *sloppy*! Why'd I hit Floor 30 like it was some day trip?! I should've listened to what I was told! I heard that Guardians were insane monsters that killed countless innocents, didn't I?! So why'd I go in alone?! I could've made another sword from scratch!"

Dia was in a dither, minding all the eyes on us. Yet I still didn't stop spilling my heart out. I figured now was the time to vent all the emotions I'd accumulated. My past failures had taught me that I should open my heart to the gang and confide in them about my worries. So I kept yelling my lungs out.

"Did I seriously think the Guardian of Floor 30 would be no sweat for me?! I said I'd beat him at the blade?! I assumed the Brawl was mine to lose?! I said there was no way I could be weaker than Lastiara?! Argh, that's so cringe! Holy hell, how cocky can I get?!"

I was ranting so much that everybody was lost for words. The whole arena could hear me; the mic was picking up my shouting. The presenter, the spectators, the guild members who'd come to watch, the people I'd befriended in Laoravia, my allies on Team Lastiara—everyone and their little dog was listening, mouths agape.

"I've never lost?! Well *that's* a lie! I lost to Palinchron, no ifs, ands, or buts about it! And talk about an utter defeat—he even captured and brainwashed me! Ugh, what a string of blunders! It's so bad I have to wonder if I ever actually

succeeded at anything! I wasn't able to save anybody! Not Dia, not Lastiara, not Maria, not Alty, and not Mr. Hine! I couldn't save a SINGLE PERSON!"

I didn't care how it looked. My reputation was already in tatters and past the point of fixing.

"And why'd I get all chummy with Lorwen and Reaper?! They're *monsters*! They're the same entities Tida and Alty were! Like, c'mon! You're telling me I stayed the night with them?! That I had one of them teach me the blade like it was some after-school program?! I was even all buddy-buddy with him at the tournament sign-up!"

The last memories I went through were those of Snow, Reaper, and Lorwen. Which was to say, my recollection of a wonderful handful of days. What halcyon days they were. To live in that dream again, where I could find happiness in some far-off world with my sister. In that dream, my "sister" Maria was all smiles, and I had a companion I could trust in Snow. I could be friends with the Guardian Lorwen and Reaper, and my allies and the citizens had confidence in me as a guildmaster working for the state...

Meanwhile, in reality, my actual sister, Hitaki, was a world away. I'd stolen my companion Dia's dreams from him and been unable to save my ally Lastiara. I'd been forced to fight the Guardian Alty and Maria because we couldn't come to understand one another in time. I hadn't built a relationship of trust with anyone—I'd just run off to a sham of a life where I could pretend I'd never made all those mistakes. But now I was shaking myself free of that, along with the tears in my eyes.

"Man, the way I treated Snow! I was so irresponsible! Why didn't I ever try to understand her or her woes?! The ball only became such a mess because I never showed any interest in anyone else! Look what had to happen for me to get a clue! And even afterward, I handled it all wrong! I knew how off everything felt during the dragon-slaying quest, didn't I?! Snow, Lorwen, and Reaper were all acting so weird! I was so slow to notice anything! And by then, it was too little, too late!"

Bit by bit, my trip down memory lane approached the present.

"And don't get me started on the Brawl! That receptionist *warned* me, but I

still let my guard down! That match against Elmirahd was a fiasco! I legit got caught up in it and basically made a love confession! And in front of a million people too! Did I lose my mind?! I basically punched myself in the face just because I got a little irritated! And why'd I vent at Elmirahd?! If there's anybody to vent at, it's that bastard Palinchron! Ugh, can I do *anything* right?!"

Recalling all of my gross errors during my Aikawa Kanami era, my face turned beet red. The match against Mr. Elmirahd was Exhibit A.

"That's what happens when your will's that weak! Look at our match just now—if I'd worked harder, it'd have ended in a second! There was no need to fight so long that it ended up like *this*! Your hair and throat would have stayed unharmed, Lastiara! It's all because my heart was so weak!"

I was looking at the disaster scene that was Lastiara's team, grimacing. Memory lane had reached the present. It would've been easy to keep raking myself over the coals, but we had bigger fish to fry. I lowered my voice, calmed down now that I'd vented everything, and took my time to thoroughly apologize.

"Ugh, I'm such an idiot...but I finally made it to this moment... I'm sorry, Lastiara. I might have taken you out of that hole, but I couldn't accompany you till the end. And Dia, not only did you lose an arm thanks to me, but I exposed you to danger time and time again. I'm so sorry..."

My shoulders drooped and I cast my eyes downward. After all that lamenting, my manic episode was dying down at last.

Lastiara smiled wryly. "You finally get it out of your system?"

"Yeah, I've calmed down... Sucks that I had to look so uncool, but I'm okay now."

Calmly, I looked at my own menu, checking the Condition section first.

【STATUS】

Confusion 7.48, Mind Taint 0.09

Most of the status ailments were canceled by Dia's magic. However, the fact I still had high Confusion despite the seal disappearing meant I'd probably better view my ??? skill as a lingering threat. The reason ??? hadn't activated during my emotional outburst was most likely because my life wasn't in danger. In fact, there was a good chance that ??? judged that the meltdown was necessary from a mental health standpoint.

Though the Condition section of my menu had cleared up, I still seemed to be suffering from poor physical health in smaller ways. My eyelids were heavy; I could see myself falling asleep on my feet. My MP was at zero, and while I had a fair amount of HP left, I'd already confirmed that physical resilience/stamina wasn't correlated with HP. I probably wasn't at death's door, but there was the possibility that the sheer fatigue would render me immobile. I clenched my hands a bunch to gauge how much fight I had left in me. Depending on what unfolded, yet another battle on the heels of this one was within the realm of possibility.

I checked my remaining strength. I wanted to avoid more combat if at all possible, but if I had to fight, I had to fight. I was pretty sure that if I conked out now, the outcome would be no better than last time. Now that my memories were back, I refused to make the mistakes I made on the Day of the Blessed Birth. Never again!

I ascertained the current situation and continued to rack my brain, which was already teetering on the edge, thinking about the future. I couldn't let myself off the hook making excuses like I was too sleepy or in too bad shape. Honestly, this level of burnout wasn't even that bad compared to the despair I'd tasted at the close of the Day of the Blessed Birth. Don't get me wrong, I was in agony, but not to the point of dying. I'd known worse circumstances than *this*.

I knew that what I'd been through thus far had strengthened my heart. I made full use of my thought streams skill to revise my plan of action. After a nice deep breath, I spoke unhurriedly with my allies.

"Lastiara, Dia, I'm really sorry I ended up coming across so uncool, but from this point on, I think we're going to have to look even more uncool as we claw our way forward! I'm never gonna try to keep up appearances or run away from problems ever again. I'm so tired of all the mistakes I keep making that way!"

Lastiara looked genuinely relieved. “Welcome back. Look, you don’t have to worry about it. I *know* you’re uncool, Sieg.”

Dia’s face lit up too. “Sieg! You’re finally back!” He side-hugged me, tears in his eyes.

I damn near burst into tears too. The sight of this bright light after wallowing in the darkness for so long... But again, this was not the time to let the warm fuzzies distract me. Because if things were as dire as I thought, we couldn’t afford to waste a single second.

I grabbed Dia’s shoulder and separated us a little before looking into his eyes and saying, “Hold on, Dia. First, there’s something I need to ask of you, and something I need to apologize for. It’s true that I’m the same person that you knew as ‘Siegfried Vizzita,’ but I’d like you to call me Kanami. ‘Sieg’ was only ever an alias; my true name actually *is* Aikawa Kanami. So from now on, could you please call me Kanami?”

“Wait, huh? I don’t get it. You’re not Sieg?”

It seemed that in my haste to explain, I hadn’t accounted for how Dia would react. So I explained it in plainer terms. “I’m both Sieg *and* Kanami. Back then, I had no faith in anything and no leg to stand on. That’s why I went by ‘Siegfried Vizzita.’ That’s why I kept falling back on lies. I know that by lying, I betrayed your trust. But even so, I’d like you to forgive me because I’m never gonna lie again.”

Dia listened to my words in blank amazement. But he didn’t reply. This was Dia we were talking about. I knew how much stock he put in promises and the rules. He might not be able to accept that I’d been going by a false name. That said, if I didn’t tell him here and now, and in no uncertain terms, about the real me, I’d regret it down the line.

I was about to add more in the hope of getting Dia to understand, but before I could, he responded differently from how I’d anticipated, drawing closer not to me but to Lastiara.

He was frowning. “Hey, uh, Lastiara? Is it just me, or is something not adding up?”

Lastiara was smiling. “Hm? What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you tell me that when Sieg’s memories returned, he’d forget his memories from when he was ‘Kanami’? But... But, like, it looks to me like he’s got all his memories from both times.”

What Lastiara had told him was wrong. I hadn’t forgotten anything. *What kinda bullshit was that, Lastiara?*

Clearly, the naive and trusting Dia had fallen into Lastiara’s web.

“Oh, that?” she said. “I guess I did say that, huh? Sorry, Dia. That was a lie.”

“Excuse me?! You lied to me?! You... You *lied* to me, Lastiara?! I only sucked it up and put on those clothes because I honestly believed you! So you’re saying Sieg remembers *all of it?!?*”

She nodded with a mile-wide smile. “Yep. It’s probably seared into his brain, really.”

“Waaaaaaagh!!!” Beet red in the face, Dia broke into a run.

“Ah, no running!” said Lastiara. “We absolutely can’t afford to split up here! That’d be seriously bad!”

“Wait, hold on, wait, stop! I’d hate that too! Don’t move, Dia! Please!”

Thankfully, Dia had no athletic talent. I was seriously fretting, so I apprehended him in short order, and Lastiara placed a hand on him to knock him unconscious. Right from the jump, things weren’t going to plan. As per usual.

Lastiara and I took a moment to catch our breath, and Ms. Sera had undone her beast-form at some point, because she was back to human. She had on the large mantle that Lastiara had been wearing.

“Her Grace isn’t coming to,” said Ms. Sera. “We can rest easy now.”

“Let’s wake her up when we’re in need of some firepower. Until then, let her sleep. Knowing her, she’d destroy whatever Kanami tells her to, even the moment she gets up.”

At Lastiara’s request, Ms. Sera held Dia in her arms. Lastiara’s not-very-nice

assessment of Dia took me aback a little.

“You make him sound like he’s disturbed. Speaking of which, is it just me or did Dia’s personality change while I wasn’t looking?”

“What you’re witnessing is his unadulterated self. He’s the kinda kid that tries to put up a cool front in his own weird way. He must’ve *really* put on airs when ‘Sieg’ was around.” Lastiara looked at the sleeping Dia with kindness in her eyes. It was totally different from the eyes “Sieg” used to regard Dia with. They were eyes that truly understood him.

“I see... Guess I didn’t understand Dia at all back then, huh? Or rather, I suppose it’s just that I never really *tried* to understand him.”

I’d had plenty of opportunities to gain that sort of understanding. Maybe if I’d asked enough times about his past or gender identity, he’d have told me. Maybe I could have met with the real Dia back then. But I’d chosen not to. During my first days in this world, I’d viewed the people here as nothing more than NPCs. I hadn’t wanted to believe in this place—a world where my sister wasn’t. But now I was different. I knew that without faith, I couldn’t move forward. Once this was all over, I wanted Dia and I to introduce ourselves to one another, properly this time.

A solemn air gripped the arena. The presenter, who’d been watching from afar, approached me. “Er... I don’t quite understand. How exactly did the match play out?”

“I’m sorry, but could you shut it a sec?” I said coldly.

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Even after I’d regained my memories, I still remembered what this jackass had pulled. The rage was still there. And you could bet this was one grudge I wouldn’t be forgetting.

Lastiara also ignored the presenter. She probably didn’t give a toss about the Brawl anymore. “So, what do we do from here on out? Do we head right out to chase after Palinchron?”

“Ah, yeah, about that... Let’s close out the matches first. Could you throw this match for me, Lastiara?”

“Huh? The matches? But what about Palinchron?”

To be honest, I didn't give a rat's ass about the Brawl either. I was right there with her about wanting to give chase as soon as possible. The fact that he was free and on the loose was enough to worsen my anxiety. I badly wanted to settle the Palinchron problem. But that would be dancing to his tune. I was convinced that if we didn't move carefully, a seam would open in the Brawl that would prove fatal for us. It'd prevent me from leaving the Alliance. Snow, Reaper, and Lorwen—those were the three people blocking my way. I had no proof, but I knew that the prison Palinchron had crafted couldn't be that easy to escape. In order to extricate myself from this elaborate jail cell, it was necessary to move with extreme prudence. Unfortunately, that plan of escape...

“I can't say. Forgive me, Lastiara.”

It was a plan I couldn't tell a soul about. I couldn't utter the words. I couldn't even afford to think too deeply about it. Because if I did, there was a chance it'd tip her off. And if she caught on, this plan was done for. Lastiara's personality was such that she'd sacrifice even Snow and Maria without any qualms. She had the determination and resolve to be capable of that. The more time passed, the greater the chances were that she'd figure it out. I had to get things rolling, and I had to do it swiftly and carefully.

“Hm...” She looked none too pleased that I was hiding something from her, and so brazenly to boot. She might have had every intention of leaving the Dungeon Alliance the moment my memories came back. Nevertheless, she calmly brought her dissatisfaction under control. “I think we ought to run after Palinchron immediately. We can take down that Guardian some other time. Lorwen Arrace is clearly an amicable, good-natured guy, so we can let him be and nothing bad will happen. Palinchron's the opposite. The more we leave him to his own devices, the worse things get for us.”

“I know. Trust me, I'm not letting him get off scot-free. The quicker we go after him, the better. But that's exactly why I don't wanna make the mistake I made back with Alty. If we go full steam ahead, it'll be that day all over again.”

She frowned at the way I was dodging the crux of the argument. What I'd said sounded contradictory, and she was starting to get irritated. “What're you

talking—”

But I wouldn't yield. “Lastiara, believe in me. Because I believe in you.”

I wasn't the same as before; I wasn't hiding it from her because I didn't trust her. It was *because* I trusted her that I was keeping mum. I wasn't going to leave it up to somebody else, but neither was I going to soldier on by myself. I'd learned my lesson. The fastest way forward was to help and be helped by trustworthy comrades. And this was me putting that lesson into effect.

After hearing my earnest plea, Lastiara affected a sigh. “Guess it can't be helped. If you really insist, I suppose I'll follow along. I don't really get what you're up to, but...I'll throw the match for you for the time being.”

She faced the presenter. “Oh Mr. Emcee-ee! Team Lastiara's conceding. And the other team's acknowledged it, so count it as a loss for us.”

The presenter seemed bewildered. The people in the stands, who likewise had no idea what was going on, had been buzzing all this time.

“Um, what became of the ‘knocking the symbol’ battle?”

“Oh, that? I think my bangle was the first to break. It's true that they broke at almost the same time, though, so we had to talk it out at the end to decide who won. That's why Team Lastiara's conceding now. As much as it stings to admit it, he beat us.”

“Wait, what? You're *conceding*?”

“Sure am.”

“But you seem perfectly capable of continuing to me... In fact, you're the ones who healed Mr. Kanami...”

“Could you acknowledge what both teams are agreeing on, please?” she said, her tone domineering and vaguely threatening. “My team has come to the conclusion that we can't beat Kanami. So we're conceding. What's unusual about that?”

“Y-Yes, understood. That's no problem. The winner of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball semifinals between the North and West Areas is Mr. Aikawa Kanami!”

The announcement resounded throughout the venue. With that, I'd made it to the finals. This was the first step.

The buzzing in the audience increased, and the grumbling was getting worse and worse. They must have thought it was a tie only for the match to be decided through a discussion. Talk about a severely disappointing outcome. While I felt for them, I wanted them to be patient with me here. To me, the Brawl semifinals were nothing more than an opening act. My real battle was about to begin, and I couldn't afford to burn through my candle right now.

As the end of the match was announced and the audience booed, I approached Lastiara and whispered, "Listen well, Lastiara. There's a lot I'd like you to do so that we can emerge from the Brawl unscathed."

I conveyed what I wanted to say conscientiously and unhurriedly, while also keeping the crucial bits close to the vest. I knew that I was making an unreasonable request of her, but Lastiara seemed to trust me, nodding silently as she listened.

I was relieved. Lastiara, who'd regained herself, had placed her trust in me. And I, in turn, could place all my trust in her. That made me so, so happy.

Guess that's what it means to have a true friend...

But this was not the time to indulge in emotion. I had to proceed with the plan and make sure it worked. I'd regained my memories and reunited with my friends who'd been waiting for me for so long. Now it was time to save the *rest* of my comrades: Snow, Lorwen, and Reaper. And this time, I refused to mess up. I'd bring the Brawl to an end with a smile on everyone's faces.

With that vow in my heart, my true battle commenced.

Afterword

Volume 5.

It's Reaper who's the main focus of the cover this time around, and it's pushing the envelope, isn't it? By the way, Reaper's design is my favorite. I won't divulge why, but it's my favorite. Just looking at it makes my heart feel nice and clean.

As for the contents of this volume, we finally got to the scene I was anticipating the most. As always, it managed to fit within the page count (if only barely), so I'm really happy about that. However, the fight against the Guardian of Floor 30, which can be said to be our hero's second redemption arc, awaits us in the next volume.

The segment of the story that takes place in Laoravia has a lot of points of similarity to the segment of the story that took place in Vart and Whoseyards (volumes 1 to 3). These two parts could be called two sides of the same coin, and the way the heroines and the Guardian are treated, in particular, are perhaps the most striking parallel. How will our now more mature protagonist overcome things? I think that'll be the highlight of what's to come. I'm sure that in volume 6, he'll show us how different he's become from volume 3 Kanami.

Talking about the illustrations and highlights in the afterword like this is great and all, but *Dungeon Dive* does have a serious problem, which is that the story has slowly deviated from the title. As the title suggests, I want to keep playing with the heroines in the Dungeon, but the boss monsters of this story keep gallivanting outside of it, so I couldn't help but get a volume without any Dungeon diving in it. Allow me to sincerely apologize. I'm truly sorry.

I get the feeling that in every afterword I write, I'm always apologizing. That's what I get for wanting to write about not just the Dungeon, but also our protagonist's character growth and troubles. I just need to remind myself, *remember to think before choosing the title of the series*. This is what happens when you don't. I'll be more careful next time, I swear...

But this will be my last apology. After all, the next volume is the segment that I, having been writing the web version this whole time, wanted in print form the most. I think it's a volume I can put forward with my head held high.

That's right. I'll show you, dear readers—volume 6 will contain an apology-free afterword or my name isn't Tarisa Warinai!

Lastly, I'd like to thank all the readers who paved the way for these five volumes. I've only come this far because of people like you who've kept reading. Of course, I'd also like to thank my editors for always being there to help, as well as my illustrator, Ukai-san. Clutching these five volumes tightly in hand, I wish to express my gratitude to everyone who was involved in the making of *Dungeon Dive*, and I'm itching to work on the next part.

So long for now!



DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

5

By Tarisa Warinai Illustrated by Saki Ukai

WITH THE CROWD'S EYES
ON HER, SHE GRACEFULLY
STUCK THE LANDING AT THE
CENTER OF THE ARENA.

SHE WAS THE
MOST EXALTED AND
REVERED GIRL IN ALL
THE ALLIANCE.

SHE WAS
LASTIARA
WHOSEYARDS.



Bonus Short Stories

Brawl Qualifiers

The place? A multipurpose arena in northeastern Laoravia. The mostly unremarkable circular stone edifice was neither very big nor very small, and within its walls lay an extensive space for the purposes of duels and training drills and the like. But at the moment, that spacious ground felt pretty cramped. I could say it even felt stifling.

“So, we’re here for the qualifying rounds for the Brawl, but...”

“Wow! The air’s so abuzz, it feels nice and comfy somehow!”

I, Lorwen, Thief of Earth’s Essence, had just taken my companion, Reaper, all the way to the sand-blanketed central space of this arena, but we were surrounded by loads and loads of boorish, filthy characters. They were all wielding heavy-duty weapons and eagerly awaiting the start of the preliminary bouts for the biggest tournament in the Alliance, commonly known as the Brawl. Just participating was a high honor, and the brutes were radiating bloodlust so palpable they might bite each other’s heads off over a ticket to enter the ring.

Unlike seeded contestants such as Kanami, we were taking part as part of the ordinary bracket of hopefuls, which was why we had to show up at the site of the qualifiers. My disciple, Kanami, was at a real-life nobles’ ball today, so I only had Reaper to accompany me.

Reaper’s eyes were sparkling, surrounded as she was by such interesting adults.

“Reaper, that buzzing in the air’s called bloodlust and hostility,” I said helpfully. “Best remember the sensation so you can respond to attacks from your blind spot and afar.”

“Ah, so this sorta thing’s called bloodlust! Wait, but when I fought you, the air

never once got this way, did it?”

“It’s part of the art of the sword. I actively take care that the air doesn’t get like that. Obviously.”

“Wow. You’re so skilled, Lorwen.”

“It ain’t just the sword; it’s a combat fundamental. Unless you learn to attack without palpable bloodlust, you’ll never be able to lay a finger on me, so work on that.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best. So, I gotta hold in the buzzy, frizzling feeling, huh? Here goes... Nngh! Hrnnn!”

She moved behind me and tried to touch me with a very silent motion. I smoothly dodged her using my Responsiveness skill. Clearly, she was having fun because she kept trying to touch me on the back over and over again. As a result, we had a ball with a friendly, carefree game of ghost tag in the arena. And as you might expect, the assorted toughs weren’t exactly looking at us with good vibes. After all, every participant here meant business, and a number of them must have been putting their lives on the line.

“Whoa, seriously? He brought a little kid here?”

“I ain’t never seen anybody younger than an Eltraliew Academy student here. I’m guessin’ she’s the youngest.”

“Tch! This ain’t no place for a tyke to be. Gets on my nerves...”

They weren’t whispering their caustic remarks or hiding their tut-tuts. Somebody nearby spat in our direction.

“Wha-huh?” said Reaper, standing still and scanning the crowd. “I’m not welcome here?”

“Nah, you’re not. But don’t worry, they’re all good people. They’re urging you to go home so you don’t get hurt.”

A thousand years ago, when I was Reaper’s height, not one person had bothered to stop me when I had entered a tournament in a certain nation. Back in that era, it was considered only natural for somebody to stake their life to open a path forward if they were to survive, no matter how small they were.

Compared to days past, this tournament was ridiculously warm and soft. The people around us were taking an interest in her and behaving responsibly enough to spout abusive language just because she was small. That alone would serve to drastically lower the death count. What a wonderful culture. What a wonderful custom! This world devoid of dark clouds in the sky was so full of deeply moving sights, and all it took to see them was to live as normal.

“Huh. So they’re all good people.”

“That’s right.”

We two time travelers from a thousand years ago nodded to one another as we basked in the enmity shooting at us from all sides. People were murmuring about whether we were right in the head, but since they weren’t wrong per se, we didn’t answer. We continued to draw more and more eyes in our corner of the arena, and after about an hour of waiting, the presenter rolled up, signaling the preliminaries were on at last.

The rules were bland and boring. Maybe they had to be when there were this many people. They were making everybody in the space fight in an indiscriminate free-for-all. When I heard that the last three teams to remain standing won, I felt a mite disappointed. I’d gotten my hopes up for something more elaborate than that. But when the presenter explained that there were so many applicants this year that this was all the time they had for, I had to give that to them.

The moment the explanatory address ended, the fight began. Everyone on the cramped battlefield brandished their weapons, bracing themselves for incoming attacks. Since the name of the game was to remain standing, a lot of teams decided to be on the defensive rather than stand out. Fighters glared at one another for a while before, little by little, teams who were working out strategies stepped into motion.

“Sitting here staring really ain’t my style. What say we get moving?” one guy asked.

There were a fair amount of promising teams. Reaper and I were watching them from the edge.

“Hey, what’re we doin’? We takin’ some down, or we watchin’ and waitin’?”

another chimed in.

“We’ll do both. How ’bout we start with the team with the tyke? The two o’ them at the edge over there.”

A certain team had us in their sights. It seemed they saw us as easy pickings. While the weak getting taken out first was a matter of course, no matter the time or place, that team was a bit unlucky.

“Hold up,” I told them. “You’re better off not underestimating Reaper here. Appearances aside, she’s several times stronger than you guys, and several times more ruthless too.”

If there was no avoiding being targeted, I’d play fair and warn people about the power gap. Predictably, that just made the veins in the foreheads of everybody around us bulge.

“I thought he was nuts, but not *this* nuts...”

“He lookin’ down on us?”

“You tellin’ me that kiddie’s stronger than us?”

Exposed to a sizzling bath of invigorating bloodlust, I plopped myself down and provoked them all again.

“I was planning to fight by myself today, but now that I know just how good-natured our opponents are, I can watch without having to worry. I leave it to you, Reaper.”

Reaper versus everybody else in the qualifiers. That ought to make for a good match. I felt bad for the rest of the participants, but I was putting this learning opportunity for my buddy before their needs.

“Huh? Lorwen, you’re saying I’m allowed to fight?” Her face lit up—I’d told her to behave herself.

“Don’t mind if ya do. Only, make sure ya don’t get injured. Oh yeah, and Kanami said not to injure any opponents either. If a single drop of blood falls, you lose.”

“Aww, I can’t injure *them*?”

“Apparently. Before we left, he said it till he was blue in the face. Now then...I can do it no problem. I wonder if you can too?”

“O-Of course I can! I totally can too!” She pulled a black sickle from out of nowhere and stepped in front of me. I was still sitting on the ground. “I just need to make them all faint without wounding them, right?! I can do that no problem, same as you!”

Surely you don’t need telling, but that little assertion only made our opponents’ anger run hotter. Those forehead veins were threatening to burst. Who could blame them? One guy was on his ass and a little kid had just said she’d take it easy on them. Nobody with a measure of confidence in their own prowess would take that lying down. We’d provoked them and then some, and now they were coming swinging at Reaper.

I watched from behind. The qualifiers were over in a jiffy; in the end, there was only one possible outcome, no matter how hard they tried. Only a single team came out on top. And the Laoravian cityscape was soon full of participating fighters muttering how impossible it had been as they headed home. I felt a tad forlorn as I watched them trudge off. It reminded me a wee bit of my former life, and I was about to frown. But...

“Yay! We won the preliminaries, Lorwen!”

Unlike back then, I had Reaper by my side. I wasn’t alone anymore.

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“Right? Bet you’re happy I’m around!”

Maybe that was all I had ever needed to be satisfied.

“Oh, definitely. I really am glad you’re with me, Reaper...”

But that sense of satisfaction vanished and gave rise to lingering attachments at the same time, although I’d only realize it another day.

Glenn Walker’s Round 2

The Huura, the river between the countries of Eltraliew and Laoravia, was where the Brawl had begun at last. It was already Round 2, but since I was

seeded, this was actually my first match. With the sun shining radiantly, it was perfect weather for gladiatorial bloodshed.

Standing in the center of the arena I was so familiar with, I was catching the cheers of my fans from all over the Alliance. I knew I was essentially a circus animal, but I responded with a polite smile. That was my job. And it was also my obligation.

A small distance away, the presenter of the Brawl was introducing the fighters.

“Challenging the strongest man in our Dungeon Alliance stands a team of hunters who’ve made a name for themselves on the mainland: Avalanche Blow! I heard that over there, that band of adventurers’ popularity is on par with Lord Walker’s! Can they manage to poke holes in *the strongest* using the arrows at their backs?!”

He’d introduced me—“the strongest”—before them. I wasted no time walking up to my opponents, trading words of greeting with them with a beaming smile on my face.

“I’m Glenn Walker. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

“Please allow us to learn from you, sir. Tales of your valor have reached the mainland.”

“Ha ha, they have, have they?”

Tales of my nonexistent valor. The fact that they’d reached the other side of the ocean made me smile wryly. My opponents must have taken that as a sign that I saw them as no sweat, because they frowned a little.

I calmly stared at their faces. Every one of them had big frames, and they were really giving off hunter vibes what with the light-green and earth-colored clothing, the curved swords at their waists, and the bows they were carrying on their backs. It made me wonder.

I get that they said they’re a team of hunters, but can they really afford to be wearing stuff that screams “hunter” that loudly? What if their mark notices that they’re hun—

“You won’t believe this, folks! Among the monsters Avalanche Blow has hunted is a dragon-type! A small one, but a dragon nonetheless! Lord Walker may be a dragon slayer, but he can’t let his guard down against them!”

Oh, so they hunt monsters, not people. Ha ha ha. Did my mind really just jump to the type whose work involves hunting people? Boy, that’s some late-stage brain rot.

“Something wrong, Lord Walker?” Seeing me grinning like that, the subordinates who’d become my comrades in arms called out to me.

“I’m fine. Remember, I need to put on a performance during the match, so don’t get involved until I say so. I can probably take them by myself.”

We settled on the program out of earshot of our opponents. I was a scout specializing in little tricks, but the narrative cast me as a hero possessed of overwhelming strength, and I had to put on a front during the match to that effect. It was a whole big thing.

“Now then, may Match 3 of the west area of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball commence!”

The battle was on. On my side, I was out front by myself. On their side, the leader was alone at the back of their formation. I approached them breezily, like I was taking a stroll. To tell the truth, when I fought people rather than monsters, I felt at ease. If Avalanche Blow were pros at fighting monsters, I was a pro at fighting people. If you asked me, there wasn’t a ghost of a chance I could lose in a match with rules.

In the face of my breezy stride, the two at the front of the opposing team kept their composure, coolly brandishing their swords and breaking into a run.

“Time to strike!”

“Right! Let’s run our strat!”

That level of grit was to be expected of guys who’d honed their mettle through fighting monsters. This wasn’t enough to leave them feeling shaken. That said, they’d absolutely never reach me. Not when their line of thought was that shallow.

“What the?! How’d they...”

“It can’t be!”

By the moment the two enemies and I had crossed paths, their swords were in my hands. It was a thievery technique I was used to, but one that left *them* flabbergasted.

The presenter jumped in. “Wh-What a trouncing, folks! At a tournament of this caliber, stealing the enemy’s weapon isn’t something you witness very often! His skill with the sword is fearsome indeed, but that’s the strongest for you! That’s the hero of the Dungeon Alliance, Glenn Walker, for you!”

It wasn’t my skill with the sword. It was my skill with pilfering...

I got the feeling the favoritism was a little much. Management may have ordered the presenter to hype me up, but I’d have liked him to have toned it down a notch.

“Chief! We’ll box him in! Don’t hesitate to shoot!”

That state of affairs must have snapped my opponents back to their senses; the two whose swords I’d swiped came rushing at me again. However, thinking that simplistically would never get them anywhere against me. Coming into the match so sloppily, they could attack me till the cows came home and would still never be able to kill me. If I could have, I’d have taught them a lesson or two by killing them, but I resisted the urge and settled for capturing them instead. I fetched a length of rope from inside the breast of my clothes and tied them up the instant they ran by me. It took me a second, if that. As long as I could predict their movements, I could do the deed in the space of a breath.

My eyes met the eyes of my last remaining opponents, the leader who was training his bow on me. His bowstring drawn to the limit, and he let his arrow fly at me.

I didn’t bother stepping aside. With the skills in my arsenal, there was no way a projectile could hit me from that distance. I ignored the arrow and retrieved a dagger from inside the breast of my clothes before hurling it at full power. The dagger and the arrow intersected in the air. The arrow cut a single hair from my head, while my dagger severed his bowstring.

The leader's eyes opened wide. He must have been sure he was going to hit the bull's eye. He probably figured that at a distance, a hunter like him had the advantage. But reality begged to differ.

"M-Mr. Emcee...we lose." The man was calm enough to understand he was no match for me. It appeared he wasn't the type to fight a losing battle. I'd been thinking about how to liven up the match even more, but it ended prematurely.

"And that's the match! It ended the way folks were saying it would, but for the battle to be *that* one-sided! That's another huge win for our singular hero, Glenn Walker! He advances to Round 3!"

Cheers suffused the arena, and I gave the crowds the smile they wanted out of a "hero." In the end, I'd been able to pull a win without having to use much of my techniques. If the enemy had me on the ropes, I'd have to rely on my actual wheelhouse—daggers and poisons—to fight, and that was a fighting style nobody wanted to see in the "strongest," so I was extremely grateful.

It was as the so-called strongest hero that I had to face that Kanami boy in the finals. I needed to climb my way up through the tourney as the idealized hero the spectators had in their heads. And I couldn't let this tournament escape my grasp.

If I'm not fast enough...Ms. Snow won't last much longer.

If I saved anyone at all, I was going to save Ms. Snow. Such was the mission of the one who inherited the title of "the strongest."

As I recalled Mr. Will, the previous holder of that title, I followed in his footsteps by continuing to smile amid the dizzying glory. And I kept that smile, which contained traces of grief and sorrow spilling through, pasted on my face.



Having returned to the waiting room following the match, I turned my smile off right away and went over what to do next with a Walker Clan chamberlain.

"Another bit of work behind us," I said. "So, who's my next opponent?"

"A swordsman by the name of Lorwen from the general bracket, sir."

“Lorwen? Can’t say I’ve heard the name before.”

“I haven’t either, sir. From what I’ve heard, though, he’s very formidable indeed.”

“I’ll gather us a little intel, why don’t I? Even if we don’t know who he is, I wanna at least see what weapons he uses from afar.”

“You can leave a small task like that to us—”

“Nah, I’ll do it. I’m the best suited to work like this.”

I wanted to save myself some waiting, and a specialist like me could gather information both safely and speedily without needing prior preparation. Silly as it sounded, that was my mindset when I went to spy on the contestant called Lorwen. But all it took was for my eyes to meet his for me to instantly understand. When I’d seen the tourney matchups, I’d thought my role was to lose to Kanami in the finals, but I’d been wrong. Because in the next match, I’d learn that as a monster—a truly fitting actor for the role of villain—Lorwen Arrace was more worthy than I was to make it to the finals as Kanami’s opponent.

For the first time in ages, the smile on my face was one of actual delight.

I Want a Pet

A little while after Lorwen and Reaper settled in as guests of Epic Seeker, we had a chat to remember.

“Hey, guys! Can I keep a pet here?!”

A girl entered the guild’s main office that morning. She was the pure-hearted little death specter I’d found in the Dungeon, and her name was Reaper.

“You can’t,” said Lorwen.

“Course not,” I agreed.

“Probably not,” said Snow after a pause.

“You’re kidding! *No one’s* with me?!”

She must have been expecting at least one of us to give her the okay.

“Reaper,” said Lorwen, “you’re not old enough to keep a pet. That kinda thing comes after you absorb more everyday knowledge than you’ve got now.” He stated the grown-up thing to say like he was her guardian. Actually, as of recently, he *was* her guardian for all intents and purposes.

“What Lorwen said. Please drop it, Reaper.”

Keeping a pet in this office? That was going to be a no for a variety of reasons.

“But wait, hold on! The pet I picked up’s *super* cute! This is fate, I know it!”

“Let the poor thing be,” replied Lorwen.

“P-Pretty please?! I’m begging you here, let’s keep the pet together!”

The scene was straight out of any normal household in my world, complete with the lovable little daughter pleading with her father figure. Reaper pulled on the hem of our clothes and stared up with those tear-filled eyes. As you might expect, Lorwen and I wavered. Enduring her continue-staring-at-us strategy, I quickly caved.

“Rgh, hmm... Maybe we do keep the thing on a trial basis? To teach Reaper about the sanctity of life?”

Lorwen caved too. “You’re the boss of this room, so if you’re okay with it... If it’s nothing too big, then it might even be good for her emotional development.”

We were both so susceptible to a little kid’s honest pleading. Naturally, Snow wasn’t having it.

“Aren’t you two being awfully soft on her?”

We averted our eyes absurdly fast. Unable to bear Snow’s gaze for long, I hurried to ask Reaper for more information.

“So, uh, what sort of pet did you pick up?”

“Ah, just look out the window. It didn’t come inside, so I’m having it wait in the garden.”

“It didn’t come inside?”

Puzzled, I approached the window Reaper was pointing to, and what she

meant became immediately apparent. Squatting right by a big tree in Epic Seeker's garden was a beast covered in thick fur.

"Is that...a dog?"

From this distance, I couldn't tell what else it could be. Only, its size was a bit... No, it was actually pretty huge, so that question mark crept in there.

Snow looked through the window too. "Oh, that's a monster. A common one in the plains to the left of the Dungeon Alliance. It's a Bound Dog. Those things've carved themselves a high rank in the traveler-cause-of-death rankings."

Now that I knew it was a monster liable to leave a body count, I used my menu-sight on it.

【MONSTER】Bound Dog: Rank 6

"Uh, Reaper? How exactly did you bring that thing all the way here?!"

"I used darkness, all sneaky-like! Like this!" Black mist came out of her fingers, and she smiled proudly.

I had no choice. I had to execute my duties as guildmaster. "All right, I'm gonna go kill that monster real quick. Wait here, Reaper."

"No hesitation, huh?! Hold on! Wait! I'll take proper care of it!"

"Okay, let's say you do... You planning to learn about the sanctity of life through the deaths of our guild members?"

If I left it to its own devices in such a place, unbeknownst to the guild, one or more would meet their demise at its jaws.

"It's okay! My pupper won't attack anybody! I swear! Come with me!" Reaper's confidence seemed absolute. In order to prove it, she jumped from the window and descended to the garden outside.

"Wha— Hey! Come back here and stay put!" I said, jumping down from the window myself.

Lorwen and Snow followed suit. That height was piddly to us, so the window made for a great exit point. When we all landed in the garden, the Bound Dog got to its feet. It really was enormous; its head was big enough to swallow people whole, and its teeth were like white daggers. Keeping it as a pet would be more dangerous than keeping a lion. But Reaper presented a hand to the monster, her guard lowered.

“Gimme a paw!”

She was trying to get it to do tricks. At that moment, Lorwen and I grimaced, hit with a discomfort that only the two of us with high-level perception abilities sensed. The Bound Dog was supposed to be a monster, but here it was, proffering its giant paw as ordered.

“See?! Tell me it isn’t fine!” she said, a contented smile on her face.

As the one among us most acquainted with the fearsomeness of a Bound Dog, Snow was taken aback. She stared at the obedient monster with curiosity. “Huh? What’s going on here? I’ve never heard of a monster listening to a human’s orders. Did you just make a huge discovery? A name-in-history discovery? How do we credit Kanami with it...”

What she’d said wasn’t lost on me, but first, there was something I needed to verify.

“Lorwen, don’t tell me...”

He was standing next to me, his expression as serious as mine. “Yeah... Listen, Snow, that ain’t something humans can learn to do, so you’re better off not singing about it from the rooftops.” He made it clear to her that this wasn’t a technique mere humans could emulate and it wasn’t a phenomenon that would serve the interests of the Dungeon Alliance.

“To my eyes,” I added, “it looks like it’s the fear of death that’s got the monster chained to her whims. Maybe it’s mistaking Reaper for a higher-ranked monster? Or could there be some other reason?”

“Man, for a monster to be this frightened...” said Lorwen. “What on earth did you do, Reaper?”

“Huh? Oh, I just kept it in the darkness and chatted with it while being careful

not to let up my palpable bloodlust.”

Now that’s just pure torture. You’re telling me the poor thing had to bathe in the unending bloodlust of a death specter within a pall of all-occluding darkness?

I was aghast, and Lorwen sighed sorrowfully. I drew the blade I’d borrowed from Epic Seeker. She was a monster of sorts herself, so she had to understand its true fearsomeness. I wasted no time telling her that keeping the thing wasn’t in the cards. “I knew it. It seems it’s just too soon for you to keep a pet, Reaper. While I feel for that monster a little, I can’t not kill it. No carelessness allowed around them.”

“Awww,” she muttered, hanging her head. “And I took the time to talk to it and bring it here...”

“You can’t blame us, Reaper. It’s just too dangerous. Keep something smaller as a pet.”

“Something smaller? But they always run when they catch sight of me.”

“That’s only because your bloodlust is leaking,” Lorwen replied. “You’re too intense, but that can be concealed one way or another with enough training. I’ll coach ya later, so bear with it till then.”

“Wait, what? You’re gonna coach me, Lorwen? In that case...fine.” Reaper acquiesced more readily than I would’ve thought. And so the quarrel over the pet subsided without much ado.

Lorwen proceeded to painlessly snuff out the Bound Dog in the garden. After everything was said and done, I got the feeling that Reaper had made all that fuss in order to sound Lorwen out. Back then, I’d chalked it up as nothing more than a kid being a kid. It was during the Brawl that I learned I’d been mistaken.

Days later, a Reaper who could now control her own bloodlust would give me hell in battle.

Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 5

Cutting to the chase, the duel between me and Karamia Arrace ended in a draw. I'd made such elaborate preparations and expended all of my savings, knowing that if I lost, I'd die of starvation. I'd taken all sorts of magic tools into the duel only for it to end in a draw.

I was brooding in a corner of the academy's dining hall when...

"Senpai!"

Liner seemed oddly amped up as he called out to me. The result of the match must have been *that* unbelievable.

"I heard the rumors of how the duel turned out. You're incredible, senpai! I mean, you managed a draw against Council President Karamia, who's broken past the Level 20 ceiling... Her level's twice as high as mine! Twice!"

"Uh, sure, I guess," I replied dispiritedly. "Are rumors already making the rounds?"

"Yes, they are. Word is, it must have been a draw, because the rankings didn't change even though the duel had to have taken place. Man, I'm relieved, because to tell you the truth, I thought today would be your funeral. You really are amazing, senpai."

My face turned pale. My funeral? That was no laughing matter. From where I was standing, I had yet to fully escape that possible fate in the near future.

"Huh...I see. So, did you hear any rumors about what happened?"

"No, not really. Annius did too solid a job administering the duel for that."

Annius had served as a witness for yesterday's duel, and she'd done her level best to make sure what had happened didn't leak out. Even though she'd told me she wouldn't favor one side or the other too strongly, she still took action for my sake.

Talk about a friend worth having. I'll worship the ground she walks on later.

"Well, it was a duel and everything, but I only managed a draw through super

underhanded means, so...hearing you call me amazing over and over...it's not great."

"Ah, I figured that's how you did it. Considering all the preparations you made in the lead-up, I reckoned that had to be what you did."

As I explained my reasons, my face remained white as a sheet. "I won't lie; if we fight again, I'll lose for sure. I won't be able to prepare the same magic tools a second time. Man oh man, my wallet's really bleeding. Like, I'm bleeding out here. I splurged so much, and I haven't even got a W to show for it."

The Elt-Order dueling system was, in essence, my source of income. My all-or-nothing gamble had ended up in a draw, so that money was cut off. I no longer had the funds to buy the ingredients and components necessary to create magic tools. And honestly, it seemed like the end of the rope for my academy life in general. At this rate, I'd be forced to sponge off my friend Annus in earnest, and as a friend, I wanted to avoid that if possible.

As I lamented pissing away what little money I had, I grumbled about the duel to Liner. "Argh, like, shit, dude. This is the pits. I swear, that Karamia. Anybody with a heart would've thrown the match for me at that point. It was going to plan until the end... How'd she even pull a draw after all that? I mean, that's just screwy. Dammit. Ugh..."

"I hate to say it, but you *were* fighting a monster. Her level's in the twenties."

"You ain't kidding. She was a damn monster. She's ranked third, and I knew beating her would mean a big payout, so I very much fought to win, but then she recovers *because her skin's inhumanly tough*? It's like, come on. *That's* why I got a draw? Really?"

Just remembering the closing bit of the duel was galling. The sabotage operation starting the day before had been executed flawlessly; the smoke screen and caltrops worked wonders in the moment, and the magic tool-powered traps proved a huge success. The magic-gem spell that served as my main firepower landed a direct hit, and I followed that up with an attack utilizing sleep drugs. And yet she'd still taken the fight to a draw.

You've gotta be kidding me...

Then a voice said, “Indeed. Let me assure you, there’s no way I could be pleased with a *draw* either. Thanks to you, some of my favorite clothes got tears in them. Now take responsibility and pay for the damages.”

“Yeah, exactly, it was all going so well until after I melted her clothes. But the crazy bastard went and ran through that sea of acid with her skin exposed—”

“Don’t you worry. You’ll be taking responsibility for marring me while you’re at it, Kanami Eltraliew.”

“Huh?”

I turned to look at the source of that elegant voice. It was a girl with light-pink hair. Karamia Arrace. She was standing there with a smile on her face.

The very next moment, my world turned black. It was only natural that if a Level 20 monster of a girl came this close, a Level 1 schlub like me could never put up a fight. Liner, being Level 10, was able to put up something of a fight, but —

“Geh! I’ve got nothing to do with— Gwah!”

He fainted too. We could sense we were being dragged somewhere before we lost consciousness.



Having been taken to an unfamiliar room, we were woken. The room lacked windows and was made of cold stone. At a guess, we were in a basement. As much as I didn’t want to think it, it might even have been something akin to a torture chamber. That was where we were tied up and detained.

“Um, so, do you have some sort of business with me, Ms. Karamia Arrace?” asked Liner, who was behind me. “I don’t have anything to do with that guy, so...”

So much for being my friend. But enough about the always-caught-up-in-trouble Liner. First, I had to secure my own safety.

“Yes, I do. That’s why I brought you here,” she replied.

“D-Do you mean a rematch?” I asked.

“I do want a rematch, certainly. But I promised Ms. Annus that there would be none even if I didn’t win, so I’m afraid I can’t.”

Nice going, Annus! You made her promise that?! I’m gonna lick the ground you walk on later!

“As such, I have no choice but to exact my revenge up close and personal.”

What’s the big idea, Annus?! This ain’t what you told me before! Am I seriously gonna bite it here?!

“Kanami, I can make use of you. And as such, I’ve come up with a different point of compromise.”

“You can use me?”

It was then I realized she was different from yesterday. The most evident proof of that change was how she was addressing me by name.

“How should I explain it... You have a creative thinking that we lack. To be frank, yesterday’s duel threw me for a loop.”

Unlike before, I felt like I could have a proper conversation with her. And the fact that I’d shown my mettle in our duel probably had a whole lot to do with that.

“The way you did whatever it took to win the fight elicited deep sympathy in me. And more than anything, the magic tools you made are a great fit for my combat style.”

Goosebumps. Karamia Arrace’s magic energy brushed my whole body gently. It felt like the willies that seize a prey animal when a reptile licks it.

She looked me dead in the eyes. “Kanami, use all of your skills for my benefit. Do that and I’ll wipe the slate clean of all your incivility.”

I was not expecting *that*. “What, for real? You’d wipe the slate clean for me?”

“Ah, actually, I don’t want it *totally* wiped. Let’s make your crime of touching my soft, fair skin a separate matter. That, I can’t forgive so easily.”

“You know what? That’s fair.”

Putting that aside, this development meant that I no longer had anything

impeding my ability to duel people. As long as I could earn money through Elt-Order battles, I could extricate myself from this pit.

“Join my faction and prove to the student body that you work under me. Let’s make that our compromise for now.”

That turn of events made the rumored draw easy to explain. Now the story was that Karamia had acknowledged my strengths and cut the duel short in order to fold me under her umbrella. That way, we could both salvage our pride.

“Ms. Karamia, if I may ask one question. Does this mean you won’t meddle with my Elt-Order duels?”

“Yes, that’s what it means. Upon reflection, there’s no better system than this ‘Elt-Order’ affair to show the academy my power,” she murmured. “Initially, I was angry they started such a thing without my approval as Student Council President, but now, I think I ought to capitalize on it. I’ll be able to visit more violence upon all the students than I could have gotten away with using my authority as Council President alone. I’ll be able to rule over them through true fear.”

I got the feeling she’d morphed back into the Karamia I could not, in fact, have a proper conversation with.

“I wanna be this academy’s absolute sovereign,” she said, relating her dream while releasing suffocating amounts of magic energy.

I observed her with my dimensional magic and naked eyes. She looked beautiful in that moment. The disturbing stuff she’d said notwithstanding, she was a girl who’d set up a lofty perch for herself and was taking steps toward it, and that was at least a little attractive.

“Currently standing in my way are the beyond-rank Snow Walker, the ranked first Philty Walker, and the ranked second Elmirahd Siddark. I don’t care how you do it: give me the winning edge over them, the most accomplished students in academy history. Of course, once I’m sitting in first place, I’ll give you a little taste of the top. The headmaster is my enemy as well, so if it means setting him up, I’ll cooperate.”

Now that she'd brought up the headmaster, I'd lost any reason to turn her offer down. Perhaps she'd changed her tune compared to yesterday because she'd heard about my deal with him.

"If you swear to work under me...I have a *contract* for you."

She thrust a piece of paper before my eyes. It was a contract of employment. There were no regulations forbidding students from holding jobs. She wanted to hire me as a butler, to make it crystal clear where I stood. At this academy, chamberlains often enrolled so that they could attend to the nobles here, so it was perfectly plausible.

I skimmed the document. "'All the food, clothing, shelter, and necessary academy devices will be provided for you'?! And I'm allowed to use the lab too?!"

"Of course. That comes with the territory when you're close to me. When you're a 'friend.'"

This was huge. Having access to textbooks changed everything. It'd make it easier to go down the path of the magic tool-user. The path that yesterday's duel proved had promise. And most useful of all for tackling the Elt-Order was the fact that the magic tools I made during class would become mine to use.

"Liner, could you give me your two cents?" I asked my friend in the back. "The offer sounds too good to be true." I wasn't from this world, so I didn't know the nitty gritty stuff.

"Who, me? Well, I know you have your circumstances, so it can't be helped, but normally, that's something you'd decipher yourself. Don't come crying to me afterward..."

Liner was a noble. I had him give her contract a look-see, then signed it. And in all honesty, I had never really had the wherewithal to refuse in the first place.

"Starting today, you and Liner are part of my faction."

"Wait, not just him, but me too?! What?!"

Thus, I (and one other kid thrown in for good measure) became Karamia Arrace's underling. I received the greatest backer I could have received in order

to move up the Elt-Order ranks. All in all, I figured getting involved with her wasn't such a raw deal. Until, that is, I discovered in the not-too-distant future what a scam that contract was.

Unlike the me in that timeline next door, I wasn't used to getting fooled yet. I didn't know about the existence of unreasonable magical contracts, and I'd never before encountered the true depths of human malice and kindness. Karamia told me, the boy she'd just met, about her own dreams. And I didn't understand the true significance of that act. I didn't understand what she really meant when she called me her "friend."

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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 5

by Tarisa Warinai

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