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DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

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Chapter 1: The Part of the Brain That Judges What's Insane or Not Is Burnt to a Crisp

The battle with Mr. Hine was over. When Lastiara came to, Mr. Hine had sensed he was on the back foot and escaped. Thanks to that, I was now back on my feet. However, the sheer fatigue and a nasty headache had me tottering, and I was going through a bad case of the shakes to top it off. Had Lastiara taken just a little bit longer to wake up, these legs of mine might have gotten chopped off, and the terror and confusion flooded my brain, which refused to return to my normal modes of thought.

Upon seeing me in such a state, Lastiara shouted, "Sieg! Sieg, are you okay?!" She walked over to me even as she held her broken arm. It was bent in a gruesome way.

"I'm okay," I said, using a hand to stop her from straining herself on my behalf. "Don't shout about *me*... I'm more worried about *you*."

Judging by the way her arm was dangling, she was more grievously wounded than I was.

"More about *me*... OWW! Look at that; it's straight-up *broken*. Blestspell: *Full Cure*..." Immediately, her bone fracture was no more. "So, where'd that Hine go?"

"Mr. Hine? I managed to drive him off."

"You did? Phew... Gotta say, though, like, *ugh*. The heck was Hine *doing*?!"

Now that the spot of danger had gone away, Lastiara seemed relieved, though she did vent her anger about having been subjected to that horrendous turn.

"Beats me. Mr. Hine said nothing but shit that flew over my head before running off, so..."

"It flew over your head? So what did he tell you, then?"

“For starters, he wanted us to leave the Dungeon Alliance if he won the duel.”

At that, Lastiara frowned.

“Also, he called you fake.”

“He called me fake? Duh, of course I’m fake. It’s like, c’mon, really? After all this time?!” She scratched her head with her newly restored arm. It wasn’t often she showed her irritation so openly.

“Uhh...hold on; you admit you’re fake?” Clearly, she didn’t take umbrage at the term.

“I told you already. My body was created to be identical to Saint Tiara’s. So of course I’m fake. I don’t deny it.”

But that wasn’t the kind of “fake” Mr. Hine was talking about.

“I don’t think that’s what he meant by ‘fake.’ He didn’t mean it as in your body is artificial. He meant something more like your personality is. Like, your thoughts and feelings.”

“My personality? My thoughts and feelings? Artificial? I mean, I’ve been influenced by the people around me, sure, but so has everyone. I’m me, full stop.”

“Sure, I guess, but...”

In the face of her firm insistence, I couldn’t consider how she acted pure affectation or totally fake. But I also couldn’t ignore Mr. Hine’s words, given how vehement he had been. An anxiety I couldn’t express in words started pooling in the pit of my stomach. I told her the remark from Mr. Hine that had sparked the most anxiety of all in me.

“And to cap things off, he said that at this rate, you would die.”

“I’ll die?” She looked befuddled.

“That’s what he told me, anyway.”

“I’ll die...” Lastiara’s eyes were trained on the ground. “That’s what my Hine said?” she murmured.

Slowly, she raised her gaze and looked my way. All I could do was give a little

nod of assent. The dark depths of her eyes deepened. I got the feeling the madness that had quieted down as of late was leaking out again.

“I really have to wonder why, after all this time...” she whispered under her breath, her hand on her brow as she brooded, “even though it’s not long now...though I suppose it *is* like him...”

She was weirding me out. Normally, nobody would be so calm after being told they’d die, but it was even more than that. To be in such deep thought after being told she would die without being given a reason for it... It was as though she had an inkling of what that reason might be. I drew closer to ask her what it was, but before I could get close enough, she noticed me approaching and fretfully resumed our conversation.

“Ah, whoops, sorry, Sieg. I was just a bit taken aback, that’s all. It’s nothing. It’s all because of that silly Hine going around, saying strange stuff.”

Her face had returned to normal, devoid of discomposure. She wanted me to pretend the brooding hadn’t happened, and I didn’t know what to think. *Should I pry into Mr. Hine and Lastiara’s state of affairs? Or should I respect her will and pretend I didn’t see that?*

It took me some time to find an answer. Too long, since Lastiara was back to talking, her expression a cheery one.

“Anyways! The real problem is that dummy Hine putting the ends before the means. We need to go back to Whoseyards and have a chat with someone about his rash behavior,” she said as she walked towards the *Connection* portal.

Apparently, she was giving up on diving any further that day. She wanted to return home to Whoseyards and get some info on today’s odd episode.

“Shall I come with you down to Whoseyards?”

“Nah, that’s okay. It’s an internal issue. And let me apologize. The duels—they were supposed to be entertainment...”

That did little to dispel my worry. “But Lastiara, shouldn’t I be with you in case Mr. Hine attacks again? That’d spell trouble.”

“Nah, that only happened because I let my guard down after seeing one of my

own. Normally, I'd trounce him, so it's okay. You can tell by looking at our stats, can't you?"

It was true. If it was purely a question of stats, Lastiara beat him hands down. Almost all of her numbers exceeded his, and there was a gap regarding the skills they possessed as well. If they battled without any extenuating circumstances, she would definitely win.

But a moment ago, Lastiara had been defeated precisely because there *were* extenuating circumstances. If their fight had been one-on-one, Mr. Hine would have shut her down completely with his first move. With the right materials to make Lastiara drop her guard, he could functionally blank her, and that was a fact. My unease was failing to evaporate.

"It's okay," she insisted. "I won't get so careless again. Promise. So just wait for me."

With that, she stepped through the magic door, and I followed her into our home, where we were met with the sight of our living room, as well as the black-haired girl standing in our kitchen, Maria.

Maria got quite a jolt from our abrupt return, which was only natural, seeing as not even ten minutes had passed since we'd entered the Dungeon.

"Wait, what happened, you two? Aren't you back too soon?"

Maria stopped washing the dishes and came over to us.

"Oh, I just realized I forgot about something I have to do back where I'm at," said Lastiara as she neared the window. "I'm hitting Whoseyards today, so you two can hang out while I'm gone. You can, you know, go monster hunting or shopping or something." She waved goodbye before hastily popping out. "See ya later!"

She didn't leave us any time to reply. Maria regarded the way Lastiara was acting with suspicion and asked me if something had happened. I could only answer evasively and say it was no big deal. I didn't want to worry her. In fact, what I really wanted was for her to live her days divorced from rough stuff like Dungeon diving.

Now that the noisy one was gone, the house fell totally quiet.

“Miss Alty called me. What are you planning to do, Master?”

“Alty called you? Did she come here?”

“No. Early in the morning, while I was cooking, she called out to me through the fire of the burner. And now it’s about the scheduled time.”

“That girl’s everywhere. You can go, sure. I’m still diving, after all.” I wasn’t going to go with her to what I assumed was another magic lesson. I’d have nothing to do.

From the look of it, Alty was in contact with Maria through the fire in the kitchen. Once again, it sunk in just how overpowered Alty’s abilities were.

“Okay,” said Maria. “In that case, I’ll take my leave.”

“Yep. See you.”

With Maria stepping out, the house grew yet more silent. All by myself amid that quiet, I sat at the living room table and soothed my mind. The unexpected assault had left me reeling on the inside, so my first order of business was setting that straight. I took a whole lot of deep breaths—which resulted in a peculiar sense of isolation. I’d been left to my own devices for the first time in a while. As of late, I always had someone or other by my side. Right after I was dropped into this world, I was tormented by loneliness, but that crushing solitude had eased off at some point. And while I chastised myself for my selfishness, I also figured it was only human nature to covet what they didn’t have and find what they did have a chore. It made me painfully aware of how immature I was.

Basically, I’m just a kid. A kid who’s got his hands full thinking about himself.

If I were an adult, I’d have an adult’s emotional elbow room, and I’d have no excuse to keep putting off coming to grips with Maria’s feelings of infatuation indefinitely. And to bring up something that just happened, I’d have no excuse not to accompany Lastiara to Whoseyards. There’d be no rift between me and Lastiara, I’d be able to understand Mr. Hine’s desperate pleas, and Dia would never have gotten so grievously hurt...

But all of that was in the past. It was all immutable. Owing to my inexperience, I couldn’t deal with it aptly. I didn’t for a second think I’d made all

the most optimal choices. For one, I was regretting not insisting on accompanying Lastiara just now, even if it meant forcing it on her. But at the same time, I had to wonder whether it was my place to probe so deep into her personal life.

You know what? It's simple. I just don't have the power or the leeway to assess things properly. And as such, I need to get stronger.

I was determined. Instead of lamenting the past, I'd grow as a person, even if only a little. I passed through *Connection* and returned to Floor 20. Not that I was planning to explore floors this deep on my own, obviously. It wasn't that I thought I wasn't equal to the task, but it couldn't be denied that the danger factor went up compared to diving as a duo. And more than anything, if I ventured too deep without Lastiara, she'd give me an earful.

Accordingly, I decided to go monster hunting.

I wanted to get stronger. I couldn't resolve my mental immaturity in a day, but in this world, I *could* solve my physical weakness in a brief span of time. So of course, I'd start thinking about compensating for my inadequacies by training up my body. It couldn't hurt to use the time on my hands to level up so that I could make the best decisions—and so I wouldn't be creating yet more regrets to lament.

The first step was to select a suitable hunting ground. The strongest monsters I could hunt by myself without issue were the Furies on Floor 21. That didn't, however, make Furies the most efficient monsters for level grinding. They did dispense a lot of EXP, but they also enjoyed high natural bulk. Taking into account the amount of time it required to kill one, I couldn't say it was the most time-effective enemy.

The ideal monster was one I could kill with a single swing of my sword. In addition, the brevity of the time it took to find the monster and how many of them appeared at a time were important. Lastly, the less that was irregular about the monster, the better.

Through the experience I had cultivated back on Earth playing video games, I racked my brain for the best candidate. Thinking back upon the monsters I'd fought thus far, I concluded that the floor that struck the right balance was

Floor 15, so I headed there.

As expected, it proved to be the ideal hunting ground. There, I tore through various monsters without reprieve, amassing more and more EXP and magic gems. I turned off my soul and just killed, killed, killed. Since the enemies died in one sword swing, I didn't expend much MP to speak of. By leveling up, my max MP went up, which increased the amount of MP I recovered passively. Perhaps that was why I was able to keep hunting semi-permanently.

From time to time, Lastiara's and Maria's faces flashed through my mind. So too did the face of Alty, the one who wanted me to grant her wish. Even so, I kept on hacking and slashing. I had to go back to my world. My Great Return. And the best way to make it happen was the hunting that I was doing now. That was what I told myself as I devoted my time to level grinding, my headspace reverting to video game-mode.

I did it all the livelong day, as though what I was actually slicing up were my doubts and apprehension...



Having completed my hunt for the day, I returned home. In a day's time, I'd acquired more EXP than ever before. And needless to say, I'd met the required amount to level up. If Lastiara had been around, I'd have asked her to level me up, but to my chagrin, she wasn't back yet. I reckoned that since she'd made her way down to Whoseyards, she wouldn't be able to return that quickly.

Next, I looked for Maria, but she wasn't home either. Was it taking her that long to learn a new spell?

There's nobody here but me.

I looked out the window, wondering if I'd gotten home too early. The sun was beginning to set, the red afterglow beautiful. Oddly enough, a weird melancholy impelled me outside. In order to turn the EXP into an actual level up, I made use of my time and headed towards a church, as it made sense to level up as soon as possible. Also, since I'd picked up a wealth of magic gems, I had to convert them into money.

After that, I'll go shopping for a nice change of pace, and then I'll round things

off by visiting Dia.

The plan coalesced as I walked. I went down the hill and entered the townscape of Vart. Ambling down a main avenue during the nice sunset, I was assailed anew by a strange wave of depression. The road was decorated with magic gems on the edges, and they were twinkling red. Those faint lights stirred my heart, and I picked up my pace as if to run from my own sadness. In time, I reached the church.

Conveniently, when I entered, I saw a priest chanting, and various citizens were offering their prayers. They were already in the middle of the service. I didn't know if it'd still work if I didn't start praying from the beginning of the mass, but I sat at one of the pews in the back and prayed by imitation.

It was quiet, peaceful. I did look at my menu from time to time to see if I'd leveled up, only to find that I hadn't and resumed praying. Compared to Lastiara's level up spell, the process at a church took way longer. I killed time by checking my stats and looking at the windows. The stained glass of the winged women was so gorgeous as to be gaudy. I used Analyze on it, as an experiment, and was shocked to find it was all made of magic gem material.

While I was looking around the church, examining various things, the priest finished his chanting and bowed. The parishioners who'd been praying also bowed, then got up sporadically and started making for the exit. I remained seated and looked at my menu.

【STATUS】

NAME: AIKAWA KANAMI

HP: 345/372

MP: 221/653-200

CLASS: None

LEVEL 13

STR 7.82

VIT 8.02

DEX 9.35

AGI 12.01

INT 11.73

MAG 29.78

APT 7.00

EXP: 20235/35000

I had leveled up, but how to use my bonus points? Up until now, I'd felt compelled to spend them on HP and MP, but it was high time I considered other options. What was the next most necessary ability after durability and staying power? The firepower to kill monsters, I surmised. And thinking about it in simple terms, STR or MAG were probably connected to that.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 345/372

MP: 221/657-200

CLASS: None

LEVEL 13

STR 7.82

VIT 8.02

DEX 9.35

AGI 12.01

INT 11.73

MAG 30.08

APT 7.00

EXP: 20235/35000

My MAG increased by 0.30, and MP also increased, albeit slightly.

I was hoping for a sudden 1.00-point bump. Whether the other stats also changed in increments of 0.30, I wouldn't know until I allocated bonus points to them. I figured that next time, I'd try sussing out the rules by tossing a point or two into STR.

After my stats deliberations, I got to my feet, happy that I was stronger now. Then, just as I was about to exit the church, I froze in my tracks. A familiar knight was outside the door. I could sense it with *Dimension*.

It proved fortunate that I'd been on my guard, pouring power into *Dimension*, which itself was due to Mr. Hine attacking me that morning. Thanks to that, I was able to notice him before stepping outside.

【STATUS】

NAME: Palinchron Regacy

HP: 311/312

MP: 42/62

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 22

STR 7.90

VIT 9.87

DEX 11.89

AGI 5.67

INT 7.34

MAG 4.78

APT 1.80

INNATE SKILLS: Observant 1.45

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.89, Holy Magic 1.23, Martial

I delved into my memory and recalled the knight named Palinchron. I'd met him at the slave market. He was the sort of aloof type who liked getting a rise out of folks, so, no one I liked.

I searched the church for a different exit through *Dimension*, but the door suddenly opened and there the tall "knight" stood.

As before, he didn't look the part of a knight. His attire was something a merchant would wear and definitely wasn't easy to move in. The only thing one could point to as being knightlike was the sword at his waist.

Palinchron drew nearer, his dull brown hair swaying as he came over. "Well hello, Sieg, my lad. Fancy meeting you here."

I knew it was no coincidence. He'd been waiting for me outside the church. He'd entered because I had deployed *Dimension* over a wide area and searched for a different exit.

"Yeah, what a coincidence. You stalking me or what? Guess knights have loads of time on their hands, huh?"

Up until now, I'd used a more polite register when speaking with the knights, but for whatever reason, I couldn't be assed to do so with Palinchron.

"Ack, so you knew I was tailing you. Looks like you've got yourself a pretty good perception spell too. Your magic energy swelled up all of a sudden, so I got startled and ended up coming inside."

Did that mean he also had a perception spell? The chances were high that he was packing something similar to *Dimension*. His waiting for me in ambush and his tailing me must have been thanks to that spell. At a guess, it was linked to that skill of his called Spellrite. It was a category of magic that, in all my intelligence gathering thus far, I'd never heard of.

"So what do you want from me? You wanna duel me too?"

"Whoa now, let's not get violent here. I just came to have a chat. You drove back Sera, Ragne, and Hine, didn't you? Which means I'm no match either. I'm

neck and neck with old man Hopes for last place, after all,” he said with a shrug.

I wasn’t about to let my guard down. I kept a safe distance away from him and used Analyze on everything about him.

【STEEL SWORD】

Attack Power 2. A steel sword without anything else to it.

He had no equipment or items with which to fight beyond that sword.

Palinchron didn’t fail to notice that I’d raised my guard and was observing his person. He tried to break the tension.

“I’m being serious. I really, truly came to chat with you. This sword, I swiped from some knight lodging. Thing’s shabby.”

“Well, this morning, I was attacked even though the mood in the air was equally friendly, so...”

“Ha ha, I know. Hine, right? I came to check up on you because I know all about it.”

A smirking Palinchron took a seat at the edge of a pew. There were few people around at this point. The priest had slunk back inside. It felt unnatural, just the two of us in the church.

“If you know, then I shouldn’t have to tell you that my faith in knights has taken a nosedive. I don’t want you within sword range of me.”

“Fine, I’ll stay back. I promise. So would you talk to me?”

Palinchron put his sword on the floor, but his willingness to acquiesce only made me more dubious. There were other ways to battle besides swords. Still, it would have been untoward of me to refuse to talk to him after all that. Besides, I had questions for the Whoseyards people, my encounter with Mr. Hine among them. Left with no other choice, I sat at the opposite end of the pew.

“If it’s just a chat, then I don’t mind.”

“Much obliged. If I wasn’t able to even *talk* to you, I’d be in a bind, so that’s a relief. Tell me, how’s it going? Did you beat all of the Seven Celestial Knights besides me?”

Can’t say I saw that question coming. “No, not all of them. The ones I beat are...Ms. Radiant, Mr. Hopes, Raggie, and Mr. Hine. So four of them,” I said, seeing no reason to lie. This was information he could find out for himself if he was so inclined.

“Uh-huh, all right, gotcha,” he answered, in no way aggrieved that his colleagues had lost their duels.

“Let me ask you a question. Do you know why Mr. Hine did what he did?”

“Yep,” he replied instantly. “I sure do.”

I wasn’t expecting him to give it to me straight, so I was a tad taken aback.

“Don’t be so shocked,” he said, smiling. “You answered me honestly, so I answered in kind.”

“Just tell me already.”

“Sure thing, champ. I’ll keep it concise. It’s because, well—I wound him up. Over the past few days, I’ve been laying it on thick, saying stuff like ‘jolly gee whillikers, looks like our fair lady has been having so much fun with Siegy. She’s smiling and laughing like an ordinary girl!’ and ‘To think she’s gonna vanish after being taken for a ride since birth, without ever being able to lay hold of the smallest happiness... I mean, it may be for the sake of the nation, but I feel sorry for her,’ *et cetera et cetera*. And it worked like a charm, ‘cause boy, he got *frantic*. And then, just like that, he went to go save her. Ha ha, mission accomplished.”

He smiled the innocent smile of a kid who had pulled off some prank. The gap between that smile and what he’d just said left me dumbfounded.



“You...wound him up?”

“When it comes to instigating people, my reputation precedes me. And a lot of the spells I’ve acquired have to do with mental states too.”

“But why? Why did you—”

“Because it looked fun. And because I want the government of Whoseyards to pay a price too. Mostly, though, it’s because this is what I like to do.”

He laughed, and I had no words. This was my first time talking to someone who was so unvarnished about his wrongful intent, and I had no idea how to react. The fact that there were people who could drive others mad in such a happy-go-lucky manner frightened me.

“My turn to ask a question,” continued Palinchron. “Tell me, laddie, do you feel like saving our good mistress? Our Lastiara?”

Save Lastiara? Did that mean she was in peril?

Palinchron’s words were like venom. It was akin to getting force-fed a hit of acid. To me, Palinchron was a poison-spewing monster, or close to it. On high alert for any mental magic, which he’d mentioned he possessed moments prior, I checked my menu only to find there was nothing wrong with me. Palinchron just had a way with words. To think he could get my head aching so hard just by flapping his gums...

“What do you mean, save her?”

“Wait, didn’t Hine tell you? Well, if he didn’t, then I guess I’ve gotta be the one to get into it. I’ll do you that favor. I’ll thoroughly explain the secrets behind both Whoseyards and milady. Ugh, it just can’t be helped, can it? Guess I’ll keep things brief. Lastiara Whoseyards is...wait for it! A living sacrifice for the Day of the Blessed Birth. She was created solely to be a vessel for the invocation of Saint Tiara. But naturally, if you stick something like that inside her, her own consciousness goes bye-bye. Long story short, the day after tomorrow, she dies.”

My heart was racing, beating the same beat it had on that fateful day we had first met. He was prodding me just like he had during that slave auction. He was

actively winding me up. Palinchron had pointed at the girl who would have fallen into misery and whipped me up with that faint smile on his face, all but asking, *Are you sure you're okay with not doing anything?*

"Is that true?"

"I don't lie. Although I guess that's for you to decide, laddie."

I had no reason to take him at his word. A liar never calls himself a liar. Yet what he said had been corroborated by Lastiara and Mr. Hine.

"Give me a little more detail." I wanted it to be a lie, so I needed more info. That way, there could be contradictions to seize upon.

"Sure. I'll tell you whatever you want. You're uniquely entitled to that." Palinchron's lips curled, and he sidled up to me slightly. It was the grin of a spider with its prey in its grips. The ice-cold smile of an insect, not of any red-blooded thing.

"First things first, Lastiara's not human. She wasn't born of a womb, and she isn't even really an organism like you or me. She's literally made of magic gem. A homunculus of flesh and jewel. We call her a 'jewelculus.' Did you know that? She may look grown-up, but it's only been three years since she was created. She's a right tot."

That was a pretty nonchalant way to spring the news that someone wasn't human, but I already knew. Lastiara herself had told me. The fact that she was three years old came as a surprise, but I had a vague sense that was the case. She was the poster child for mind-body-unbalance, and this explained her mental infancy.

Nevertheless, I answered, "Lastiara said she's sixteen."

"Yeah, because her body was set as sixteen. She must've chosen her biological age as opposed to her actual age to avoid confusing you."

Back during the festival, she had couched her answer of sixteen years old with a "more or less." That was no big contradiction; on the inside, she was probably as Palinchron said.

"Go on."

“You got it. Now, why is it that Whoseyards made a jewelculus—a ‘doll body,’ so to speak? I’ll tell you why: to resurrect a famous person from the past.”

Palinchron stretched his arms out and kept talking like he was having a grand old time. Every word he uttered shaved away at my heart like a razor.

“The blood of a saint is preserved in the cathedral. All of her blood. It seems they tried all sorts of ways to bring Saint Tiara, inventor of magic, back to this world, and they zeroed in on the properties of a mage’s blood. Blood has the power to leave behind a lot of magic formulas and arrays. And then they thought, maybe Saint Tiara’s *personality* could be transmitted by way of a magic formula in the blood too. Gotta admire the guys’ obsession levels.”

I didn’t feel any reverence on his part for the saint. Needless to say, I had none either.

I could tell where this was going. That blood...

“In other words, the duty of the jewelculus Lastiara is to drink all of Saint Tiara’s blood and surrender her body unto the saint. The blood coursing through her veins is jam-packed with transferal formulas. And that’s so that she can be a receptacle for the saint’s resurrection. She was born to die, she was.”

That blood was going to kill Lastiara, which made Saint Tiara nothing more than an enemy to me.

“See, Saint Tiara’s resurrection is prophesied in the Book of the Church of Levahn. It’s this year, in fact. And Whoseyards is moving in accordance with that prophecy. The citizens of Whoseyards, for their part, are looking forward to the prophecy’s fulfillment. This year’s Day of the Blessed Birth won’t be the usual, that’s for sure. And it’s right around the corner—the day after tomorrow. Milady hasn’t got too long, ha ha ha. So what’s it gonna be, laddie? What’s it gonna be, Siegy boy?”

After he finished his smothering monologue, he shot me a badgering look, eager to see my response.

“Does Lastiara know and accept all of this?”

“She should have been told that she’d become one with Saint Tiara. It’s ambiguous what that means, but I’m sure she’s vaguely aware of her own

annihilation. Her instructor was Hine, so I don't know the details, but it would definitely have been child's play to indoctrinate our innocent and purehearted mistress who was born yesterday," he said, stifling a laugh.

Lastiara must have thought nothing of "becoming" Saint Tiara on the Day of the Blessed Birth. It was all she was ever raised to believe. If she hadn't accepted that future, she wouldn't have been so carefree while Dungeon diving. Any normal person would have fled immediately. She would have fled someplace far, far away, just as Mr. Hine had said.

"Does Lastiara harbor no mixed feelings about taking part in the ritual?"

"To be exact, she was *conditioned* not to have any mixed feelings. Or so I'm guessing. Her life has been planned out from the start. Her future being shaped by others is her destiny."

"Her future being shaped...her destiny..."

Something about those words gave me pause. *A life being shaped by fate? I too—*

"Apparently, it's all for Whoseyards's plan, you know?" continued Palinchron, heedless of my furrowed brow.

I left the words that had caught my attention and instead focused on what he was saying. "Whoseyards's plan? What plan is that?"

"Now that's a good question. It's such a *fun* plan that I was just dying to tell you about it. This is the plan: Lastiara will gladly partake of the ritual and turn into Saint Tiara. And it's to be unveiled during the Day of the Blessed Birth, to the joy of the public. What happens after that is straight out of a hero tale. Using her wondrous power, she'll blaze new paths through the Dungeon, lengthen the Pathway, and take the title of strongest from Glenn. For the record, Glenn himself is in on it. Moreover, she'll take the top prize at the Brawl later on and make her name known throughout the lands, returning in triumph to Whoseyards's suzerain territory as she works her miraculous magic in every corner. She'll make her long-awaited entry into the war in the north of the continent, and the living legend that is the Saint will descend upon the supreme commander on the front lines. Through her authority and might, the war will end as an overwhelming victory for Whoseyards! Wowee, she really is our hero!

Ha ha. What a splendid tale, right? All of this is what they've decided on."

The plan they had for Lastiara's future mirrored the hero stories that she so enjoyed. *Sounds like she'd be stoked*, I thought, only to realize the way that everything lined up was too convenient. It made me suspect that her interests and preferences had been artificially contrived to be like that. Maybe it wasn't that Lastiara viewed hero tales with a romantic lens and wanted to be a hero herself. Maybe she'd been *taught* to view hero tales that way *because* she was to be a hero from the jump. And if that was true, then...it was enough to make my stomach churn.

"Nobody's whole life should be planned out for them," I found myself grumbling. "That's totally absurd."

"Right?! So c'mon, laddie! Let's go save the girl!" he replied, beaming.

I was too scared for words. A proposal that pure coming from a stinker like Palinchron?

"You're just trying to get me riled up! What is it you wanna do?!"

"What do I wanna do? I wanna save a fellow human being, of course. I wanna give milady the life of an honest-to-goodness *person*. I wanna rescue her from sacrificing herself for some monstrous delusion about her becoming a saint!" he said, a gleam in his eyes.

I could tell that he thought Lastiara's destiny was just plain foolish and tedious. He thought that a plan so set in stone going smoothly was *boring*. He thought that saving Lastiara sounded exciting, and nothing more. Indeed, that was all he wanted. His desire to rock the boat was so easy to pick up on.

"I'd like you to put a stop to Saint Tiara's resurrection. More specifically, I want you to demolish Whoseyards's biggest festival, the Day of the Blessed Birth of Saint Tiara, the day after tomorrow."

There was no way I'd agree to demolish anything. That went against my policy. Don't get me wrong. I was enraged to hear the truth behind Lastiara's situation. But there was only so much I could do. I didn't have that kind of time.

"If I do that, I'll be arrested. I could have the purest of intentions, but it's still a crime."

“Is that so? I’m sure you won’t get arrested. You’re strong enough to give them the slip. You’ve driven away the Seven Celestial Knights, this country’s foremost battle power, over and over again.”

“If the authorities set their sights on me, I’ll become a criminal and it’d be tough for me to do anything. It would greatly affect my everyday life.”

“If that happens, you can just flee the country. If you go someplace outside of Whoseyards’s reach, it’s smooth sailing from there.”

“I’m a Dungeon diver without any relatives. I don’t wanna leave this place, and I’ve got nowhere to go.”

“If you go to either of the two countries down south, it shouldn’t be a problem. It’s not like Vart’s on friendly terms with Whoseyards either. Someone as strong as you should have no trouble finding somewhere that’ll give you shelter.”

“Why should I have to seek shelter or run away at all? Don’t be ridic—”

“I get it. So in other words, you can totally save her if you wanted to, but you’re looking out for number one, so you *won’t* save her. Is that the gist of it?” He flashed a nasty smile, hitting me where it hurt. Bull’s-eye.

I scowled. All I could do was acknowledge what a small man I really was. “Yep. Nailed it. That’s exactly right,” I said, ashamed. But really, didn’t everyone look out for number one?

Palinchron stared at me with disappointment in his eyes. “Huh. Not taking the bait this time, are you? Back at the slave market, you were easy pickings. Do you dislike her or what? Or is there something special about that slave?”

Now he had hit me in the recesses of my heart. Recesses nobody was supposed to notice.

“It’s a matter of degree,” I replied. “I managed to make the slave problem go away with money, but this is different. It’s like you said—I like Lastiara, but I don’t like her *that* much.”

His eyes scrutinized me. He tried to see through my lies with his penetrating gaze. After a moment, he smiled and said, “Ha ha. Well, I guess it’s

unreasonable of me to tell you to drop everything and resign yourself to antagonizing Whoseyards. I'm not gonna coerce you. As far as I'm concerned, I can call this a huge success just because I caused Hine to get a bit unhinged. No use getting greedy now. That said...I've got a feeling you *will* help."

On the surface, he'd essentially told me he was giving up, but he eyed me like a fly caught in his web.

Palinchron got to his feet. "Right then, I'm gonna go disappear now. My credo involves operating behind the scenes." He gave me a little wave goodbye and made to exit the church.

I wasn't expecting such a quick and easy conclusion. I had thought he'd be more insistent about persuading me. Or did he think that much was enough to push me to do it? I didn't understand his true intentions, but I watched him go without saying a thing. I'd obtained the minimum amount of information I needed. I wasn't going to stop him so that I could wring more out of him. He was just that big a puzzle to me.

With Palinchron gone, the church fell silent, and I heaved a sigh. Taking deep breaths, I dragged my heavy, leaden form home. I felt like a sack of bricks, and my emotional state was similarly heavy.

It was likely due to this gloominess that I wasn't able to go shopping or visit Dia afterwards. I went straight home to look for Lastiara, but she wasn't there. No matter where I looked, the only one home was Maria.

Maria came up to me with worry in her eyes. That was laudable of her, but knowing her courage could be stemming from infatuation made it hopelessly difficult to deal with.

"What's the matter, Master?"

I wondered whether I should tell her about Lastiara. Going by appearances, the two were on good terms. While Maria pushed Lastiara away with cold words often enough, the way I saw it, that was just how friends talked.

Did Maria know much about Lastiara? Maybe they spoke like when they were alone together earlier.

"Well, it's just...the day after tomorrow, Lastiara...she..."

“The day after tomorrow? What about it? Is Ms. Lastiara doing something?”

“On the Day of the Blessed Birth...”

“Yes?”

Maria waited for me to finish speaking. She didn’t put any particular importance on the day after tomorrow or the Day of the Blessed Birth. It seemed that she didn’t know a thing, much like me a short while ago.

I hesitated to fill her in. Maria and Lastiara were friends. And if they were friends, she should hear it all from Lastiara herself. That was what I found myself thinking. Besides, the information I had wasn’t information from Lastiara’s mouth. It was just hearsay from Mr. Hine and Palinchron.

No, I’m only hiding behind excuses.

The real reason I wasn’t telling her? I was feeling down. And I was feeling too listless to explain. Just like when I had bumped into her at the slave market, I took back the words that had been about to escape my lips simply because my heart was heavy, rolling out the bland, tepid, nothing of an answer instead.

“She said let’s hang out again on the Day of the Blessed Birth.”

“Yes. That’s fine; of course.” Maria nodded meekly even as her eyes bored holes right through me.

Her response wasn’t lost on me. She was probably just pretending to take my word for it. She’d intuited what I wanted and refrained from prying. It was far from the only time she had taken a step back out of consideration for me—in fact, it happened all the time. And the thought that it stemmed from her feelings for me made me want to dig a hole out of there.

My body felt even more leaden now, and I dragged myself away to my bedroom, fleeing for the hills. In my head, a chaotic whirlwind swarm of information swirled and danced in my head, and I felt less than well. I wrapped myself in my blanket in the hopes that would help.

By dinner and even later in the wee hours of the night, Lastiara had not returned.



The next day, on the morning of the eve of the Blessed Birth, I could hear the voices of people from far away despite the early hour. The nation was livening up in anticipation of the climactic holiday.

In order to soothe my parched throat, I forced the sack of bricks that was my body out of bed and dragged myself to the living room. It was when I walked down the corridor and opened the door leading into the kitchen that I saw her—a girl creeping in through the window.

Lastiara. I'd waited for her until the wee hours. When our eyes met, she waved a hand in greeting.

"Oh! Hey, uhh, good morning, Sieg."

"Yeah, uhh, morning."

Lastiara couldn't have expected to see me again right then and there. She entered the living room in a disconcerted rush and walked towards the storage shed farther inside. I calmed my racing heart and watched her. She was rummaging through the breakfast bread and brought some to the living room table. I took a seat at the same table and addressed her as she stuffed her cheeks.

"Lastiara, there's something I wanna chat with you about."

"Hrm? A chat? Sure."

"It's about tomorrow. The Day of the Blessed Birth."

"Uh-huh."

I stared at her calmly. I was only going to ask her the most important question. "Tomorrow, are you going to, err...surrender your body to Saint Tiara?"

Her expression didn't change; there wasn't so much as a crease in that face that had been constructed to be peerlessly beautiful.

She nodded. "Yep. That's what I plan to do," she said, her tone as lighthearted as always.

I grimaced. I was emotionally shaken, so much so that I could tell, but I maintained my composure to the best of my ability. "That's what you plan to

do... But I heard that if you do, you'll functionally cease to be."

"Ah, so you heard. Guess Hine or somebody else told you?"

"You're not denying it. Is it really true?"

I'd wanted her to deny it. I'd wanted her to laugh and say it was all a lie. It would have been such a relief. We could have continued Dungeon diving together, just like we had up until the day before.

"Rats. I kept it on the down-low because I didn't want to shock you."

"Who cares about that?! This is more important!"

"I was looking forward to seeing the face you would've made when you'd found you'd suddenly formed a party with Saint Tiara."

"What are you... You won't be there to see that!" I choked out.

I couldn't help but flare up at her, but she kept talking as flippantly as usual, her smile not abating.

"It's fine! Saint Tiara is also me. Even if I become the saint, I'll still be your comrade. You don't gotta worry."

She was trying to assuage me by telling me it wouldn't affect my Dungeon diving, but that was off base and it only fueled my irritation further.

"No! You can't say that! I heard that if you become Saint Tiara, you'll lose your consciousness! You'll basically disappear! Do you even get that?!" I couldn't help it; I was getting louder.

"So I hear. I understand that," she said, taking it in stride.

"So you hear?! And you're fine with that?!"

"I am. My purpose in life is to become one with Saint Tiara. I respect her. I think any hero who saved so many lives is wonderful, and I love both their lives and their stories. If I can *become* one of those heroes, then I've got nothing to complain about. Why would I ever resist? If anything, it's an honor."

Her excess of faith reminded me of what Mr. Hine called her: *fake*. And her faith in Saint Tiara was so squeaky-clean it had a touch of madness. So much so, in fact, that I couldn't think of it as anything other than artificial.

“Isn’t that just because you were brought up to be that way? Normally, if a person was told they’d disappear, they’d resist the idea at least a little bit. It’s like you’ve been *brainwashed*!”

“Yeah, I guess so. I know, okay? I know I’m biased. But that’s just how I am. Even if it’s my upbringing or I’m brainwashed, that’s still who I am now. Are you gonna reject everything about me and the life I’ve lived up till today as ‘fake’ or ‘artificial’? Because that’s all there is to me. Are you gonna sit there and tell me what makes me *me* is invalid?”

Lastiara didn’t waver or hesitate at all when she said she didn’t care if she was indoctrinated or brainwashed. It was plain to see she possessed a will and a mind of her own. A sense of self that was elastic but also had a core.

I was baffled. Where were the boundaries anymore? Where were the lines between the artificial Lastiara and the real one? I couldn’t blindly deny the validity of her resolution, not without hearing her out. If I tried to disavow the artificial Lastiara and ended up disavowing the true Lastiara in the process, it’d all come to nothing in the end. Which was why all I could do was make a last gasp, words quavering:

“R-Really? You’re *genuinely* okay with that?”

Undaunted, she looked straight at me. “Of course I am. I was born to be Saint Tiara’s vessel and raised to be her vessel too. Becoming Saint Tiara is the reason I’m alive... I’m sure of it. Because I... I mean...”

Part of the way through, her expression turned less resolute.

“Because that’s who...I am?”

Now she looked uneasy, apprehensive about what she herself had said. And something similar had happened in the past too. When she’d joined the party at the pub, her thoughts had changed as she spoke. A firm conviction that had melted in the middle of a sentence. She was like an unstable sky, growing sunny, then cloudy, sunny, then cloudy. That was Lastiara writ large.

“That’s what I’m like, apparently,” she muttered without confidence, her eyes wandering.

It was then that I knew for sure. The truth behind the unstable foundation I’d

always felt she was standing on—the artificial Lastiara and the real one were nipping at each other's heels.



“Whaddya mean, ‘apparently’?! You don’t even know for sure yourself, do you?! Tell me you’re not feeling shaken, or puzzled! You don’t know what’s right or not either, do you?!”

I seized on this chance to change her mind, showering her with questions, but an instant later, she was the Lastiara with the bright and cheery look on her face.

“Heh, heh heh, heh heh heh. You’ve got it wrong. I’m gonna become Saint Tiara. I’ll be going on a heart-pounding adventure, conquering mighty foes, experiencing various encounters and farewells—I’ll be the hero everyone admires. I’ll *be* that hero! It’s gonna be so, so amazing!”

She laughed, eyes wild and crazy. She had changed so suddenly it was almost like a case of spirit possession. But then:

“I’m sure it’ll be amazing... I’m sure of it...”

She turned mealymouthed once again.

“S-See? You’re *not* confident! You’re afraid of being sacrificed!”

“I’m not afraid. It’s not that I’m afraid of dying. You should know that from watching me fight in the Dungeon. I’m not so *weak* that I’d cower before a little thing like *that*!”

Aaand she’d swung back to bold. But now I had something of a grasp on the trigger that caused her to one-eighty like that. Every time I spoke against the ritual, the artificial Lastiara poked out from inside her. And if I continued in this way, we would just keep going in circles. This must have been what Palinchron was talking about when he’d said she was the result of constant conditioning. In all likelihood, I could say it till I was blue in the face but I’d never persuade her. That was how she was now. I was impotent to do say anything besides:

“Really, though? Are you *truly* fine with it?”

“It’s not just me who’s affected, Sieg,” she said smilingly. “Everybody in the Cathedral, everyone in Whoseyards, and Saint Tiara herself are all looking forward to it. This vessel is up to its nose in the hopes of the people! So I’m gonna go through the ritual.”

“Well even so, I think I ought to veto the ritual.”

We glared at each other, but no amount of glaring was going to put a dent in her determination. I knew that from how much time we’d spent together. When she had that look on her face, she’d never give in. She’d just double and triple down, clad in madness all the while.

The silence pressed on as we continued our stare down. Lastiara was the one to break it. Her expression flipped from courageous and spirited to something clingier. Another emotional afterquake? But no, this seemed different.

“If so—if that’s how you feel, then will you come save me? Will you do as Hine said and go on a journey with me someplace far away, just the two of us?”

The outer corners of Lastiara’s eyes fell, and she looked up at me with a look that said she was depending on me. It was the first time I had seen Lastiara showing such frailty. My eyes reeled open with shock at her show of age-appropriate girlishness. She was like a little kid. And I hoped that this was the real Lastiara, not the artificial one. But it came with a question that I could only answer any *other* time. Would I go on a journey with her?

But in this stretch of time, I had one singular absolute—I had to reach the deepest level of the Dungeon and effect my Great Return. It was my goal in life and my objective in this world. However, there was no way the two of us could adventure together after leaving the Dungeon Alliance.

“That’s... I...”

“Would you make an enemy out of all of the knights of the Alliance and the entire country of Whoseyards? Would you wreck tomorrow’s ritual for me? Would you take that gigantic risk that it takes to rescue me?”

None of those questions sounded like curiosity. They sounded like pleading.

“Would you be the hero of my story?”

I could see the crying little girl inside her. And that little girl wished to be saved. There was no doubt about it. This wasn’t the artificial Lastiara’s voice. This was the real Lastiara’s voice. Maybe if I replied to this voice correctly, I could draw out more of the true Lastiara and have a real conversation with her. And if we just communicated our intentions to each other, I could even

persuade her. This was my one chance to change her mind. This was the timing to seize on. And yet...

And yet I couldn't give her an answer.

The problem was that her desperate plea was overly at odds with my Great Return. A confluence of factors were playing tug of war inside me—my conscience, my sense of morality, my obligations, my selfishness. I was frozen. And upon seeing me unable to move an inch, Lastiara's face clouded.

The window of time I could reach her was over, like a fleeting comet. She reverted to her typical cheerful expression, laughing it off as usual. "Ha, ha ha! That was a joke. You don't need to do anything like that. I know you haven't got that kind of time. You're already at your limit thinking about yourself."

Mr. Hine's counsel had come to no avail. The opportunity for my voice to reach her had come and gone, and I'd said nothing. I'd been unable to say a thing.

"You're a candidate, Sieg. I won't impose anything on you. You don't have any obligation or responsibility to do that."

She tossed the rest of the bread into her mouth with a smile.

Ah, she's back to being the same as always. The same instability, the same restlessness, the same wavering, the same tendency to change her tune at record speed.

"Wait, Lastiara, we're not done talk—"

"Besides, it might be a non-issue to begin with. There'll be times where I override Saint Tiara's consciousness. Wonder how it's gonna shake out? I mean, I'm pretty damn strong too."

She spoke of the next day with an optimistic, forward-looking, delighted smile, and there was no sign she'd listen to any objections. She ate up all of the rest of the bread and got to her feet. "Thanks for the meal. I've got stuff to do for tomorrow, so I'll be off. I don't think I'll be able to help with exploring the Dungeon today, so you can hang out with Mar-Mar. And give her my regards while you're at it."

“Let’s just talk a little more!”

Lastiara turned her back to me, as if to say there was nothing left to discuss. “Tomorrow night, I think I’ll drop by, so wait until then... Ciao ciao.”

With those as her parting words, she exited the house. Wondering if I should fight to stop her, I stuck a hand into my inventory. However, I hesitated for too long, and in that time, Lastiara scurried out, leaving me alone.

Were those her last words just now? The thought brought on intolerable feelings that threatened to crush me.

Just then, I heard the door open behind me. On the other side of the door stood Maria. Her expression seemed about as gloomy and grave as mine, and she was staring my way. I could tell that she’d overheard the conversation.

“Maria, were you listening?”

“Yes.”

Perhaps she’d been about to come in but saw us acting out of the ordinary and didn’t want to step into that, so she ended up eavesdropping.

“So, err, does that mean Miss Lastiara...”

“She left. Just as you heard.” I feebly pointed to where she exited.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Master?”

“The problem’s just too big... At least, as I am right now, I can’t drift away from the Dungeon.”

That was the situation in a nutshell. To boil it all down, the problem was simply too huge for a schoolboy like me to handle.

“So when the new version of her, Miss Tiara, comes along, are you going to think of her as Miss Lastiara and continue Dungeon diving with her?”

“She won’t be Lastiara at all. She’ll be someone else in her skin. Of course I can’t just go on like before.”

I could never treat some person to whom I had no emotional attachment as though she were Lastiara. If anything, Tiara would be my *enemy* for supplanting Lastiara.

“At the very least, there’s no way I could think of her as my comrade.”

“I see,” she said, her voice pure and clear. “I’m happy to hear that. Truly.” There was no sadness or rage there. She felt nothing but relief from the bottom of her heart.

“You’re... You’re *happy*?” I couldn’t understand why. I’d thought that she was on good enough terms with her to mourn her departure. But it was the exact opposite. And then, she pulled the same thing Alty had once pulled on me.



“I mean, I thought you maybe *liked* Miss Lastiara or something, Master.” She said it so readily, like it was nothing.

“Huh?” My head went blank. It was just like when Alty had nuked me with the crush thing two days prior; I couldn’t comprehend what had been said right away.

Maria continued, ignoring my mute amazement. “Well, yeah. Miss Lastiara had her odd qualities.”

I understood the words, but I didn’t understand what she was saying. Her response, which I had never once expected, left me confused. A horde of questions flitted about in my brain. Wasn’t Maria herself the one with the crush? Why was this about *me* now? I was totally lost.

“You’ve seen how pretty she is...”

No argument there; she was a beauty. In fact, the word “beauty” didn’t cut it. Her looks were unreal. She was so stunning that not even the most beautiful TV stars in my world could rival her.

“Plus, she was so strong, and cheery...”

I was convinced that physically speaking, she was stronger than anybody else. She was so OP it was unfair, and that was on top of her bevy of skills and her eyes that were close to mine in caliber. And her personality could be called cheery. If one left out the unstable and unhinged parts of her, she did enjoy a sunny and forward-facing disposition. It was that cheer that pulled in everyone around her, and she had a mood-buoying life-of-the-party side to her that put smiles on her companions’ faces.

“And she likes mischief, but at her core, she’s always thinking about her companions...”

It was true. There was a lot about her that was dodgy and dangerous. Like her love of thrills and her desire for drama. But that didn’t translate to her needlessly putting people in danger. On the contrary, she’d given me a great deal of advice. And if there was something that needed saying, she said it, no matter how difficult it was to say or how much of a villain it made her.

“And she’s a dreamer, but ideal as a Dungeon diver...”

She must have been a dreamer because of her environment growing up. In order to become a hero, she had naturally been groomed to like stories about heroes. That was why she was so peerlessly enthusiastic about adventure and why she excelled at Dungeon diving more than anyone else.

“She’s a lot like you, so you got along well...”

I did get along well with Lastiara. I was only taking such a cautious stance because there was a reason I absolutely could not afford to die. If not for that, I would be like her—a game-loving dreamer. Even though I *said* the opposite, deep inside I more than understood where she was coming from.

“So I’d been under the impression you maybe liked her. But you don’t actually, right, Master? You don’t like her, right?”

Did I like her? If I put the Dungeon before all else, it was reasonable to discard Lastiara. It had been my intention from the beginning, and in effect, I had just abandoned her. But I hadn’t given her up without trying to get her to stay first. I’d been reluctant to let her go. Was that because I liked her?

Thinking back, it struck me as strange that, as a boy, I hadn’t thought anything of such a beyond-perfect girl when I’d first encountered her. Was it because the way we’d crossed paths had put me off? Was the situation to blame? Was that why I couldn’t acknowledge I was attracted to her?

But I couldn’t deny that right now, I was panicking because I was about to lose her. I was desperately racking my mind for anything I could do. And that meant...

That meant that, just as Maria had said, I liked Lasti—

The following skill has activated: ???

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

Wha?

The fire all throughout my body was quenched, as though I'd been doused in icy water. My racing heart calmed down, and the bits and bobs of information whirling in my head were arranged in neat and tidy rows. At the same time, I noticed that something that had been causing my heart to throb was now gone. Something important. And "???" had replaced that something with a serenity I hadn't asked for. With a cool head, I analyzed the situation. I knew what that "something" was. Judging by what I'd been thinking about before it triggered, it was most likely infatuation or love or the like. And on an intellectual level, I understood it. But now I was so composed that I couldn't believe it.

"Huh? Ha, ha ha, ha ha. Ha ha ha ha..." I laughed hoarsely.

I knew of two triggers for "???" One was when my emotions were truly running away from me. While I did wonder if it'd activate on me earlier due to that, that wasn't the trigger in this instance. I hadn't been *that* confused. In fact, I'd been doing my damndest to think things through logically and set the situation straight in my mind. Which left only the other trigger as a possibility. *Are you telling me that registered as me being about to die?*

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

In short, did "???" make a judgment call that my infatuation or love or what have you put my life at risk? Was it trying to tell me that if I indulged in my feelings for Lastiara, I'd die?

That could very well be the case. Maybe it'd kill me. But even so! Even so, you can't just swap it away from me so willy-nilly! That's just not okay!

A fire by the name of wrath gushed inside of me. It was a wrath that bubbled up from the bottom of my heart, and it was hot enough to ruin the calm that "???" had just afforded me. But that unprecedented level of rage didn't trigger "???" despite my newfound lack of that newfound calm.

Oh, okay, so that's how it is. If I think about any kind of childlike crush, that's over the line, but if I feel angry enough to kill somebody, that's acceptable. What an absolute joke!

"Wh-What's the matter, Master?" Maria was dismayed; she stood stock still,

her face stiff.

But that wasn't even on my radar at the moment. *Come to think of it, when I first met Lastiara, "???" activated around then. And if I'm not wrong, it also activated the second time we met. No wonder I was so slow to cotton onto my feelings for her. And it was only natural that my budding feelings were so stunted. My emotions were actively severed at the roots. So, judging by how we met, Lastiara and I were a disaster.*

I laughed bitterly. I laughed from the excess of rage, and I laughed so much that I gradually became calmer. "Ha ha... It's nothing; it's just a little funny... You're right, Maria. I don't like Lastiara. And you can take that to the bank."

"H-Huh? Is... Is that right?" She was surprised. Apparently, she hadn't exactly been expecting that response. She promptly examined my expression to determine the truth. But try as she might, it was futile. Any such detectable something had vanished a moment ago.

"But never mind that. You said something interesting just now. About how Lastiara and I are similar."

Maria's Perception skill was really convenient. It allowed me to learn things about myself that I hadn't even noticed.

"Right, yes, I uhh, I don't know how to put it exactly, but your cores are similar. From where I'm standing, you're *both* flawless, like you were created that way."

"Ha ha!"

The aptness of that remark! My hoarse laughter increased. She was so on the mark, it was comical. Because if Lastiara was an artificial person crafted by her environment, then I was also an artificial person dancing to the tune of "???" Maria was right. We were peas in a pod.

"I see. So we're similar at heart, huh?"

"Yes."

My laughter was frightening her. Not even her Perception could garner any insights into my sudden turnaround or what I was thinking. That was just how

anomalous “???” was. In other words, both Lastiara and I were around the same level of unstable. And now I had a feeling I understood how she felt a little bit. Namely, I suspected that even though she knew that this whole ritual business was bizarre, she didn’t have any feelings about it. That was why she prioritized the duty imposed on her from birth. Undergoing the ritual had become her sole emotional rock to stand on.

And me? I was the same. Even now that I knew that I had feelings for her, I couldn’t feel those feelings. And the only emotional rock left to stand on was going to the deepest level of the Dungeon. Wasn’t I doing the exact same thing as she was by prioritizing my “duty”?

There’s no way I can go.

That was what I’d so self-importantly told her. Well, I couldn’t very well tell her that and then be so blind to my own shortcomings. And more than anything else, I hadn’t forgotten my anger towards “???”

“Maria, I’m going out for a while. I’ll be back by noon.”

“Wait, huh? Master, where are you—”

Leaving the confused Maria behind, I exited through the window. There was no time to waste.

I’m not going to the Dungeon. So where should I go? I contemplated calmly, stuffing my rage inside me so that “???” wouldn’t activate.

I intended to act under the assumption that I had feelings for Lastiara. However, as those feelings had been robbed from me, I couldn’t muster any confidence in my actions. I knew what I needed to do, but I really wanted someone to confirm it. Maria was out, since her personal feelings prevented her from being objective enough.

That was why I was gonna go see *him*. Somebody who, unlike us, wasn’t unstable. A comrade with a firm sense of self.



I went past the hospital’s reception desk and walked over to the ward where Dia awaited. The well-ventilated hallway had been repaired, and it maintained

its appearance as a hallway, if only barely. Crossing the not-so-aesthetically pleasing corridor, I stepped inside Dia's room.

There I saw not just him, but also three other, less familiar faces.

"Dia, you have visitors?" I asked him. He was sitting in his bed.

I looked at the three strangers. The men wore priestly garb, and my menu-sight confirmed that their class was listed as Priest, so there could be little doubt. Over their clean and pale attire, they wore patterned stole-like shawls hanging down their fronts.

"S-Sieg?! Hold on, hold up a minute!"

"Okay," I said extremely calmly before stepping back into the corridor.

My rage was still there, but thanks to that "???" activation earlier, I'd composed myself. I was glad I wasn't acting helter-skelter.

I killed some time in the hallway, and after a moment or two, the three priests came out and gave me a bow before leaving the premises, after which I entered Dia's room again.

"Sup, Dia?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Sieg, you almost never come so early in the morning..."

It seemed he didn't want me to have seen that scene just now. Clearly, Dia had his own circumstances to deal with. I was vaguely aware of that fact ever since he and Lastiara had told me they were acquaintances.

"Were those guys Whoseyards priests?"

"Urgh... They're not from Whoseyards, but I guess you could say they're similar."

"If you don't wanna say, you don't have to."

"Err, no, it's okay... Those guys were priests from my country, and they came here for me," he confessed frankly. He must have thought he couldn't hide it anymore.

"They came here for you?"

“I’m sorry I never told you. I’m an important figure in my country, and I’m on the run.”

Dia, an important figure in a different country. That tracked. He had to have been born special in some way. There was no other explanation for how his talents surpassed even Lastiara’s, as she herself was a homunculus made to be as perfect as possible. Dia might have thought he was hitting me with a shocking revelation, but to me, it was a revelation that made sense of things.

I couldn’t stand seeing that apologetic look on his face, so I replied amiably. “Gotcha. But don’t worry, it’s no big deal to me. Come what may, you’ll always just be Dia to me.”

“Sieg!” He stared at me, visibly moved. He’d probably been expecting me to scold him.

Meanwhile, I didn’t have the time to be fretting about that. I hurried the conversation along. “So do you need to go back to your country now or what?”

“Well, by all rights, I do, but not anytime too soon. They’re actually making me appear at the ritual during the Day of the Blessed Birth tomorrow. I accepted a request to represent a certain sect, so...”

I was pretty surprised that Dia was in a higher position than I could have guessed, given that when I’d met him, he’d been beaten up and starving. First impressions really are important.

I resisted the urge to ask more about that request and stuck to being pragmatic for the moment. “Are you going back to your country after making that appearance? Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Nah, of course I ain’t going back. I decided I’m gonna try striking it rich here. And I’m not gonna ask you to help me with persuading those dudes either. I don’t wanna bother you. I wanna try managing this stuff on my own for the time being.”

We were an ocean away from the silly little kids of the past. If only we’d been so candid with ourselves before. If only we’d been this decisive before.

“Got it. That said, I wanna help where I can, so if anything comes up, feel free to turn to me and I’ll lend a hand.”

“Sure. Cheers, Sieg.”

The conversation regarding the problem Dia was facing ended in so many seconds. Of course, I was under no illusion that that was the extent of what was weighing on his shoulders. Regardless, I’d probably resolved the things I could in that moment. Now it was time to talk about Lastiara.

“So, I’m sorry to spring this on you when you’re in a tough spot,” I said, “but there’s something I wanna ask you.”

“Something you wanna ask me? Shoot.”

Dia remained unswayed by the influence of outside factors, unlike me or Lastiara, and he wasn’t captive to his personal feelings like Maria. Most importantly, he was the comrade I could trust the most in this world.

“It’s about Lastiara.”

The point of my visiting Dia this time around was to ask his advice. I quickly rattled off all the main points about Lastiara and the Day of the Blessed Birth, and Dia listened quietly.

He nodded unreservedly. “I see...”

It wasn’t as though he didn’t know about the Day of the Blessed Birth, after all. He didn’t question that what I said was true.

“I’m thinking that the source of Lastiara’s unusual behavior isn’t just her upbringing. She’s gotta have some kind of mental magic cast on her too. A spell that was cast over and over since she was a kid,” he said, making no bones about how bad Lastiara’s situation was. “Otherwise she wouldn’t get that stubborn.”

Dia was versed in holy magic, and it seemed a specific sorcery had sprung to mind. But I had seen Lastiara’s menu, and at the very least, it didn’t *look* like any magic had been cast on her that would cause a Condition to manifest. The only things that stood out were her skills “Doll Body” and “Pseudo-Divine Eyes.”

“If mental magic was cast on Lastiara, could you lift it?”

“Nah, don’t think so. If it was a simple spell, I would have noticed when we met and dispelled it for her. I think it’s a magic formula that’s pervaded her

body on the flesh and blood level. Higher-ups in Whoseyards can manage that sort of thing without batting an eyelid,” he declared as though he’d seen it himself.

“Then, as things stand, I have to give up on the idea of lifting that spell, huh?”

“They do have to dispel it themselves before the ritual to summon St. Tiara into her body. I don’t see them summoning the vaunted progenitor saint into a body afflicted by mental magic that causes her to take her own survival so lightly.”

“Before the ritual, you say...”

So ideally, I’d take her out of there right before the ritual. If that proved beyond me, I’d have no choice but to somehow enlist the aid of a person who knew how to dispel magic or the like.

“So what are you gonna do, Sieg? I’ll help. Physically I’m back to normal.”

He didn’t hesitate to give his assistance to a friend even when he was in a less than desirable position himself, which provided a window into just how good a guy Dia was.

Unfortunately, I didn’t really have an answer to that question. To be exact, “???” had taken the answer from me.

“Dia, can I ask you a weird question?”

“Uh, sure.”

“What would you—no, what would *any* normal person do? Is this where I go and save her?”

I had to ask him; no dressing anything up. I could no longer trust my own conclusions, because in my eyes, those conclusions *weren’t* my own. They were just “???” manipulating me.

“Wait, huh? What would I do?”

“Yeah. I have a duty that I need to prioritize above all else. Should I go save Lastiara despite that?”

Dia was taken aback; he looked at me like I’d grown an extra head. But after a

short pause, he answered me with an earnest expression and an ardor in his eyes.

“Hmm, well...if I were in your shoes, even if I had something I oughta prioritize, if there’s somebody who’s irreplaceable to me, I’d go save ’em. So, yeah, pretty sure I would. But that’s me. I dunno if that’s what any normal person would do.”

Dia was, as always, a compassionate kid. Now I knew that he’d go save her—but he’d also told me he didn’t know whether that was “normal.” He’d given me more to chew on, but it wasn’t enough, which left me with no other choice. I had to lay it bare.

“In that case, if, *hypothetically speaking*, I liked Lastiara, should I go save her?”

“Huh?”

“Like I said, *if* I liked Lastiara, should I go save her?”

“Hold on, wait a sec,” he said, flustered. “Do... *Do* you like Lastiara?”

I couldn’t blame him for being astonished, getting asked that out of the blue.

“No, I don’t. It’s just a hypothetical. What ought I to do *if*.”

“Oh, okay. It’s an if—a hypothetical. In that case, shouldn’t you go save her? I mean, if you like her, then however pressing something else may be, it’s only natural to think to yourself that you *have* to save her. But that’s, like, if you *like* her. It’s for that hypothetical scenario!” he answered without hesitation.

I knew it. It was perfectly normal to go save somebody you liked. That was why my “???” skill had erased the emotion. It must have been because going to the Cathedral to rescue her would have put my life on the line.

“I see. All right, I’ve made up my mind. I’m gonna go save her.”

My thinking was in line with Dia’s own opinion, which steeled my resolve.

“Huh?”

“Thanks, Dia. I’m heading off to the cathedral in Whoseyards.”

I got to my feet without hesitation. Actually, maybe I had never been of two

minds to begin with. Maybe I'd known what the correct decision was all along. Abandoning someone you're fond of to die isn't what anybody would normally do. *Of course* the correct response is to save someone I like, travel all over the Dungeon, and return to my family with pride in my heart.

"Wait, Sieg! That...it's...it's too sudden! It's pointless even if you leave now! I just told you, they'll dispel her mental magic *right before* the ritual! If you try rescuing her forcibly, there's a chance she'll resist you! That must be why that Hine guy's so worried! What if, after you save her, she says she's gonna attend the ritual no matter what? Have you got a plan for that?!"

"Ah." He was right. That was the reason Mr. Hine was willing to cut off my legs if it meant he could drag Lastiara out of the country. If I tried rescuing her then and there, it came with the possibility of her resisting.

Upon seeing the dumb "oh yeah" look on my face, Dia heaved a sigh. "Can't be helped," he murmured before adding, "Message received. You're serious about wanting to save Lastiara. I get it, so...wait for me a sec. Stay there—I'll be the one to save her." He made his declaration, determined to prove that he was not at all inferior to me.

"Huh? But why?"

"I can be present at the ritual right up until its completion. They'll let their guard down at the moment the ritual is about to be complete, which is when I'll destroy the cathedral. And then I'll approach Lastiara and ask her what she actually wants. If she wants to run, we'll flee straight to your place, the two of us."

It was an extremely audacious and reckless plan, but there was no denying that that was the only time the mental magic that had a hold over her would be undone.

"If we succeed," Dia continued, "then Lastiara and I are gonna be on the lam from Whoseyards...so let's run for the seafaring country of Greeard in the south, I guess. We can hit the Dungeon as a team from there."

I didn't understand why Dia was willing to go that far. Were Dia and Lastiara closer than I'd assumed? It seemed odd to me.

“Guess you could say I might as well, since I’m on the run anyway,” he said sheepishly. “I mean, if I make friends with somebody of Lastiara’s caliber, it’ll pay off.”

“But if you save Lastiara, you’ll make more enemies too. And powerful enemies at that. Do you really have the resolve to save her even if you end up antagonizing a whole country?”

“The resolve? Oh, I’ve got the resolve. We’re talking about someone *you’d* be willing to go that far for, so of course she’s someone who needs saving in my eyes too. This much ain’t nothing. Our Dungeon diving’s only just begun, man!” he said, grinning broadly.

One of Dia’s dreams was to strike it rich in the Dungeon, yet he was willing to save Lastiara even if doing so threw up more obstacles in the way of that dream. His big heart blew me away, and it reminded me just how puny my heart was. I felt ashamed of my tendency to prioritize myself over others. Dia was a bright and dazzling star, and I wanted to be like him. I emulated him by putting a big old smile on my face.

“Thank you, Dia. But you don’t have to do that. I will.”

“You will?”

“Yeah. ’Cause abducting Lastiara’s my job. I’ll leap in right before the ritual rounds off and whisk her away. I’m the ringleader at the end of the day. I won’t make you do my dirty work.” My answer carried the confidence I saw in Dia, however false that confidence was.

“I expected no less, Sieg,” he replied. As always, he had an excess of faith in me.

A lot had cropped up, but at last, my plan of action had solidified. I had time on my hands, so I decided to ask for as much information on the Cathedral as possible. However, Dia didn’t know much about it himself. Having been a guest of honor, he knew a little about the arrangements for the ritual and the layout of the building and nothing else. But having even that much intel made all the difference. I now knew the place and the timing for me to swoop in.

However, looking at Dia’s expression, it didn’t seem like he wanted to saddle

me with everything. I repeatedly reminded him that he didn't need to put himself out to help me, but I didn't know how far Dia would push himself the next day.

At Dia's typical upright behavior, I couldn't help but smile wryly. Perhaps if I were as straightforward and upstanding as him, I might have been able to produce a different outcome. But as of now, I could only do what I had to do. After Dia and I were finished informing one another, I immediately left the hospital ward and headed for the border. It was time to see this "cathedral" where Lastiara would be undergoing the ritual with my own eyes.



The Cathedral of Whoseyards. The enormous and awe-inspiring structure was one of the symbols of the nation. It was also important in that it supervised the public institutions of Whoseyards.

The word "cathedral" had me imagining a Western-style church but bigger. In reality, it was completely different. If I had to describe it, it was more of a fortress than anything. The grounds were about three Tokyo Domes in width, and they were enclosed by an artificial river. Farther inside, there were more obstructions in the form of tall conifers and iron fencing. The walls of water, trees, and iron concealed the interior.

Situated within that high-reaching enclosure towered a building that was well and truly a citadel unto itself. In order to enter the central stronghold, one had to cross a huge drawbridge spanning the man-made moat.

It really was a castle fort. To enter the central castle, you had to pass through a huge drawbridge over an artificial river. And since there was only one drawbridge, there was only one entrance.

The giant drawbridge, which looked around fifty meters wide to me, was suspended over the moat for some time. I'd heard that they didn't ever raise the drawbridge, so it seemed that there was no need to worry about being forced to cross the river without the bridge's aid.

On the other hand, the reason it wasn't raised was because of how heavily it was guarded. Dozens of sentry knights were always at the ready, protecting the bridge. Moreover, a huge gate had been installed in the middle, and both ends

of the gate had elevated platforms to boot. There was a hut near the bridge that served as a garrison for the knights. Clearly, they were zealous about not letting any suspicious individuals in, come hell or high water.

Should I invade through the main gate, or should I cross the river and the fence? I put my hand on my chin, running the scenarios of the next day's infiltration through my head. That was when *Dimension* picked up on a peculiar reading. It was easy to tell who this high-temperature cluster might be.

"Doing your best, aren't ya, Sieg?"

Alty's voice came at me from behind.

"That you, Alty? You got some business with me?"

"I know your circumstances. I came here to ask you something," she said, her gaze piercing.

Maybe she'd heard all about Lastiara from Dia or Maria. Perhaps she'd gleaned it through her nasty eavesdropping ability.

"Ask me what?"

"Why are you trying to save Lastiara? 'Cause if it's love, I'm prepared to lend a hand."

She was, as ever, a love gossip freak. She wanted to make everything about romantic affairs by any means. Granted, this time around, she was right. Or almost.

I gave it a moment's thought before shaking my head. "It ain't something as beautiful as *love* that's driving me right now. My motives are simpler than that."

Love? That emotion was totally gone now, and I couldn't say that what no longer existed was spurring me to action. If I did, I'd be disrespecting Lastiara, and I myself wouldn't be able to swallow it. The impetus at that point was something less complicated than affection.

"Really? Do you wanna tell me what that simple motive is?"

"Something's sticking in my craw. I can't take being toyed with anymore, so I'm gonna sever the fetters binding her. That's all there is to it."

Basically, I was losing my patience when it came to being trifled with by this world—by skills, by magic, by cultures, and all that garbage. I was beyond fed up. I was *angry*. That was the reason I was fighting what “???” wanted for me. I *would* save Lastiara, and we *would* Dungeon dive together alongside Maria and Dia. Period.

“Hrm. Can’t say I understand, but...if you’re telling me it’s definitely not love, I’m gonna have difficulty helping ya out, considering I live and breathe love.”

“I don’t need you to do anything in particular. If people find out about you helping us, that’d put us in a precarious spot. If you wanna be of service, help me out in the Dungeon and not in town, okay?”

“Hrm, all right, fine. I don’t wanna be doing anything that disadvantages my pet, Mar-Mar. I’ll remain a silent observer this time.”

Alty caught on quick, which was great. She still had a kind look on her face when she added, “That being said, I can’t have you dying on me. Whenever you think you’re in danger, just light a flame. As long as there’s fire around, I can at least bail ya out. I’ll be on standby tomorrow, so you can call me anytime.” With that, she turned on her heels.

“Thanks, Alty.”

“You don’t gotta thank me. We’re partners in crime.”

But her voice—it was trembling. Not from a negative emotion like sadness either. I could tell it was trembling from joy. She laughed, albeit faintly.

“Heh heh heh. It won’t be long now. Just a little bit longer...”

She disappeared, that uncanny smile never leaving her face. I found it a bit suspicious, but I didn’t have the time to probe. I had to move on to the next order of business.

First things first, I needed to go into town to purchase the tools and weapons I’d be using the next day. After stocking up my inventory, I headed to the library, where I read a number of books about Whoseyards and the Festival of the Blessed Birth. Sadly, I didn’t come across any new information that was particularly notable. Giving up, I searched for books about magic next.

There was a good chance that I'd have to fight. Not only that, the battles would be against large crowds of my fellow human beings. As such, I looked for examples of spells I'd require. Of course, no amount of perusing would allow me to obtain that magic, but I plunged into the tomes in search of information regardless, searing the details of the spells I had my sights on into my head.

To what end, you may ask? I was going to *create* magic.

Maria and Franrühle had said in the past that magic wasn't something one could create from nothing. Back then, I hadn't argued the point. Yet, as a matter of fact, I had worked out a whole bunch of spells. *Dimension: Calculash. Layered Dimension. Ice Arrow. Snowmension. Ice Flamberge.* Sure, they were just different applications of extant spells, but I had created no fewer than five of them.

Maria had remarked that creating new spells was the stuff of fairy tales. Apparently, the only people who could create magic were singular individuals like the heroes who appeared in such stories. But if you asked me, this place was just like a fairy tale anyway.

After reading my fill of volumes on magic, I exited the library. As I walked through town, I conceptualized new spells in my head.

"I'm one of those singular individuals. I know it. Spellcast: *Dimension*. Spellcast: *Freeze*," I said under my breath, mixing the two spells together.

All that was left was to visualize. That was the reason I'd pored over so many different spells. Creating a new spell from scratch was very hard. Visualizing a preexisting spell, on the other hand, was a different story. That had already been substantiated. I carefully and deliberately refined the spell, kneading it as I got it ever closer to the picture in my mind's eye. Ideally, I'd have liked to have practiced in the comfort of my own home, but the more time I had to practice, the better.

Consequently, the road I was walking down was freezing over slightly. At first, the freezing was so slight that you couldn't notice it without staring, but by the time I reached the house, small icicles were growing from my footsteps. *The creation of this brutal ice spell is within my grasp.*

My number one concern upon returning home was Maria. I had gotten swept

up by impulsiveness and preparations for my plan to abduct Lastiara, leaving poor Maria alone and neglected. But contrary to my expectations, she looked the same as always.

“Welcome home, Master.”

As always, she had dinner prepared, so we partook together as we chatted about nothing special. I tried sussing out Maria’s mental state but ultimately stopped myself. If possible, I wanted to put off my Maria problems until Lastiara returned. I calmly came to the conclusion that it’d be better to let sleeping dogs lie for now. Unlike with Lastiara, no one was going to die if I didn’t resolve the Maria situation immediately. There was a big urgency gap there. I intended to focus all of my attention on the Lastiara abduction plan.

Night fell. I holed up in my bedroom and resumed practicing the spell from earlier, practicing and practicing and practicing through trial and error until my MP was drained. I kept at it until my eyelids grew heavy.

I’m gonna save you, Lastiara.

With that vow, I fell asleep.



The Day of the Blessed Birth was here.

I woke up before dawn and checked how I was doing physically. It was partially because my sleep rhythm had gotten used to it, but also because of my nerves.

My plan was to depart at daybreak. According to what Dia had told me, the ritual would end before midday, as they would be unveiling the newly descended Saint Tiara at noon. As such, my plan had to commence early in the morning.

I used the last of my free time to head to the living room for some light breakfast, only to be surprised to see Maria standing there. I’d told her that I wouldn’t do anything. During suppertime the night before, we’d eaten our food without broaching anything major. As a result, I hadn’t been expecting to bump into her then and there. The plan had been to bring back Lastiara before Maria woke up. I’d hit a snag from the jump.

She stared at me, just as expressionless as before. “You are going after all...aren’t you...Master...”

She was aware of it all. I’d underestimated the sharpness of her intuition. She must have stayed up waiting for me after divining my intentions. Now that it had come to this, I couldn’t keep mum.

“Yeah. I’m gonna come right back with Lastiara in tow, so could you wait here for me?”

Maria remained expressionless; she said nothing at all. While I thought it strange, I kept going. “After we return, we’re planning to flee to a different country. How about you—”

What’re you going to do?

I interrupted myself. Putting it that way made it sound as though it didn’t matter to me what she did. Taking her feelings into consideration, asking her that would be too heartless.

“How about you come with us? We’ll run away, the three of us.”

The blank look on her face remained unchanged. “Run away? What about the house?”

The house? I wasn’t expecting talk of the house. In my eyes, it was nothing more than a stopgap measure, but maybe to Maria it was something more.

“Unfortunately, I’m thinking we’ll have no choice but to abandon it. What a waste, I know...”

Finally, her expression changed. “No... No, I don’t want to.”

This was an expression I’d never seen before. Not even when she was a slave. She was trembling, and from the look on her face, it was the end of the world to her.

“Huh?” I’d thought we were having a calm conversation, but my response had been in vain. It had only aggravated her.

“Please don’t go, Master. I’m begging you, please don’t go!” she pleaded, grimacing. This was the first time she’d ever stood in the way of anything I did.

“Maria...what’s gotten into you?”

“If you go, I’ll never get through to you. You’ll leave me to rot.”

Maria’s expression continued to darken until finally, it reached a point of unfathomed madness not unlike Lastiara’s in the past.

“C-C’mon, Maria, calm down. I said we’d run away together, didn’t I? I promise I won’t leave you behind. How could I ever abandon you like that?”

“Liar. Even if we run away, the three of us, I know I’m not really there in the end. It doesn’t matter if I’m there or not. And I can’t stomach that.”

This back-and-forth was similar to my conversation with a high intoxicated, giddy Lastiara, in that I couldn’t keep up with her leaping to conclusions. Maria was not in her right mind, and I looked for the cause as she kept talking.

“Why are you going to go save Miss Lastiara? I thought you didn’t like her or anything?”

Was this a product of envy? But Maria’s personality was more coolheaded and persevering than that. Seeing her erupt like this felt out of place. Perhaps her romantic feelings had spilled over because there was a problem with my behavior. But everyone perceived her crush as something small. What was making her feel so cornered?

“Whaddya mean, why? She’s one of us, isn’t she? We need her to Dungeon dive going forward. I can’t afford to forsake her.”

“Dungeon dive going forward? How long do you plan to dive?!” At last, she was beginning to raise her voice.

“C-Calm down, Maria, please!”

“If you go, then I’m sure Miss Lastiara will be saved! And if that happens, it’ll be the same as before! I don’t wanna reach the stupid depths of the stupid Dungeon! Not going to the Dungeon won’t kill you, will it?! If you live a nice quiet life here at home, that’s all you need!” she shouted, spitting out all of her pent-up grievances.

I couldn’t acknowledge that. That desire ran counter to my objective in this world and the reason I was even living here. In order to communicate my

intentions to her, I once again tried to pacify her.

“I can’t do that, Maria. I can’t stray from gunning for the depths of the Dungeon. I’m in the Dungeon Alliance for the sole reason of reaching the deepest level, so—”

“Yeah, well, that’s just greedy! You don’t need to reach the depths! You can earn money nice and safe around Level 10 and live a normal, happy life! That’s what I want! And Miss Lastiara isn’t necessary for that, is she?!” she raged.

This was plainly not the Maria I knew. With grim determination, I drew close and grabbed her by the shoulders. Then I stared straight into her eyes. “Listen, Maria, that is not what this is about! At this rate, Lastiara’s gonna *die*! That’s why I’ve gotta save her! Are you okay with Lastiara dying, Maria?!”

Maria’s bleary eyes opened wide. Perhaps the fire in my words had persuaded her; I could feel the tension in her body gradually abating through my hands. She feebly cast down her eyes.

“Miss Lastiara’s a good person. I don’t want her to die.”

“See? So we need to go save her. She’s our comrade, after all.”

I could tell Maria’s body was relaxing. *Good. Maria’s calmed down now—*

“Our comrade? That’s why? You’re putting your life on the line to go save her just because she’s our ‘comrade’?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Maria’s body radiated a bizarre pressure. Detecting that this force was none other than magic energy, I fell back a half step.

“Yeah, right. Because she’s ‘our comrade.’ Lies. Who would risk their life just for *that*? That’s right. No one would. Listen, I *know*. I get it. You want to show her your good side, right?!” she shouted, flames bursting from her body. “You want to show off, but only to her, never to me, right?! Even though when *she* wasn’t in the picture, you’d try to look good for *me*!!!”

I immediately retreated, crossing my arms to protect my face from the blaze. And then, through the gap between my crossed arms, I saw Maria constructing a flame sword, which she wielded as she slowly and calmly approached.

This is a battle.

That was what my intuition told me, but I couldn't draw a sword from my inventory for one simple reason. I absolutely did not want to choose the option of attacking Maria with a weapon.

I deployed my magic and made to hold her down with my bare hands.
“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash*, spellcast: *Freeze!*”

First, I weakened the intensity of the fire in the room using *Freeze* as I closed the distance between us. Maria reacted by swinging down the flame sword from above. I bent down to dodge it and aimed to grab her by the wrist, but Maria's extraordinary eyes more than saw it coming. Her flame-wreathed free hand grabbed *me* by the wrist. Her fire burned my skin, and my body froze in place.

“Yoww!”

Maria tried to press her advantage by slicing upward, but the flame sword met only empty air. Thanks to *Calculash*, I could see the trajectory of the slash. In the end, there was no way Maria could win a close-combat fight against me. My numbers were just that much higher than hers. Mustering all of my considerable STR stat, I broke free of her grip, grabbed her wrist, and spun to her back. She was unable to keep up with my AGI, so both of her arms were pinned to her back. I fell to the ground with her in my grasp and held her down as I used Analyze to check her Condition.

【CONDITION】

Confusion 4.23

There it was. There was no mistaking it; Maria wasn't herself. There was no way Confusion would get that high just from normal everyday life. This only made sense if she was under the effect of some spell or skill.

I racked my brain for anyone who might carry out such a deed, keeping her pinned as I shouted, “Maria, listen to me! Have you met that Palinchron guy recently?!”

“P-Palinchron?”

“The knight who won the bid for you at the slave auction! The guy with the watchful eyes who’s a bit taller than me and wears merchant clothes! That dodgy-looking dude!”

“Never... Never mind about that!”

By blasting yet more fire, she tried burning me from below, but I endured by strengthening *Freeze*.

“Maria, has someone cast some kind of spell on you?! Your confusion is crazy high!”

“A spell? Confusion?!”

I spent all of my magic energy on *Freeze*. Fortunately, I’d been practicing my ice magic since the day before, and my control over the cold was perfect. It not only weakened Maria’s fire, it leached the heat from her body. I was literally cooling her head. The method was surprisingly effective. The tension left her body, and she started calming down.

“That’s it; easy does it... Breathe in, breathe out...”

Maria did as I instructed and breathed. Harshly at first. And when her body had become completely chilled, she seemed to come back to her senses.

“Huh? Wait, what?”

“You okay, Maria? Nice and calm now?”

Her confusion stat abated alongside her mania.

【CONDITION】

Confusion 0.44

I suspected that Maria’s flames were linked to her Confusion stat. And that made Alty, the one who had taught her fire magic, the prime suspect. But there was no way such a forcible measure could have been for Maria’s sake. If Alty had done this to make Maria’s love requited, it was too off the mark. And if her

objective had been to take my life, Maria was too weak to accomplish that; Alty had to have foreseen my being able to restrain her like this.

Unable to determine Alty's angle, I gritted my teeth.

"I... I'm sorry! What have I done?!" Maria apologized, red in the face.

"It's okay. I know you were saying stuff you don't mean because of the Confusion."

As I pulled myself off her, I sensed the morning sun shining through the window. The plan to recapture Lastiara was a race against time, yet I'd been kept from leaving. Perhaps the culprit was aiming to interfere with Lastiara's rescue. Then again, I'd only decided to rescue her the day before, and only Maria, Dia, and Alty were in the know. Did that make Alty the only possibility?

But she wouldn't have a motive. Alty didn't hold any grudge against Lastiara, at least not as far as I knew. I'd seen her expression the day before. If she hated Lastiara, she hid it well.

"I'm sorry, Master. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

For now, I had to focus on soothing Maria. I stroked her head. "It's okay, honest. You don't have to apologize. Never mind that; are you hurt anywhere? From what I can see, your Confusion is way down, but..."

"Yes. I'm back to normal now. I'm truly sorry..."

From the look of her, she had no idea what had just happened, but she hadn't forgotten it either. She'd regained her presence of mind, so she could at least hold down the fort for me. But—and this was just a hunch—I had a bad feeling about it.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to talk to her. It was already daybreak. If I headed out any later, I'd be endangering Lastiara. And even though my heart wouldn't stop pounding, I had to make a choice. A choice that, in all likelihood, I'd come to regret forevermore.

"Maria, I'm gonna go take Lastiara back. I think it'll all be over before you know it."

"Y-Yes, understood. If that's your decision, I will of course abide by it," said

Maria obediently. Owing to that bout of Confusion, she was shrinking, utterly mortified.

“Until we’re home, wait for us here, if you would. We’ll be back in no time, promise.”

I’d have preferred to leave her with someone I could trust, but I couldn’t think of a suitable person. I contemplated having her wait at the pub, but Maria was stronger than the manager now. So I had no choice but to have her wait for us at home. Lastiara’s recapture would probably be a blitz, and since it would only take a short time, it should be okay.

“Yes, understood. I’ll wait for you here. For you both...”

The light of reason was in her eyes. The madness from before was no more. I could rest easy—to an extent, anyway. Lastiara, on the other hand, could die any second. The urgency of the matter compelled me to go get her now.

“See you later, Maria.”

A pause. “Yes, Master. See you later.”

Reluctantly, I turned my back to her and broke into a run, rushing out of our house and dashing towards Whoseyards. I had to. I had to ignore the look that had appeared on her face just before we parted and just, *run*.

Right away, I retrieved a largish stole from my inventory, wrapped it around my neck, and drew it up to my nose to hide my face. I knew it was no use, but I wanted to conceal my identity as much as possible. People who knew me would know it was me, but people who didn’t wouldn’t. That was what I was going for.

I zipped through the dawn-lit townscape of Vart, strode over the border, and entered Whoseyards. Even though it was dead early in the morning, there were a ton of folks walking about. They had to be participants in the Day of the Blessed Birth events. They were all headed for the Cathedral with a spring in their step. The weeklong lead-up that was the Festival of the Blessed Birth had gotten people into peak spirits. Everyone from parents taking their small kids to old married couples were chatting up a storm in their anticipation of the celebration held at the Cathedral. I apologized to them in my heart for what I was about to do as I raced along the boulevard.

That was when the Cathedral came into view in the distance. I started sensing an abnormally dense mass of magic energy rising up from that direction. It wasn't rising from the Cathedral itself, but from outside it. A man was standing in the center of the avenue, amid the crowd. His name was Hine Hellvilleshine. The knight of wind with the short blond hair.

I could hardly disregard him. He was the one knight among the great number of knights who'd be there that I couldn't ignore. I slowly decelerated, coming to a halt before him. At some point, the throng in the road had parted into two; the vibe Mr. Hine and I were saturating the air with had caused the people surrounding us to distance themselves.

Mr. Hine was wearing more or less the same attire he'd worn during our last encounter. The only difference was how insanely dirty those clothes were. He was all cut up; his clothes had rips here and there. He was covered in mud, and the hems looked worn out and frayed. There were only two rings left on his fingers, and he'd lost one of his swords too. I didn't need to check his menu to see he had wounds all over.

"You're finally here, lad," said the battered and bruised paladin.

Mr. Hine had been waiting for me. He must have been that sure I'd be crossing through then and there. And that could only mean one of two things: either he was here to block my progress or the opposite. Of course, I knew which of those two possibilities it was. As far as I was aware, the only one who'd tried to chase Lastiara out of the country up until that day had been him. That was why I approached him without hesitation, and he greeted me with a tender smile. As in the past, his smile had been so lovely it had made my spine tingle. And for some reason, I had a feeling the shadow of death was hanging over his face. The man was prepared to give his life. Or that was what the gravitas he was exuding led me to believe. Faintly, his magic energy—

"Shall we talk as we walk?" he asked.

After I agreed, he turned his vulnerable back to me and started walking towards the cathedral. I followed him, not even considering attacking him from behind. His expression, his appearance, his behavior—they all screamed that I could be sure he genuinely meant to collaborate with me.

He asked me another question as we walked. “Now that things have come to this, we have limited options. Do you understand what I mean, lad?”

“Err... I heard that during the ritual, the fetters binding Lastiara will all disappear. I figured I’d aim for that moment.” I walked beside him, informing him truthfully of my plan.

“Good. All that’s left is to determine if we’re aiming for that moment to abduct her, or if we’re aiming for that moment to talk down the organizers. It’s one or the other.”

“Talk down the organizers?”

“I speak of Chancellor Pheydelt as well as one representative of the Senate. If those two conclude that the ritual can’t take shape, then milady’s death will be averted. Guests of honor and nobles from various nations will be in attendance; if something should befall them, they may have no choice but to cancel or modify the event.”

“So that’s on the table too.”

We were already on the threshold; having more options than before had me losing my bearings. I wasn’t ungrateful, but I couldn’t deny it also ushered in some doubt.

Mr. Hine must have taken note of that, since he didn’t coerce me. “Please just keep that in mind as a possible alternative.”

“Okay.”

We reached the cathedral’s drawbridge. The masses were buzzing about, waiting for the hour to come. As soon as Lastiara’s ritual was over, the full ceremony would commence inside the cathedral. Citizens eagerly awaited the opening of the fortress’s doors so they could be part of it.

I turned my gaze towards the building. In the middle of the drawbridge, multiple knights had formed a human wall, their swords drawn. In addition, countless knights could be seen waiting on the raised platforms and rest areas behind that wall. Mr. Hine’s expression didn’t change as he pointed at the main gate and started explaining.

“We’re going to pass through the main entrance and cross over to the cathedral. I had a look at the other routes yesterday and today, and they’re all too heavily guarded. That being the case, let’s break through the front, where we know where we’re going.”

I couldn’t rebut what he said. As I didn’t know much about the interior, I’d have trouble using any route besides the front entrance anyway. It didn’t change my plans.

“Okay. Let’s save Lastiara together, Mr. Hine.”

He smiled faintly and shook his head. “You have the wrong idea, lad,” he said, his expression sad but his voice glad. “You’ll be the one who saves her. The only one.”

“Only me?”

“Do you remember what I said in the Dungeon? I did tell you, didn’t I? I’m complicit. And that’s the truth. It was I who indoctrinated her. I knew I was wrong to do so too. I just kept pretending not to see it. I was never able to recognize anything she was feeling inside. I couldn’t comprehend either of them—the Lastiara who made up her mind to do this or the little girl who sought salvation. As such, I’m unqualified to save her.”

I couldn’t quite grasp what he meant by “unqualified.” To me, it looked like he simply felt remorse for neglecting Lastiara’s problems for so long.

“I don’t think being ‘qualified’ has anything to do with it. If you’re gonna bring that up, I’m not...”

I’m not qualified either. I hadn’t replied when she asked me to save her, and my feelings for her had been taken from me. In fact, I wasn’t sure Lastiara meant quite as much to me as she did Mr. Hine.

“That’s not true,” he said. “You’ve come to stand where you are after only a few days. It took me three years. That’s how ahead of me you are. That’s truly how small I am compared to you.”

He quickened his pace as he derided himself. As our walking speeds weren’t the same anymore, I ended up lagging behind. I started walking faster in order to catch up, but it was then that I detected a curious magic energy in his wake.

Dimension came into contact with that energy—and I was astonished by its sheer weight. It was so heavy that I might swear he'd peeled off his very soul. I didn't know why, but I could tell that he'd turned his hand to forbidden magic for Lastiara's sake.

On an intuitive level, I understood that he was making use of something akin to a curse, and that it was squeezing the magic energy out of him as payment. I didn't know why I thought that. Strangely enough, looking at his back filled me with a sense of nostalgia. Like I'd seen that curse somewhere before. Like someone somewhere had paid a similar price...

Reeled in by that strange nostalgia, I reached out to that energy. And when my magic energy touched his—when the dimension-element magic energy touched the magic energy that was leaking from his soul—the scenery before my eyes warped and contorted. For a fleeting moment, the townscape gave way to another vista, as if the world's plane of existence had skewed.

Mr. Hine was now walking down a Whoseyards boulevard. Under the bright and sunny skies, the cathedral bridge could be seen a short way off in the distance. We were walking outdoors now; I didn't need to verify that. And yet, for a moment there, it seemed to my eyes like Mr. Hine was walking down a dim and gloomy underground passage.

No, it *still* looked that way. I could see Mr. Hine walking through an underground corridor even now. It was as though two different dimensions were overlapping. It was like a waking dream—but also like a flashback.

A flashback? Mr. Hine's?

I could tell that this phenomenon didn't stem from "???" but rather from *Dimension*, which was analyzing the magic energy scraped from his soul. That energy was dense, and the near-infinite scene funneled into my head in the form of information. These were the memories he'd spent with the girl he was now trying to rescue and the memories of why he was so penitent that he would curse this world.

I viewed his story through my mind's eye.

Chapter 2: The Pawn Named Hine

Hine Hellvilleshine, the Rank Two Knight of the Seven Celestial Knights. That is the title I currently possess.

I never particularly wanted such an overblown title, mind you. That's because I never wanted to be a knight who took pride in his status or prestige. If I'd become, say, a rural area knight who dedicated his body and soul to a single person, the kind you'd see playing a supporting role in an opera, I'd have been perfectly happy with that. What I wanted to be was a righteous knight capable of protecting someone from harm.

Yet in the end, I had never been able to become anyone's knight. I was born to a distinguished knight family in Whoseyards, and out of fear of tarnishing the family name, I trained and trained. But I'm a man to be pitied, for with the power I acquired, I kept committing mistake after mistake.

When I first met milady, it was at age eighteen, soon after I assumed my post within the Celestial Knights. I was led by a superior into the dark basement of the cathedral, passing through heavy stone doors into an eerie room containing naught but a candle and bed.

And there she was. She had been asleep, her eyes closed. I remember it like it was yesterday. I remember it because the second I laid eyes on the maiden dozing atop the soft bed under pure white sheets was the second that my tale as a knight finally started.

The sight of her otherworldly beauty took my breath away. I'd been given a bare-bones explanation beforehand, so I understood that this was to be Saint Tiara's vessel, but I asked just to be sure:

"Is this her? *The* Saint Tiara?"

"Sure is," said the man who'd brought me there. "Well, she's the girl who'll serve as the body for the rebirth spell that *the* Saint Tiara left behind. She's both Whoseyards's dearest wish and the culmination of magical engineering,"

he explained concisely.

The man's name was Pheydelt Riös, and he was a proxy agent of this nation's Chancellor. Under his reddish-brown hair glared a cloudy, dark pair of eyes. The Seven Celestial Knights were presently under his direct supervision, which made him my superior. As his eyes intimated, he was of a somewhat ruthless disposition, but since his loyalty to his country was second to none, he was still on the preferable side as a supervisor.

"Just how long has this been in the works? From what I can tell, she's in her teens."

"Actually, she's under a year old. They weren't able to lock in the homunculus's body until rather recently. If I recall correctly, it's been around three months since she was born."

"Th-Three months? But then why does she look so grown-up?" There was no way the girl sleeping before my eyes could be a *baby*.

"It's possible thanks to today's magical engineering," stated Pheydelt like it was no big deal, ignoring my astonishment. "Since we need to get the body ready by the Day of the Blessed Birth three years from now, they decided to make the body's physiological age older to match. We've been tasked with offering a finished 'sixteen-year-old' product by the stipulated date in the year foretold by the founder's prophecy. And to that end, you've been chosen as her educator, Hine Hellvilleshine."

"Me? Her educator?"

"For the time being, we'll be treating her as a descendant of Saint Tiara. She'll be given the status of a god in human form, and she'll be readied for the promised day. I'd like to put you in charge of preparing her in some of the ways she needs. You have to furnish her with the appropriate strength and inculcation. If, when the Saint descends into her body, that body is feeble and weak, the plan will fall behind schedule. We plan to have the Saint get to work right away, you see."

I was beginning to get the picture. In short, my mission was to raise this girl up such that she would be a suitable vessel for Saint Tiara's advent.

“So I should train her up? If that’s all, I can probably manage it.”

“No, you’re not just going to train her body. This is important, so listen carefully. In a moment, this homunculus is going to sprout a consciousness of her own. When that happens, the biggest problem is whether the girl will agree to the ritual. So I want you to be guiding her to the correct decision.”

The picture wasn’t looking so pretty anymore. I looked Pheydelt in his lifeless eyes. “Err, uhh, sir, this vessel, this girl will be conscious? So she’ll have the soul of a girl who’s not Saint Tiara?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Think of her as a baby who was born a few months ago. There’s a possibility that she’ll reject the idea of her consciousness being overwritten by Saint Tiara’s.”

“Overwritten? So their consciousnesses won’t coexist? But then—” *But then, doesn’t that mean this girl’s gonna die?*

My ember of righteous indignation was cut short by Pheydelt’s cold remarks.

“Good sir knight, this is what the government has decided, the consensus of the Church of Levahn, and the dying wish of the founder.”

My small flames of fury were doused in short order by the lump of ice that was the state’s decree.

“The vessel will become the saint that everyone reveres. That’s a cause for celebration, not something to pity her for. The sympathy you feel for her could well be construed as treasonous.”

“No, sir, I would never think such a thing.” *Treason? You’ve gotta be joking. Just because you’re above me in rank doesn’t mean you get to spout off whatever you like.* But I bowed my head like a good little knight.

“If you’re dissatisfied with her fate, Hine, then do your job. If the vessel delights in becoming Saint Tiara, we’ll be delighted. And the people will celebrate that fact as well. If that comes to pass, then no one’s left unhappy, are they, laddie? Your job, so to speak, is to make everybody happy. That’s why you were chosen—you’re near her age and you’re good at spinning yarns. Just color her world through the creative storytelling that is your forte and impress upon her the beauty of the Church of Levahn, the magnificence of Saint Tiara,

and the nobility of duty and self-sacrifice. End of discussion.”

That explanation wasn’t anywhere near enough, but of course, I was forced to obey. I could only grit my teeth and bear it. Such was the destiny of the knights of the House of Hellvilleshine.

“I leave it to you, knight of the Hellvilleshines.”

Pheydelt’s words wrapped around me like chains. It was all that was needed to keep me immobile. With that, he turned his back to me and exited the room. Left alone in the dim chamber, I heaved a sigh before immediately drawing closer to the bed in the center and shaking the girl awake. Best to get an early start on my job.

“Ngh, rrgh...”

“H-Hey there. I’m Hine. Nice to meet you.”

I tried to greet the girl, who was slowly opening her eyes, as gently yet amiably as possible so as to earn her trust as her educator.

She sat up, holding her head. “Augh... H-Hine? My... My name is... Huh? Urgh, my head hurts.” The girl had understood my words and was trying to remember who she was, only to realize right away that she didn’t even know her own name. “Who am I? I... I don’t know my name? Urgh, so much is flitting in and out...”

That comment clued me in to her condition. In all likelihood, she had been encoded with basic everyday knowledge and language through magic formulas in her blood. Left to her own devices, she’d know everything a sixteen-year-old needed to know. Otherwise, how could I be having a conversation with a girl who had been born three months prior?

“You don’t gotta strain yourself. We’ve got a name for you already.”

Her eyes opened wide, and she stared at me. The name the upper echelons of Whoseyards saw fit to christen her with was yet another chain to bind her.

“Lastiara. Your name is Lastiara Whoseyards.” It was a name that could only be called a curse.

“Lastiara... My name’s Lastiara...” She turned a tad red in the cheeks as she

delightedly repeated her name.

“Nice to meet you, Lastiara. Ah, hold on, I guess I’m supposed to call you Lady Lastiara? You *are* a ‘god in human form’... Which means I should be using the polite register when addressing you too. Well, in any case, from today on, milady, I, Hine, will be serving as your instructor. If there’s anything you’d like to ask, fire away.”

I made it clear that this was my job and gave her only the need-to-know information.

“Understood, Mr. Hine,” she said, smiling. After a moment’s thought, she gazed at my face with a puzzled look. “Mr. Hine, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“Shoot,” I replied affectionately, having decided to tell her as much as I could.

“Why do you look so sad?”

Just like that, I learned that the kind facade was beyond me. “I...I look sad?”

“Yes.”

I put a hand to my head. By tracing my mouth, nose, cheeks, and eyes with my fingers, I could tell my face was contorted. Yet I couldn’t afford to acknowledge it. It’d stand in the way of my job.

“There’s no way I could be sad. I’m *smiling*. I’m smiling a kind and gentle smile, obviously. You’ve got the wrong idea, Lastiara.”

“I do?” she replied, sincerely confused. This was clashing with the general knowledge supplied to her through her blood.

“Yep,” I persisted. “You do.”

I wasn’t pitying her. I wasn’t sympathizing or empathizing with her. I wasn’t allowed to. That was what I decided then and there. It was our first encounter that led me to that decision.

On that day, I set my path in stone. Never in my life could I become the girl’s knight. That was the moment I admitted it to myself.

Thus began the days I spent as her instructor. In addition to my work as a

knight, I continually conditioned her to be Whoseyards's convenient little pawn—and naturally, before long, I developed feelings for the purehearted lass.

But it was all too late by then. By the time I fell for her and found myself wishing to be her knight, I was no longer qualified. I myself had thrown it away—the role of saving the damsel. The role of the story's hero, swooping in to rescue her. All I was now was a filthy villain who deceived the heroine with lies. There was no way a love story could ever unfold between us, and I, the villain, kept on doing that which could not be taken back. Even if I tried to save her at a later stage, it'd expose what a heinous villain I was. I couldn't help but be afraid of her souring on me.

And that wasn't all. I was afraid of antagonizing my country. I was afraid of losing my position. I was afraid of disappointing my family. In the end, it was simple. I, Hine Hellvilleshine, was just a pathetic wretch of a man.

There was only one thing I could do. Just as Pheydelt suggested, I had to make Lastiara into the perfect construct so that she didn't suffer in life. If I made her idolize Saint Tiara, wish to become a hero, and become overjoyed to serve as the country's salvation, then that artificial "Lastiara" would die happy. That was the only happy ending available to her...

Or so I kept telling myself. I knew that this wasn't okay, but I continued to brainwash her and call it "education." I conditioned Lastiara for one year...then two years...then three years...

But one day, with only a little time left before the Day of the Blessed Birth, she made a request of me, like a ship in the night that had spotted something on the horizon.

"Mr. Hine. Before the end... Before the end, I want to see the outside."

That was when I realized that the "perfect vessel" had formed a crack. Initially, I couldn't believe my ears, as that was a line she'd never have said if she'd gone by what I'd taught her. But there she was, telling me to let her outside.

First, I wondered what the cause could be. As a knight of Whoseyards, I went straight to trying to protect the nation's interests. And soon, the cause came to me. Actually, I may have been vaguely aware all this time. It was because I was

too troubled, too apprehensive, and in too much fear for my education of her to be “perfect.”

I was supposed to teach her subjects like history and religion in a balanced manner, but I’d read her an overabundance of heroic adventure stories and tried to make her think about freedom and liberation. In addition, I’d searched for adventure stories with strong romantic elements that girls her age would like, adapted them, and presented them. It was craven of me, as I knew it’d only make her suffer. On a subconscious level, I was hoping she’d refuse to undergo the ritual of her own accord, and so I’d unwittingly given her an alternative.

The die was cast. Her request was granted much more easily than I’d anticipated, and she was granted the right to jump out of the cage called the cathedral. The top brass must have harbored a whole lot of confidence in the girl’s degree of so-called perfection.

Many layers of mental magic were applied to her from the body-creation stage, and the formulas in her blood were flawless as well. I also knew that Palinchron, who specialized in mental magic, regularly checked up on her. While I was in charge of her indoctrination, I wasn’t in charge of everything to do with her. I guess they figured it’d be futile if I plotted something by myself. And so the construct that was Lastiara popped out of her prison.

Secretly, I hoped for an upheaval of the current situation. However, reality felt otherwise. When I spoke to the girl who was preparing to set out, she was only dreaming of heroic adventures. I wanted her to do something girlier. Ideally, she would have been attracted to me if she’d been an ordinary girl. Yet she never stepped out of the framework of being a hero or saint.

Just when I was about to give up on seeing the crack in her facade as anything more than a fantasy—or seeing the girl as anyone besides “Lastiara”—we bumped into *him*.

“Hey, you. You over there, hiding. Show yourself.”

We encountered the black-haired boy with the burn mark.

“I’m not a brigand.”

Thanks to my wind-magic dragnet, I was able to detect the boy by the breaths

he exhaled. At first I figured him for a brigand, but judging by his appearance, he wasn't one. We attempted to follow our usual *modus operandi* by disengaging from him.

"You're an intriguing one!"

However, we were stymied by her curious outburst. It was the first time she'd expressed this much interest in a member of the opposite sex. She treated even the strongest diver, Glenn Walker, like any ordinary guy.

She helped the boy with all the magic she could, after which we tried to take our leave of him like nothing had happened. But I'd known her for long enough to notice that she couldn't shake him from her mind. I reckoned I had come into an opportunity to "do what I could," so to speak.

The night we healed the boy in the Dungeon, I asked her a question once we'd returned to the cathedral.

"Milady, you've that boy from earlier on your mind, haven't you?"

Her eyes sparkled, making her easy to read. The glint that had once been so pure had turned into a maddened sheen, and the reason for it was simple. Her unbalanced education over the years had negatively impacted her personality.

"This is your final chance, after all. Why don't you try working in concert with the lad?"

"But Mr. Hine, I..."

"Oh, I know. We'll say you fell in love with him. How about we go with that?"

"H-Hold on. *Love?*"

"That way, the precepts of the Church of Levahn will prevent them from complaining too much. It's a pretext for you going outside."

"Err, it's certainly true that the precepts say that, but there's no way that excuse will fly..."

"It will."

That was a lie, of course. What I would actually be reporting was: "In her admiration of Saint Tiara's adventures, Lastiara said she wants to do a Dungeon

dive before the end.” I’d sell it as being about her wanting to get closer to Saint Tiara. But I did it to unite her and the boy.

It was okay if it was just pretend. By entertaining the notion of falling in love, it would give rise to the possibility that something would be added to her heart. Maybe her emotions as a normal girl would return.

“That sounds great,” she said, her eyes shining darkly. “I’d like to go on an adventure, just like Saint Tiara!”

Unsurprisingly, the fake Lastiara’s interests lay in a hero’s journey. That would make my report to the higher-ups the truth, and that left me slightly chagrined.

“Yes, please go on an adventure with that boy. I’m sure you’ll have fun.”

“Heh heh, heh heh heh. Excellent. That’s excellent.”

For several days afterwards, I ran around the cathedral without time to sleep. I gained permission from various places, trumped up the utility of the plan, and put in the groundwork.

For some reason, Palinchron caught wind of it and lent me a hand, which was a huge help. As a result, I managed to pull the wool over the higher-ups’ eyes and earned Lastiara some more time for her own activities.

Exultantly, I went to tell the girl holed up in the cathedral.

“Milady, about what we discussed earlier...”

“What we discussed? Err, do you mean about adventuring with Kanami?”

“Yes. I asked my bosses, and they were happy to give the nod. For a few days’ time, you’ll have carte blanche.”

“Whoa, really?! W-Wow, all right! That’s incredible! For real?!”

“Milady, mind your diction.”

She was delighted. And the way she was expressing that delight was appropriate for her age. However, the mania dwelling in those eyes had not yet disappeared.

Well, that can’t be helped. It won’t be me who erases it. That boy will.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hine. Ahh, you know, I thought I’d only be able to meet up

with Kanami after I turned into the Saint. I'm honestly thrilled."

"I'm happy for you, milady. However, this is top secret, so exercise sufficient caution."

"I know. So, what's the pretext for my going outside?"

"It's just as I told you initially. Everything sprang out of your desire to be with Kanami, the boy you've got feelings for. That crush is the pretext. Of course, as this is the crush of a living god, those who can't stomach the idea will try to interfere. The big-headed, inflexible priests will grip the stalwart knights of Whoseyards in their evil clutches. But what's this? A boy named Kanami drives off all comers through his splendid swordsmanship! Who should he remind one of but—"

"Wait, hold on a second. Is such a grandiose scenario really necessary? Are you sure your storytelling thing isn't getting away from you?"

"It's... It's essential."

It seemed she thought my penchant for creating stories was running wild. Due to my constant performance of creative works, her image of me was skewed. But that mistaken conclusion suited me just fine.

"I mean, weren't there all sorts of excuses?" she asked. "You know, the usual stuff, like, 'she needs to explore like Saint Tiara did' or 'she needs to build up her body' or 'she needs to deepen her understanding of this world'?"

"That won't do."

"Pretty sure this is just a product of what floats your boat..."

"This is also a test of the boy with whom you'll be dealing."

"A test?"

"I know what you're thinking, milady. Even after you become the Saint, you'd like Kanami to be by your side."

That was just my supposition...but I needed it to be the case.

"Y-Yes... You're sharp, Mr. Hine."

Excellent. On the inside, I was clutching my fists.

“As you said, it is a grandiose scenario, but it’s an essential test of the boy who would be your knight. It also serves as a periodic monitoring of your person.”

At some point, as she watched the dashing figure of the boy being struck from behind as he protected her, she’d start to feel a little bit sweet on him. Yep, this was the classic, tried-and-true tale. It was the least a story needed to be good. Besides, for a dreamer like her, anything less would fail to provide her with enough excitement. This production had to be nice and hammy.

“For the time being, what say we send in Palinchron or whoever to gauge the boy’s mettle? You’ll make contact with him after that. Please allow him to drive away the many knights who will come for him. Needless to say, I’ll pick out knights the boy can probably beat.”

She looked unconvinced. Was my production overcooked?

“I guess it can’t be helped. But once I’ve made contact, I’ll do what I want. I have no confidence that I can playact a girl in love, and I think Kanami should be in on what he’s a part of.”

While she wasn’t over the moon about this setup, it was worth pursuing, and she didn’t dislike a hero story in this vein either.

But she’s going to explain the situation to the boy too?

In truth, I’d hoped the boy would want to protect the beautiful girl who appeared out of nowhere and liked her more organically, but...there was nothing for it. I was willing to prioritize the smoothness of the forward motion over the orchestration. Both parties faking their love only for that love to become more and more real over time was another trope, after all.

“All right. That’ll be your common ground. Now then, let’s dispatch Palinchron. In fact, let’s dispatch him today. He’s a man of leisure with time on his hands, and he has eagle eyes to boot.”

“Okay,” she replied.

Smiling inwardly at how well my plan was going, I searched for my collaborator, Palinchron, and explained things to him. Palinchron agreed without hesitation and began tracking the boy that night.

Then, the night gave way to dawn. The next morning, Palinchron's report left me astonished.

"Ahh, Hine. The lad's a beast. Even I'd have a hell of a time beating him."

"I'm sorry, come again? You're telling me this Kanami is a match for the Celestial Knights?"

"Yep, from what I can see, there's no doubt about it. And let me tell ya, he's real amusing on a personal level too."

"H-Hold on, please. A few days ago, he was on death's door on Floor 1 of the Dungeon. He's rocketed up to Celestial Knight level in just a few days?"

"Well, according to my intel, that's exactly right. A few days ago, the kid sustained a burn on Floor 1 and barely escaped alive. That's indisputable. What's also indisputable is how he traversed ten floors in no more than a few days. It'll only be a matter of time before he reaches Floor 20. There's too much about him that's freaky."

"Freaky? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm looking forward to things from this point on, so I don't wanna say. I'm thinking about how to have my fun with the lad. You know what, I'll tell ya a little something: there's a chance Siegfried Vizzita took down the Guardian of the Twentieth Floor. Ah, Siegfried being Kanami's alias."

My mouth was agape. Not even the strongest diver, Glenn Walker, and his party had been a match for that monster. Having taken Tida down would put Kanami on the level of a hero of the nation. I couldn't suppress a grin.

"A Dungeon Guardian...slain by the boy?"

"Yep. That's info from the lugs over at the Vart guild. Also, I didn't get permission but I examined the ley line and corroborated it. I don't think there's any mistake."

"There you go again with the ley lines. I should get your skill marked for sealing soon."

"All I did was gather the evidence. My prime connection's an acquaintance in Vart."

“Fine. In any case, we need to amend the plan.”

“Oho. So you heard all that and still plan to push for the kid?”

“The more I hear, the more I want to,” I told Palinchron without hiding the fact that it was expedient.

He whistled and replied that he’d cooperate with me in changing the plan. He probably hadn’t disclosed all of the info he had on the boy, but that was no skin off my back. No matter what Palinchron’s ulterior motives may have been, if the boy was a bona fide hero, we’d just elevate the plan to its optimal form.

Revising the plan overnight, I went to inform Lastiara and found her engaging in chitchat with Sera of the Celestial Knights. I explained the plan to her again, making Sera leave the room first. I didn’t want her being part of this due to her proclivities.

After I described the altered scenario, Lastiara nodded, stars in her eyes. “Ahh, I knew it! That’s my Kanami for you!”

Through her Pseudo-Divine Eyes skill, she must have seen this coming.

“As such, the knights who attack him will be Celestial Knights. And because we lack in numbers, I’ll end up having to be part of this too.”

“Right. But who knows if even the Celestial Knights will pose a challenge?”

“Just think of it as a performance. The point is, it’s fine as long as a duel is had.”

“Heh heh, I’m looking forward to it.”

Good, it’s all coming together. This’ll be a real farce, but we’ve got no choice but to do it to completion.

“As a side note, the only ones who know that the pretext is your crush on him are me, Palinchron, and the top brass. No other knights know anything.”

“So the majority are in the dark.”

“The fewer who know the truth, the better.”

All that was left was to prevent the story of this love tiff from reaching our bosses. That in itself wouldn’t be much of a problem. Few of those bosses ever

came to the Dungeon Alliance, and almost none of them had any interest in the place. They were all pencil pushers. In fact, even if they knew what I was doing, they might just laugh scornfully and that would be the end of it. That was just how farcical this whole thing came across.

“Okay, see you later, Mr. Hine.”

“Right. If I do appear, please keep up the act. I’ll be acting as well.”

She sighed with exasperation. “You really do love this sort of thing, don’t you? You, of all the Celestial Knights, must be raring to come. Your addiction to drama is hopeless.”

“Yes. Of course.”

She left the cathedral, and the plan was a go. Our modified scheme was simple. As a hero, Kanami would inspire the feelings in Lastiara that any normal girl might have. And the happiness they would share wouldn’t be a temporary one. No, it would be the kind that would last until death did them part.

I’d report to the higher-ups that Lastiara had found a man while out adventuring and eloped with him. For a hero-class kid like Kanami, they should be able to live happily ever after even if Whoseyards sent assassins after them. The two would spend their leisure time content, like the epilogue of a love story. That was what I could do for her. That was the kindness I could show her.

With hope and anticipation in my heart, I waited for time to pass. As planned, Sera was the first to go on her rampage. However, the timing was a little early, which left me sweating a bit. That woman’s loyalty—no, her ulterior motives—always amazed me.

However, for the most part, it seemed that things would settle into the scenario. After Kanami repelled Sera, he and Lastiara came into contact. And after I confirmed that they’d formed a party, it was my turn. I took Mr. Hopes to see how things were going, figuring he couldn’t win, as he was ill-suited to one-on-one duels.

I pretended to know nothing, and Lastiara and I acted out our roles. She was my number one pupil; she knew how to tell a story inside and out. We exchanged words and played in a way that was at once overblown and pregnant

with meaning. Looking back, there were a bit too many lines of straight exposition, something I intended to correct in my next creative endeavor.

But while Lastiara and I were playacting, the boy made an assertion that I couldn't have seen coming.

"Let me say one thing. I have nothing whatsoever to do with Lastiara's love life. But since she's my comrade and ally, I'd like to help grant her wish. That's all there is to it. Truly."

Even though it hadn't been arranged beforehand, he'd calmly stated what, to me, was top-quality dialogue. I stared at him, flabbergasted, while Mr. Hopes, feeling awkward, poked fun at his words.

Ahh, you don't understand, Mr. Hopes, I thought. That's the level we need from him. The level of passion. Him keeping up that amount of enthusiasm is fitting for the lead role of the story.

I'd known it all along. No one else could play this part.

I could sense that with this, I'd reached peak overreliance on others. But it was unavoidable—he was the only one. I'd taken such a liking to the boy, in fact, that it'd be no exaggeration to say fate had pinned me down until this day for the sake of him, the worthy one. I knew that he alone could protect her for the rest of her life. It wasn't a question of his strength, but rather of the kind of person he was—the kind who walked the path of the story and took it forward. He could do what I couldn't, and that was the moment I became convinced of it.

With a parting shot, I left the Dungeon and recounted what had happened to Palinchron at the cathedral with glee.

"Ha ha," laughed Palinchron. "When you're happy, I'm happy too."

"Heh heh. I was never one to devise any devious schemes, but it seems I've got more of a talent for it than I realized. I finally understand why villains in stories have so much fun scheming and conspiring."

"Now then, we still need to advance their relationship."

"Yeah, but you heard how passionately the lad declared what he did. Do they still need propping up?"

“You’re a believer in narrative convenience who’s obsessed with all things dramatic, so you may be relieved, but I can’t rest yet. I’m pretty sure I know ol’ Sieg more than you do. He’s the most weak-willed guy I’ve ever seen. Reality’s harsher than fiction, my friend.”

I had been operating under the assumption that, with a little more time, the two would come to realize how much they meant to each other and that a tale of romance would blossom between them. But Palinchron was of a different opinion.

“You know what to say to make a guy nervous.”

“Let’s get confirmation. Wait here a sec. I’m gonna hijack the ley line.”

Through the medium of the cathedral’s ley line, he gathered video information about the pair. How they appeared and acted as they participated in the festival with his slave in tow was projected into the room via magic.

Lastiara was gallivanting about, thrilled to attend her very first festival. Kanami seemed much the same—was he not accustomed to festivals either?

That could well have been the first time I had seen the lass have so much fun. It was definitely my first time seeing such an unspoiled smile on her face. I had to abide by the rules of moderation, since I was with her as part of my work duties.

However, they were comporting themselves more like same-sex friends than a boy and girl. Kanami didn’t seem to be conscious of her as a love interest.

“Urgh. You were right. This isn’t looking good.”

“Right? From what I can see, neither of them’s got feelings for the other. I’m guessing most of it’s them being tactful and thoughtful.”

“Still, though, this is...well, probably the most beautiful girl in the world we’re talking about! How could he not be thinking about her romantically?!”

Palinchron sighed. “You sound just like Sera, you know that?”

“What? Don’t lump me in with Sera!” I said indignantly.

Just then, a third person joined the two.

“Wait, isn’t that Alty?” I asked, shocked. “The Guardian who’s cooperating with the Dungeon Alliance?”

“Oh, so you know her. There can’t be many who do. Yep, that’s her, all right. I’m surprised too.”

“Palinchron...if she’s your acquaintance in Vart, then make her leave them this instant.”

“No, no, this is just a coincidence. Let her be. She won’t get in the way. Far from it, in fact—she’s the type who fires up romances.”

Alty was a mainstay in Vart, and her appearance here was unexpected, but it was true that she hadn’t done anything uncalled for. On the contrary, she mostly conversed with the third-wheel slave, and she appeared to be trying to give Lastiara and Kanami more time together. She whisked the slave away and left the boy and girl alone. That suited me perfectly, and I had no complaints.

“Thanks to the Guardian, they’re alone now.”

Even more conveniently, the duo began to deepen their conversations about the Day of the Blessed Birth. If things went on like this, he’d learn her secret, and the boy would be unable to contain himself. I eagerly waited for the turning point in their tale.

Patiently, patiently, I waited and waited, but no matter how much time passed, the girl never got to talking about herself. In all her explanations, she never mentioned anything that might make him worry. She didn’t divulge a thing about herself, despite having mere days left to live.

At this rate, the Day of the Blessed Birth would pass before the boy learned anything. Instead of talking about herself, she kept asking *him* questions. “What? Magic doesn’t exist at all where you come from?” “Whoa, that’s crazy! Forget all this, I wanna hear more about *that*!” “Your world sounds more intriguing!”

“What in the world is she...”

“Ha ha, no use asking me. Hmm, maybe she’ll tell him the day before?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, of course. The day before. It’s more dramatic saying it on the

day before. She must be aiming for the reveal to be theatrically potent. Urgh—my education’s taking her in the wrong direction, isn’t it?”

“Yep, can’t argue. Let’s take it easy and wait, all right?”

But my wish was shattered in short order.

“Why? Because Mar-Mar’s got feelings for you, obviously.”

The Guardian had uttered something outrageous.

“G-Good heavens! Argh! What’s she doing at such a pivotal moment?! That Guardian!”

“Look at that...”

“Don’t just watch, Palinchron! Use the ley line and do something—”

“That’s a tall order. Miss Alty and I are acquainted, sure, but I can’t intervene per the agreement she made with Vart.”

Palinchron didn’t act, as he was worried about the cross-border fallout. But at this rate, Kanami would start looking at his slave with different eyes. And if that happened, the relationship they’d been forging between Kanami and Lastiara would come to nothing.

“So, Sieg, what is Mar-Mar to you at the end of the day?” asked Lastiara.

Far from upset, Lastiara jumped on their ship. Not only that, she did so gleefully. She was actively prodding him in that direction.

“Aughh...” I had arrived at a truth I didn’t want to acknowledge. Lastiara was trying to matchmake the boy and his slave. That was why she didn’t talk about herself. She clearly believed that, since she’d be undergoing the ritual, she had no right to be getting into a relationship with anyone.

I could hear my plan clattering to pieces. I was assailed by the hard fact that the Day of the Blessed Birth, from which I’d been averting my eyes, was right around the corner. There were only a few days left. In only a few days’ time, the ritual would commence. A sinister chill crept down my back, and my breathing became labored. My plan had failed. I knew that now, whether I wanted to or not. The lass herself had said so.

Ah, in the end, it was all futile. What was the point of whipping up this farce?
Dizzy, I held my head. Everything that was happening was in the palms of the higher-ups' hands. She had been tuned, conditioned to undergo the ritual no matter what, and that was why they had let me off my leash without any concern.

They had a grasp of where their Hellvilleshine pawn could and couldn't move, and they'd placed the pawn Lastiara where the Hellvilleshine couldn't capture it. Since the day she was born...I could see her, but I couldn't reach out and touch her. There was never any hope to begin with.

"Sorry, Hine, but it looks like the plan's not gonna work out. Seems they're just not into each other."

I couldn't reach her. Never. Not once. *Ahh, I'll never reach her...*

I'd never reach her, and I'd never reach the realization of my own dream. Having come this far, I couldn't help but feel frustrated with myself for never trying to mobilize on my own before, and for relying entirely on others. I couldn't help but feel sorry for the sad sack who couldn't remove a single one of his shackles.

I... I'm just so weak. Me, a knight?

That was why I'd received my post. That's why I'd been made her educator. They were looking down on me. Sneering at me.

Dammit! Shit!

"Guess that's basically all we can do, huh?" Palinchron continued. "It was maybe misguided to try to get her to fall in love in the first place. If we block the ritual from happening using a different approach..."

Did things go awry because my plan was too naive, too reliant on chance? Would a more elaborate plan have yielded different results? I'd thought my plan leveraged her interests, but was it all based on a misunderstanding?

Argh, it's all because...because of my naivete!

"Man, I've gotta say, Hine, not being able to see that smile again's gonna be real heart-rending. Maybe it's because I've built up an affection for her over the

years of raising her?”

At this rate, she'd never smile again. *She's gonna disappear... She's gonna die! She's gonna freaking die!*

“To think she's gonna vanish after being taken for a ride since birth, without ever being able to lay hold of the smallest happiness... I mean, it may be for the sake of the nation, but I feel sorry for her.”

For the sake of the nation? She's gonna die “for the nation”?! Without ever getting anything out of life?! You're telling me that's okay?! Well, it's not! I can't just sit by...

“I won't allow it.”

The words escaped my lips. The words I'd decided I'd never say aloud. At that moment, I heard my shackles fall loose with a nice clanging sound. It felt like a very important restraint had come off. The sense of loss was so very pleasant...

“Hm? What was that?” Palinchron's voice echoed in the room. “You won't allow it? Then what're you gonna do about it?”

His expression made me aware of a sense of unease. My natural talent for combat clued me in to it. The source of that unease was the magic energy inside my body, which was now faintly clinging to me, leeching off me.

I'm being corroded from the inside, I realized. *Most likely, by a spell cast by the knight right in front of me.*

“Palinchron. Did you cast a spell on me?”

“Boy, did I. You angry?”

He stared me straight in the eye and, defenseless and, within reach of my sword, confessed that he'd betrayed my trust. But that betrayal made me pleased as punch.

“No. Thanks to your magic, I was finally able to voice it. If anything, I'm grateful.”

“No need to thank me. Everything I did, I did for me.”

“How long ago did you cast it?”

“Oh, ages ago. The curse takes time and consumes a ton of fuel too. Well, I call it a curse, but the spell’s not bad per se. It’s increased your strength, for one, and it’s dispelling any indecision in you. Both things you’ll be needing for the battles to come, right?”

“Yes indeed. That’s exactly right. So then...is this goodbye?”

I intuited that this would be the last of our secret meetings. It wasn’t just that the secretive Palinchron had cast a spell that he’d kept hidden from me. It was more because I could hear a noise not unlike whirring gears. The noise of a wheel that turned without ceasing. And I also understood that this was what Palinchron had been after.

Why had I never questioned the fact that he was collaborating with me? Why had I treated it as a matter of course? I could only assume that I’d been under the influence of some kind of spell—or some kind of curse. Palinchron must truly have been aiming for all this to happen for, as he himself said, “ages.”

“Nah, I actually don’t know if this marks the finish line,” he answered. “I planted a whole lot of seeds, but I can’t predict which ones will germinate. There’s a strong chance we’ll meet again. If we get tangled up in each other’s business, that’s certainly fun for me.”

“I see. Just so you know, I will go to bat for milady, no matter what.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it being otherwise.”

“Right then; I’ll be back.”

“Do be back. When you die, make sure you die with no regrets. That’s all I’m hoping for.”

Palinchron wasn’t praying for my safety or success. He just wanted me to have no regrets. I smiled wryly. He never changed.

“Heh. That’s so like you to say that. Goodbye, my friend. I don’t have many, but you are one.”

I exited the cathedral unaccompanied, a spring in my step. It wasn’t just my feet that felt light. So did my mind and body. I felt refreshed like never before. The nation of Whoseyards, the House of Hellvilleshine, my position as a

Celestial Knight—my mother and father, my brothers and sisters, my bosses and colleagues, my friends—it was the first time that I felt free from the fetters of all my obligations. I was no longer weak. I knew neither fear nor hesitation. I was unencumbered. Empty. At long last, I could act for the sake of her happiness. I could fight as a knight with nothing to lose. Just from that, I was beside myself with joy. Now, in order to capture the pawn named Lastiara, I could advance to territory the knight pawns of Whoseyards could never reach. It was in that moment that I, Hine Hellvilleshine, could finally move the pawn called Hine.



Now that I was moving my own pawn by my own hand, I waited for night to fall before heading to the pair's house. It was on the story's stage. I was entering Lastiara's theater house. Using my wind magic, I woke her up and called her outside. The girl came out, rubbing her sleepy eyes, a puzzled look on her face.

She yawned. "Mr. Hine, what brings you here so late at night?"

"Well, there're only two days left, so I came to check up on you."

"Ah, is it that time already? You don't need to check up on me. I can mind the time just fine."

"That's good to hear."

Hearing her say she'd be punctual for her own death sentence was maddening. It made me want to kill the pricks who'd made her say it.

"Mr. Hine? If you have no business with me, I'm going back to bed."

"There's something I'd like to ask you." What I wanted to know was, did my naive plan have any effect at all, or did it mean nothing whatsoever?

"I've been watching, milady, albeit from afar. You seemed so happy while you were spending time with him. Are you sure you can bear parting with him? Will you not regret undergoing the ritual if it means you'll never get to see him again?"

"Wh-Whoa, what's this all of a sudden?" The girl looked a little confused. But

just a little...

“Please, your reply,” I asked. This was my last hope.

Yet the lass drowned out her slight confusion and answered with a determined expression. “It’s no problem. Thanks to you, Mr. Hine, I was able to experience that thing called adventure. Through my brush with part of the life Saint Tiara led, what was once admiration turned into conviction.”

“Does no part of you want to keep adventuring with him?”

“Becoming a hero—becoming Saint Tiara is my dream. It’s the reason I was born, so...”

There was no hesitation there. I gnashed my teeth. Shaking her conviction would require something suitably big. Something that flipped everything upside down and tore out the roots at the heart of her. I knew that the girl would be angry with me. I knew she’d scorn me. All the same, I set about rejecting her whole life.

“Even if those feelings are artificial? Even if you were *made* to be that way? Even if the person you’ve always been was arranged by Whoseyards for its own convenience and you’ve been lied to and exploited your whole life?”

For the sake of her future happiness, I told her, even if it meant she’d suffer now—

“Artificial’s fine by me,” she replied unwaveringly. There was no sign of pain or anger or even contempt. She didn’t ask for details about what I meant with that word. She just quietly answered the question. It was like she’d known everything all along. And her expression intimated that she’d made up her mind.

Ah, so in other words, I’ve misjudged. I couldn’t so much as grasp the heart and mind of a girl who was less than three years old. Not one bit. She already understood the truth behind the creation of “Lastiara.” She understood that her lot in life was such without anyone having to tell her, and she had even braced herself for her fate. Setting aside the question of whether that was the result of external or internal factors, it was all over.

It was all over a long time ago.

What a spineless sense of relief. And I knew full well that they were laughing at me. Those big shots. That was why I had no choice but to say goodbye to her, my voice flat and listless.

“I see. Understood. In that case, I’ll be returning to the cathedral.”

She looked nonplussed. “Okay, sure, understood.”

I left the lass behind. Walking through the town at night, I lamented how little hope was left to me. As I walked, I thought only about how far the pawn named Hine could go, and soon enough I returned to my room in the Cathedral of Whoseyards. Then, I spread out all the weapons in my room and prepared well into the morning for the battles that were sure to come. In the end, there were only two options left to me. Option one: beat an entire country. Option two: knock one girl unconscious. Based on her demeanor, she wouldn’t agree to flee the country, no matter how much I tried to persuade her. She’d been tuned to be that way, after all, and to perfection at that.

As such, I effectively had no choice but to knock her out and carry her off. I had the resolve to do so now, thanks to Palinchron. I hung my most familiar twin swords at my waist and strapped on my leather gloves. I then put on ten rings that contained some of my magic energy and put my arms through the sleeves of the knightly uniform, not forgetting to hide small magic tools under my clothes. This was the greatest fighting force I could muster.

On the way out of the cathedral, I passed a subordinate who was surprised by how armed to the teeth I was.

“What kind of monster are you going out to slay, sir?”

I smiled wryly. “I’m just going to lend somebody a hand,” I equivocated.

Early in the morning, I went to the pair’s house again, but I found only the boy’s slave there. It seemed they’d already hit the Dungeon. I had no choice but to go through the entrance of the labyrinth, proceed along the Pathway that I had once walked down alongside her, and reach Floor 20. I knew that if I waited there, we’d run into each other, so I decided to wait for them in the room that was as empty and cold as I was. And I waited. And waited. And waited.

Ever since I’d met her... Ever since I’d become one of Seven Celestial Knights...

Ever since I'd started looking up to knights after seeing someone play the role of a knight in a theater in town... Ever since being born the eldest son of the House of Hellvilleshine... That was how long I'd been waiting. Until, at long last, the two emerged before me.

"I have been awaiting your arrival, milady."

I'd been waiting for this moment. For the time I could betray Whoseyards, abandon the Hellvilleshines, and fight for my oath-sworn maiden. With that, I challenged them to a battle.

The surprise attack was partially successful. As planned, she was knocked unconscious, but the boy was different, as was to be expected of the protagonist.

With strength beyond what I'd imagined, he continued parrying my onslaught. I was frustrated that things weren't going to plan, but I was also pleased. This proved it—he was truly the only one. Only he could clear away my past regrets in my stead. The pawn that was this boy was absolutely necessary to save the girl. In the midst of my hardship, I grew more convinced of that than ever. In the end, I lost the match that hinged on knocking them both out. But although it failed, it was a happy miscalculation. I knew now that the boy was strong enough to defeat the agents of evil in Whoseyards.

After throwing out remarks hinting at the girl's current situation, I took to my heels. And when I returned to the cathedral, I immediately started preparing to capture the two who possessed power that beggared imagining. Since I was now fine with throwing away my positions as a Celestial Knight and the firstborn son of the House of Hellvilleshine, I used that standing to gather up the knights of Whoseyards, planning to overwhelm the boy with sheer numbers.

I cooked up a false pretense whereby they were to capture two escaped Whoseyards VIPs, and I tried to set out for the Dungeon from the cathedral once again. Then, it happened. As if they'd been waiting for me, I found the other Seven Knights at the exit of the cathedral, having come to arrest me. Among them was Pelsiona Quaygar, the head of the Seven Celestial Knights.

What I was up to was thinly veiled treachery against Whoseyards. I was using

knights for personal business as opposed to the interests of the state, and I was trying to kidnap the cathedral's princess. When the Head of the Knights asked for an explanation, I had no reply. But I'd thrown it all away now. I'd save her by hook or by crook, and I was prepared to kill my former comrades in the process. Blowing away the head knight with some surprise wind magic, I escaped from the cathedral and laid low in town.

As I rested out of sight, I reflected on how strangely fast the head knight's response had been. Had the higher-ups predicted my betrayal? Or had Palinchron tattled on me? It was also possible that there was simply a leak somewhere. But while I didn't know the why of it, this was not such a terrible turn of events. There was no truly turning back now.

My resolve was moving my pawn ever forward, and I was starting to get a glimpse of a whole new face of the game board. I was beginning to understand the placement of the pieces for the next day's celebration of the Blessed Birth. It was just as I thought—I was the supporting character and the boy was the main character. The only way to keep the lass in check was through the pawn named Kanami. For indeed, there was no one else for the job. And that being the case, the role of my pawn was...

The boy would most assuredly come to the cathedral. That was what I believed. And it was on me to prepare by putting things in order. I had to be the one to clean up the proverbial theater. To set the stage. The wounds I sustained while escaping the cathedral stung, but I didn't mind.

It'd be difficult to get her in check through just one piece. As such, I didn't have to give it a moment's thought. My pawn had but one role to play. One and no other. And to carry out that role, I'd move onward, always onward. I'd show them and keep on walking. Even if it meant the piece named Hine Hellvilleshine should fall in the process.

Chapter 3: At the End of Day of the Blessed Birth for “Lastiara”

“All right. The time has come.”

Mr. Hine’s voice snapped me out of my waking dream. We were in front of the bridge leading to the cathedral. Perhaps because the flashback had gone by so fast, I couldn’t remember what had happened in it save for fragments of scenes. My only real takeaway was the sense that I could definitely trust him.

“Ah, uh, right!” I caught up with him and moved next to him, stealing a glance at his face from the side. What I saw on his handsome countenance was a smile.

Through his magic energy, I’d been able to get a small peek into the state of affairs that motivated him, but that didn’t mean I understood the true meaning of his smile yet. I only realized, vaguely, that an old memory was triggering it.

We passed through the crowds waiting for the ceremony and stepped onto the bridge. Upon our crossing that line, the guard knights rushed towards us, and in response, we went about constructing our spells.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash*. Spellcast: *Freeze*.”

“*Wynd Breath. Wynd Draw*.”

I deployed a sphere of detection magic several meters in radius, intermingling *Dimension* with my ice magic. That was the preparation I needed to be able to launch my new magic at any time. Cold air began to leak from my body, and the ground I trod froze over.

Mr. Hine, meanwhile, made the wind coil around him. He also spread countless lumps of wind around us. At the sight of that, the approaching knights blanched. One of them raised his voice at Mr. Hine.

“Sir... Sir Hine, what on earth—”

“I’m sorry. I’m in a hurry.”

Mr. Hine moved one of the clumps of wind, blowing the knight away from the edge. The knight flew off to the side and fell down from the drawbridge. Then came the splash.

The other knights' expressions hardly remained unchanged after that display. They tried drawing the swords that were sheathed at their waists, but it was my turn now. Before they could, I closed the gap and flung one of their number away with all my strength. That knight joined the previous one in the river. The others finally drew their swords and attempted to intercept the two cads who had come out of nowhere to commit brutal acts of violence in front of their sacred cathedral.

They were all so slow. They didn't even have the time to raise their swords. Mr. Hine's clumps of wind flew wildly, and the knights were dunked into the river one after another. I tossed the one who had escaped Mr. Hine's zephyrean onslaught, and he too met his comrades in the drink.

A high-pitched shriek sounded behind us. No doubt it was someone in the crowd screaming in response to our dastardly deed. But my companion remained calm.

"Let's run along," he said. "Leave the enemies with the high ground to me. I won't let them ring any bells or send up any smoke signals."

"Okay."

The knights waiting at the back of the bridge noticed the irregularity, and they swarmed after us like so many ants. Mr. Hine and I ran towards them without needing to confer. I felt his magical power swell as he sprinted beside me. One of the rings he wore cracked, unleashing the same spell as before.

"Sehr Wynd!"

The gale-force winds shooting from his hands blew away a portion of the clustered knights. I raced through the opening the squall had created and felt his magic power swell even more.

"Go on ahead, lad! *Sehr Wynd!*"

Yet more storm winds. A raging gust grazed my cheek before blowing away the knights in front of me and shattering the lattice gate in front. The attack had

forged a path leading to the cathedral's interior grounds.

“You want me to go without you?!”

“Yes! Listen to me—you're the one who'll save her! You can let me handle everyone behind you!”

Mr. Hine was adamant about me being the one. I'd have preferred him to not be so fixated on that, but his eyes were so serious and determined that I could tell he'd never back down no matter what. Pushed onward by the force of his will, I nodded.



“Got it!”

I put my strength into my legs and stamped the ground with enough power to gouge it as I blasted ahead. On the way in, various gusts of wind passed me from behind, knocking out the knights who were barring my path. Glancing to my side, I saw the knights on the elevated watchposts getting blown away and dropping like flies. Mr. Hine’s precision and speed were terrifying. To me, it served as a nice tailwind. There had to have been more than a hundred knights waiting at the gate, but thanks to him, we were able to leave them all behind in the space of a few seconds.

I made a beeline along the road, which was paved with gems and featured garden shrubs on either side. There were no signs of any knights giving chase from behind. It seemed my ally was keeping them occupied. However, my magic detected figures approaching from the right. Another band of knights appeared to be on my tail. Not that that group would ever catch up to me. The gap between our AGI stats was too wide to cover the distance.

Just when I was feeling relieved, I sensed a shadow popping out of that group. No, it wasn’t *one* shadow. It was a rider clinging to the back of his or her steed, and they were heading my way alarmingly, recklessly fast. *Dimension* informed me of their identities: it was the semifer knight Sera Radiant in wolf form and the magic-sword knight Ragne Kyquora, two of the Seven Celestial Knights. I increased my own speed, but the gap was closing. My AGI was greater than an ordinary person’s, but my opponent’s speed was, I had to say, greater than your average beast’s. No sooner did I sense that they’d reached the spot on the other side of the trees, right by the road I was charging down, than Raggie’s magic energy swelled.

A blade made of pure magic stretched from beyond the trees, with every intention of stabbing me. The extendable magic sword was one application of her specialty, which was manipulating magic energy itself. I’d faced this before. That experience, combined with the fact that *Dimension* informed me of the blade’s approach in advance, allowed me to bend out of the way right in the nick of time. The blade cut down several trees in an instant before quickly retracting. This was the first time I’d been witness to that sword cutting something—I had to beware of its sheer sharpness. If it touched me, it’d easily

sever a limb or two.

After the surprise attack, the two knights cut in front, showing themselves to block my way. Thanks to the AGI gap, there was nothing I could do to prevent it. Raggie, a short-haired young teen, was riding on Ms. Radiant's back.

"Err, uhh, please stop there, Mister...kid from the other day!"

There was no tension in her voice. But not one atom in me was thinking about stopping. I didn't slow down; I made to rush right past them.

"Ah, hey! Wait up!" Disconcerted, Raggie crafted her magic-energy sword and extended its blade at my feet.

"Spellcast: *Freeze*."

I'd basically already gotten used to Raggie's magic and battle techniques. Avoiding the blade, I grabbed the energy sword in my hands. Next, the cold air from *Freeze*, which had pooled inside *Calculash*, poured into the magic blade. In no time at all, it was frozen to the root by the biting cold produced by the ice magic I'd spent so much time refining.

"Augh, so cold!"

Naturally, her sword hand also froze over. Then she put her strength into her sword hand...and lifted it up.

"Huh?"

Unable to release the frozen sword of energy, she was dragged up into the air by it. With that, I flung her into the thicket.

"Wait, hold on, augh, gah, yeeaaaaaargh!" Raggie shrieked as she soared through the air, crumpling somewhere in the distance.

Judging by her level, that won't kill her. I think...

I tried to run past Ms. Radiant. Needless to say, her fangs and claws came at me; she wouldn't let me pass without a fight. Accurately gauging the timing with *Calculash*, I dodged her blows by paper-thin margins. Then I took the bag of spices from out of my inventory and sprinkled its contents. If she was as beastlike as she looked, it would work wonders, as it was highly likely that she was following me through the power of her nose.

“Gurgh, graaahhhhhh!” she bellowed.

Radiant’s wolf form started mutating; I could see she was changing back into humanoid form. A human hand rubbed the spices from her nose. The sight of Ms. Radiant not wearing a single thread of clothing shook me, but I soon snapped out of it and retrieved my beloved sword from my inventory. Seeing that, she transformed one of her hands into a lupine foreleg and howled.

“Rahhh! Why?! Why are you doing this, you... YOUUUU!!!”

“Would you please behave yourself a little?!”

Ms. Radiant’s claw sliced vainly, and my sword alone drew blood. I nicked her arms and legs and pushed her head to the ground with my free hand.

“Gah!”

Leaving the groaning Ms. Radiant in my wake, I resumed my sprint towards the cathedral. Behind me, I could sense her transforming into a wolf again and trying to run after me. However, it seemed that her brain had gotten a nasty shake, and her body was failing to cooperate. Even if she could run, she wouldn’t be as fast as before due to the lacerations on her limbs. She was out of the picture now. I could rest assured that the road was mine.

After passing through the road lined with trees on each side, I came out into an open garden. There was a large fountain in the center, along with rows of flower beds of different varieties. A familiar knight was waiting there alongside a retinue of about ten other knights. It was Hopes Jokul, a middle-aged knight sporting a head of gray hair.

Mr. Hopes greeted me with the same flippant smile as he had during our prior encounter. He immediately drew his sword and swung his arm sideways in the same fluid motion. The knights behind him started incanting at the same time. Upon closer inspection, all the knights behind Mr. Hopes were wearing comparatively light equipment and carrying staffs studded with gems. I didn’t have to use Analyze to surmise that these knights leaned more towards magic.

I ignored it all and sped up in order to blow past them. But of course, Mr. Hopes stood in my way. Now, another of the Seven Celestial Knights was barring the path forward. But I didn’t slow down. I was confident that I could

cut him down as I passed by. I swung my blade without easing up on my momentum. Just like last time, Mr. Hopes tried to parry it while falling back at the same time. That move was never going to beat me; the only thing that he could expect after retreating was a full-momentum flash of steel from me. While he had forced me to waste slightly more time on this duel, I had him in checkmate.

But that was only true if this fight was one-on-one. When Mr. Hopes lost his balance due to his constant retreat and my sword strike hit him, the knights in the back fired their spell. All the water in the fountain floated up into the air and rained down towards me. I dodged it by jumping sideways. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Hopes used that chance to regain his footing. Then, he slowly moved forward, brandishing his sword anew.

They're obviously just buying time.

I gave it some thought. I'd grown to the point where I could freeze all of the water that was being controlled. The groundwork for that had been laid, as the *Freeze* spell gathered inside my *Calculash* packed that powerful a punch. If I wanted to go about this in the fastest way possible, I could. But I decided to leave that card in my hand for the Celestial Knights I had never encountered before. It wasn't a given that the power wielded by the knights in the back was limited to water magic.

I switched my sword to my left hand and fetched some throwing stones from my inventory. I threw the stones at the knights behind Mr. Hopes with all my might, aiming for the crowns of their heads. Several took projectiles to the head and were knocked unconscious. My STR stat made any stones I tossed into deadly weapons. There were knights who didn't collapse after taking a direct hit, though. They were relatively high-level, but then again, we were talking about pebbles here.

"Twin lines!" shouted Mr. Hopes upon seeing I'd chosen to attack them from afar.

The knights immediately formed two lines, with those in the front defending and those in the back incanting. I could only admire the way they flowed like a regiment. And I could tell that breaking through would not be easy. I tried

throwing stones again, but the bullets were deflected by those in the front row and never reached the incanting knights behind them. I broke into a cold sweat, but not because I was afraid of the enemy's strength. It was because I knew I could no longer hold back. If I just wanted to break through, consequences be damned, I could hurl the spare swords in my inventory at them. Forget about the knights in the front, it'd skewer the ones in the back too. But that'd almost definitely kill them.

For but a short moment, I hesitated. Then I settled on a compromise. I took out a spare sword from my inventory and tried to fling it with all my might at body parts that wouldn't spell instant death. Even if I avoided the vitals, chances were good that this would lead to deaths regardless. Yet, since I'd made up my mind to save Lastiara, I couldn't allow myself to waver.

However, as soon as Mr. Hopes saw that I'd fetched a blade from my inventory, he reversed course on his fight-while-retreating tactic and came swinging. He too must have thought that getting blades thrown at them sounded catastrophic. I slashed the back of his hand and made him drop his sword. It was a cakewalk to defeat Mr. Hopes when he was on the offensive. Upon dropping his sword, he immediately shouted for mercy.

"We... We surrender! This is too much! If you're this resolved, I can't win! So please, do what you want; just don't throw that sword at us with your donkey strength!"

Raising his stinging hands in surrender, Mr. Hopes showed he had no intention of resisting any longer. The knights in the rear were in shock that their commander would give in. They made a stir and expressed their will to fight to the bitter end.

"We're still in this, Captain! We really found our legs from this poi—"

"You don't get it. We're no match for him! He's been holding back so we don't get badly injured. Ten squads wouldn't be enough to stop him. Throw down your weapons! Do it! If we stand our ground, we'll drop like flies. Aghh, this is so stupid..."

The knights put their weapons on the ground and left. They looked like they were chewing on bitter cud the whole while.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Now, if I may.” With that, I broke back into a run.

“Sorry about that. About taking advantage of your goodwill. But I did manage to buy nearly twenty seconds against you. You’d best hurry along now.”

I heard Mr. Hopes’s voice behind me. His tone seemed almost encouraging. I felt like I now understood a little bit more about his personality and position in Whoseyards.

I passed by the disarmed knights and rushed ever onward. I couldn’t respond to his words of encouragement; I hadn’t a second to spare. And so I passed through the central courtyard.

I had to have been more than halfway through the cathedral now. I’d heard that if I kept going, I’d run across a grandiose staircase shaped like the letter T and another shaped like an upside-down T.

Running down the road decorated with jewels and flowers, I finally reached the front of the staircase. A battalion of more than twenty knights was waiting there. At the head of the group was a knight who radiated the vibe of a formidable soldier. His equipment was on the light side, not unlike that of the magic-wielding knights from just before. What made his being a mage especially obvious was the fact that he used not only the sword at his waist but also a staff decorated with a gem. He was most likely another one of the Celestial Knights, and he was the first among them I’d seen who seemed to specialize in magic. He was a man with several long braids of hair and looked around forty years old, about the same height as me. I was about to use Analyze on him, but I stopped myself. Looking at the menu of an enemy was standard practice at first sight. But I deliberately chose not to.

Luckily, the conditions were right. I’d decided to use my new spell if I ever concluded that the enemy was magic-oriented. As such, I didn’t even bother using Analyze, instead spending that time to construct my spell. I was confident that if I used the biggest spell in my current arsenal, I could prevent the enemy from doing anything to me.

“Spellcast: *Dimension*, spellcast: *Freeze*, fusion!”

The domain of my perception magic now encompassed the entirety of the

enemy battalion. At the same time, the freezing air generated by my ice magic engulfed them. It was the same line of thinking behind *Snowmension*. The only real difference was the scale. With *Snowmension*, I put the icy air inside dimensional magic that was molded into the shape of bubbles. This time, however, I was putting that frigidity into dimensional magic molded into the shape of a great big area of effect!

“Spellcast: *Wintermension*!”

I stood at the center of the spherical domain, which was fifty meters in diameter. Inside the domain, it was the dead of winter. In this world dominated by winter’s chill, the performance of my ice magic improved dramatically. Needless to say, lowering the temperature alone wasn’t this spell’s true selling point. No, its real value lay in impeding the matter within the area of effect.

I sensed that the knight ahead of me, who was likely a Celestial Knight, was trying to cast a spell. I controlled the cold air in my bid to block it. The picture in my head was straightforward. As I hailed from a world of advanced science, I interpreted ice magic as magic that manipulated the kinetic energy of atoms. If the kinetic energy fell to zero, things froze. I wielded my ice magic using a mental image of pinning down the vibrations of atoms, based on my admittedly shallow, trivial understanding of the science. In any case, I extrapolated the atom-stopping magic into magic that quelled the motion of magic energy. Luckily, I had a firm grasp of the enemy’s magic energy thanks to my dimensional magic, which made picturing the spell in action child’s play.

I repressed the magic energy of the knights within *Wintermension*’s domain and shifted their magic formulas little by little so that they couldn’t properly construct their spells. The knights felt a tad cold and a middling sense of discomfort, but they fired their spells nonetheless—only to regard their own magic with astonishment. Each spell in their volley was visibly waning. There were even some misfires mixed in. Here, a fireball the size of a match’s flame; there, a water bullet with pitiful flying distance, and a shock wave that amounted to a barely perceptible tremor. They were the shadows of spells that could have been, and not one reached me. The spell fired by the commanding knight proved no different.

I grinned at the greater-than-expected success, deflecting the feeble excuses

for spells with my sword in one hand as I rushed to slash the commander. Panicked, he tried to draw his sword, but *Wintermension* got in the way. Hindering the movement of the enemy was its second effect.

Given that it could suppress magic energy, it was also possible for the spell to hold back the flesh. But unlike with something as fine and subtle as magic energy, there was more of a limit on how much it could stifle the enemy's body. From their point of view, it'd be a slight feeling that something was off. But even just that much instilled immeasurable anxiety in those who dealt in battles and blades.

The knight had probably perfected the motion of drawing his sword by drilling it over and over again, and the spell yielded a slip in that technique. A modest slip, but a slip regardless. In fact, *Wintermension* had the most pronounced effect on precisely those targets who had drilled techniques into their bodies through steady hard work. As a result, the commander had trouble drawing his blade. At a guess, it took him more than twice the time it normally did. And before my AGI stat, that slipup was fatal.

As the commander brandished his blade, mine was already swinging for him without mercy. The magic gem-studded staff was laterally sliced in two, and I even nicked him across the chest. Then I slashed the back of the hand that was holding the sword, sending the blade flying. It seemed that this commander was as he appeared—a magic specialist who was weak at close-quarters combat.

I bashed him in the solar plexus with the hilt of my sword and swept out his legs. My STR stat was such that the force caused him to regurgitate. He fainted in pain and toppled to the floor. There'd be no more out of him, or his squad, for that matter.

Having lost their commander, the knights were in disarray. Their formation broke down, and they attacked me in a disconnected fashion, which made them no threat. I dashed up the stairs as I rendered the nearby knights helpless, then went up the T-shaped staircase, doubled back, and climbed the upside-down T-shaped staircase, leaving only the straight-line staircase left. That last one, however, loomed long. I could see around a hundred steps, and those were just the ones I could make out.

I spotted a single knight standing halfway up the steps. It was a giant figure clad in thick, jet-black armor. The full-face helmet occluded their gender and age from view. After drawing their huge black sword, they stared at me through the gap in their visor. My gut told me this, too, was one of the Seven Celestial Knights. Repeated battles with the knights had refined my sense for them, but what really clinched it was the fact they were standing alone on the steps in front of the cathedral. That served as the best proof. Defending the final line of defense without any aid? That could only mean one thing.

【STATUS】

NAME: Pelsiona Quaygar

HP: 421/434

MP: 105/105

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 27

STR 10.98

VIT 9.72

DEX 8.55

AGI 10.09

INT 9.32

MAG 6.56

APT 1.56

INNATE SKILLS: None

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.88, Holy Magic 1.95

“Pelsiona Quaygar,” this black knight, was the strongest of the seven!

I kept running, as I had concluded that there was no need to hold back. My menu-sight communicated just how stout this black knight was in both stats

and skills. They had no gimmicks or specializations, just two solid skills and high stats across the board, reminiscent of a paladin in one of the video games I used to play. From a distance, I activated *Wintermension*. The spell couldn't be said to be fuel efficient, but against a powerful, never-before-seen enemy, I couldn't afford to be stingy.

“Spellcast: *Wintermension*!”

“Blestspell: *Growth*.”

In response, the black knight incanted some holy magic. I maneuvered the cold air to block it from happening. I remembered *Growth* from when Ms. Radiant had used it against me during our duel.

Try as I might to suppress the spell with my ice magic; that tactic didn't work well against support spells that worked inside the body. If the magic power was out of the body, I could interfere with it plenty, but the difficulty jumped up quite a few levels otherwise. As a result, the black knight succeeded in strengthening their body with *Growth* unimpeded.

【CONDITION】

Body Boost 0.67

And, the instant we both finished casting our support spells, our swords clashed. I didn't put much strength into it, as I knew beforehand that I was inferior when it came to our STR stats, and above all else, our relative positions on the staircase made a contest of strength unfavorable for me.

The black knight had the high ground, and that put me at an overwhelming disadvantage for a trial of might. As such, I parried the strike by shifting their blade back and to the left. But the momentum failed to carry the enemy's sword away—my opponent wasn't swinging with all their might either.

Instead, they quickly pulled back and shored up any openings. That one exchange was all it took for me to realize how formidable they really were. I also realized that coming up with some breakthrough in a short span of time

wasn't currently in the cards. I had to commit to either consuming more MP or spending a long time fighting this person.

I made the snap decision to do the former. I knew from experience that if the chips were down, I could spend points from my max HP to wring out more magic. I drew back a bit and took advantage of the time and distance it afforded me to craft my next spells. Due to having deployed *Wintermension* already, the construction of my bigger-than-ever ice spells went smoothly.

"Spellcast: *Snowmension*. Spellcast: *Form!*"

"Blestspell: *Divine Wave.*"

It rained magical bubbles and snow in my winter world—bubbles and snow that popped and disappeared thanks to the black knight's shock wave. The ice magic dissipated, turning into tiarlay, or snow composed of magic energy, which dyed the grand staircase white. The black knight's discernment and reaction time made me tremble with fear. If, in response to my drawing back, my opponent had closed in, I would have prepared to counter.

However, they had chosen not to pursue. Without moving a single step, they'd eyed my magic, ascertained the correct response, and instantly cast the perfect spell. In addition, they'd deemed that *Wintermension* couldn't hinder them while I was constructing another spell.

The gap in our combat experience couldn't have been clearer. Left with no other choice, I discarded the idea of fighting head-on and moved a significant distance to the side. Since they were wearing heavy equipment, my plan was to leave them behind through my relatively unencumbered speed. Yet the black knight followed suit without any trouble.

Considering their stats, I had known outrunning them was hoping against hope. But I couldn't believe such a colossal hunk of metal could actually keep up with my dead sprint until I saw it with my own eyes. Their already high STR and AGI were further enhanced by that buff spell, making them an absolute monster. Perhaps due to the influence of their physique, the heavy equipment they wore was no encumbrance. Moreover, as a knight with a wealth of experience, it made sense for them to pick the best equipment for the job, and that was probably what their heap of steel was.

Running alongside me, they swung at me with their black sword. I didn't block it with my blade, opting to dodge it instead. It missed me by a hair's breadth. So long as they surpassed me in strength, sword-on-sword clashes were to be avoided.

However, that decision led to a less-than-stellar turn. The black sword swung through the air, the blow landing on the stone staircase, sending fragments flying. The knight's full body armor protected them, but I was clad in mere cloth. To me, it'd be like getting hit by gunfire. Any shard striking, say, my head would open me up to attack, so I had no choice but to deflect the shards using my sword.

The black knight came at me with a slash. I evaded, fleeing down a considerable number of steps. Once again, the staircase ate the blow. The destruction caused smoke to rise up, and the knight stood still amid the smoke; they didn't give chase. They were determined to deny me passage.

It was too dark to see past their visor, but I could tell they were still observing me. They must have calmly ascertained the situation. At this rate, if they kept buying more and more time, I'd be the one in trouble. And though Mr. Hine had my back, I couldn't say I was totally unafraid about more comers arriving from behind.

Time to recalculate. I'd decided not to hold back my magic, but I had skimped on the MP. I had yet to use all of my new magic. After getting a read on my surroundings, I tightened *Wintermension* from around a hundred meters in diameter to around three. Then I infused that field with an excessive amount of magic energy. This was *Wintermension's* ideal form. If my opponent wasn't mainly a magic user, and if they fought one-on-one at close range, then this was the optimal form—

High-density cold air flowed out from my body, and the ground under me froze over. I sensed the black knight's breath catching, most likely out of surprise by my magical power exceeding their expectations. However, this power was only natural for me. My stats bore it out. I was no swordsman or knight. I was a mage who commanded space and ice.

"Spellcast: *Blizzardmensioooooon!!!*"

All I did was pour more MP into it, but I went ham, going so far as to change the name of the spell. Then I put my strength in my legs and kicked off the floor, charging with the same speed as moments ago. This time, things were different. My speed hadn't changed, but theirs had. Anyone who entered *Blizzardmension's* area of effect slowed down as though they were trudging through snow in the dead of winter. When that area had been a hundred meters in diameter, the hindrance to movement had been little more than a sense of discomfort. But now, the level of obstruction had risen precipitously.

At the moment, the black knight was probably experiencing a sensation akin to being in a different time stream than me. This was the true worth of the mage of space and ice, Aikawa Kanami.

Slowed to a crawl, the black blade swished through empty air. Taking advantage of the opening this created, I jumped right in front of the black knight. They threw away their black sword and tried to pin me using both arms. But I saw it all coming. This realm of concentrated winter was also within *Calculash*, and my close-combat perception abilities worked the same as ever.

And now everything about the black knight was slow. Too slow. I sidestepped their arms and passed my sword through a gap between the joints of their armor. I didn't pierce them deeply, but I did take the liberty of stabbing just deep enough to impede their actions. In addition, I sent cold air through the gap, aiming to inflict frostbite, and I froze their armor's joints, setting them in place so their limbs couldn't bend.

When I was done having my way with them, what stood there was a mass of frozen armor. Still, the black knight's fighting spirit didn't abate; the armor creaked as they tried to face me. But I finished them off by pushing their back. The giant lump of steel couldn't stay upright and rolled down the stairs, clattering and rattling and smashing the steps as they descended. It was like seeing a gigantic lump of iron roll down the stairs with rattles. I watched the heavier-than-I-thought black knight fall, my brow beaded with sweat.

That won't kill them...I hope.

That was it. The end. I canceled *Blizzardmension* and switched back to the wider-area *Dimension*. The fight with the black knight lasted about ten seconds,

but even so, the knights downstairs had reached a short distance away. Then again, I could see they'd stopped in their tracks, gawping at the sorry spectacle that was the black knight tumbling down. I heard people downstairs calling for them to be healed.

I tried running up the stairs, but I staggered a little. After all, *Blizzardmension* did more than consume MP. It also put a heavy burden on my brain. That spell required the user to maintain a constant grasp of the enemy's movements and continually allot magic energy there. Sure, I was a deft hand at calculating things, but keeping other people in check this way ran my brain ragged. I was right: the spell was only suited for one-on-one fights, and short ones at that.

However, perhaps because of that, I was able to emerge from the fight unscathed. As I had no healing spells at my disposal, and since there was a possibility I'd have to flee with Lastiara in tow, preventing injuries was of the essence. I climbed all the way up the stairs, still unsteady on my feet. There was a flower garden that resembled the courtyard where I'd fought Mr. Hopes, though it wasn't as wide as its downstairs counterpart, and soon I reached the grandiose and imposing cathedral.

A man was standing in front of the entrance. Thus far, I'd made it past five knights whom I assumed to be part of the Seven Celestial Knights. Excluding Mr. Hine, that left the seventh. The one I had yet to run across until now.

Palinchron Regacy clapped his hands, applauding me. His expression was commending, and his lips were curled. "Keh heh, I knew you were a riot. You're in the nick of time, laddie. Welcome to the Cathedral of Whoseyards."

That smug face was insufferable. I had my suspicions he was the one who'd cast that spell on Maria too, but I had no evidence. I swallowed the urge to attack him. "I don't love that I'm dancing to your tune, but I've come to take Lastiara."

"Excellent response." He snapped his fingers, and the doors of the cathedral opened unaided. The magical power enveloping the building dissipated, and I could sense that some kind of magic formula was being lifted. "All right, that's the cathedral's obstacles and barrier dispelled. Granted, I'm sure you'd have been fine either way, but consider this a freebie from me. You're the Hero of

Destiny who's gonna save the princess, after all."

I kept listening as I walked, passing by Palinchron without letting my guard down. I entered the cathedral and proceeded through the uninhabited entrance hall. Weirdly, there was no one inside.

"There's nobody around."

"They must have peace of mind just from the barrier and the knights outside. Even if there were anyone in here, they wouldn't be able to put up a fight. Keeping away's easier."

Palinchron's abilities and character were dubious, but going by his dispelling the barrier and clearing away the people, I at least knew that he was cooperating with me.

"So, are you lending me a hand too?"

Unlike Mr. Hine, Palinchron didn't seem to have any affection for Lastiara. But the guy nodded like it went without saying.

"Of course, laddie. As a token of my respect for the Hero of Destiny who made it this far, I'm gonna look after ya in more ways than one. I just put the barrier back up. That way, I can buy you time until the folks trailing you are able to enter, ya hear?"

I was grateful for that, but I couldn't trust him. As I went straight through the cathedral interior, I never took a wary eye off him.

"First things first, use your detection magic and try pinpointing the shrine room where the ritual's being held. It'll likely soon be canceled, but I'm sure you agree that a grasp of the situation's important. Oh, and I'll be watching your back, so don't worry. It'll take a little bit longer for the knights to be on your heels."

"They're still after me? You can sense stuff that's that far away?"

"The range of my detection magic's probably wider than yours. I've gotta say, that Hine's incredible," he remarked, his tone light. "He's holding them back all on his own. Shouldn't you get on with it, for his sake as well as your own?"

I didn't know if the words coming out of this joker's mouth were true or not,

but I had no doubt that Mr. Hine was indeed putting his all into keeping our enemies tied up. I hurriedly used *Dimension* to find the location of the shrine deeper inside the cathedral.

The room was about the size of a school gym. The interior was similar to one you'd see in a fairy tale illustration, the only difference, if any, lying in the dazzling decorations. The decorations in this world were mostly jewels. Stone pillars and pews lined the glittering sanctum, and well-dressed VIPs occupied those benches. Some among the crowd radiated an alarming aura.

The guests were staring at Lastiara, who was offering prayers to the stained glass. She sat alone on the stage, wearing a pure white, mostly unornamented dress. Next to her was a man who looked like a priest, and across from them was a woman. I wondered if these two were the folks Mr. Hine had mentioned: Pheydelt and that senator woman.

"Were you able to get a grasp of the inside?"

"Yeah, I was. There's some damn strong-looking people in attendance..."

"Yep. That's what I wanted you to know. You've got big shots from all over the world, plus their guards. You've gotta break past 'em, but if you go it alone, it'll be a real bitch."

"What other choice have I got?"

"I'm not telling you not to do it. It's just that, as an intellectual type, I want ya to kidnap the princess only as a last resort. You remember what Hine said, don't you? We can talk down the organizers. If that goes well, we can take back Lastiara without a fight and without having to shed any blood. I'm gonna do you a favor and set the stage for your right to say something."

Palinchron grinned. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't want to take orders from anybody who smiled or laughed like he did. But since I could be sure that our interests were aligned with regard to Lastiara's rescue, I decided to hear him out. If he didn't get too long-winded, there was still time to listen.

"All right then, what do you want me to do?"

"Oh, nothing. I just want you to stir the pot a bit. It's basically the same as when you rile folks up..." Palinchron's lips curled further still as he walked and

explained.

The process he laid out for rescuing Lastiara wasn't all that bad. If things went well, we would be able to take her without bloodshed.

"...and that's the plan. Now you wanna try it, don't ya?"

We arrived at the door of the shrine where the ceremony was being held. Palinchron was grinning like a child about to get up to no good. What a stinker this guy was. His combat ability was low, so I told myself that if push came to shove, I'd take him hostage, and smiled back.

"Sure, got it. I'll give it a whirl."

We set right to it, putting our plan into action. First, I took off my cloak and put on an expensive-looking robe with gold embroidery that Palinchron had prepared for me. By properly wiping my sweat and tidying up my getup, I could now pass for an aristocrat from some far-off locale. As soon as I finished changing, Palinchron placed a hand on the extravagantly designed door to the shrine room where the ritual was taking place, and it opened at last, creaking dully as the interior came into view.

Naturally, the guests and the priests who were officiating the ceremony turned to look at the sudden arrivals. Lastiara, who was still on the stage, also looked at me, her eyes widening. I gave her a once-over. What I noted before anything else was her tremendous fatigue. If what Dia had said was true, she had been praying since the night prior without a wink of sleep. However, I could also sense a discomfort that went beyond exhaustion. She seemed...inattentive? Out of it? It was like whatever had been possessing her was now falling away. What that was, I didn't know, but I could feel in my bones that, just like our plan foresaw, the fetters binding her were coming undone.

I took my eyes off her and scanned the room for Dia, spotting him having half-risen to his feet. With a hand, I motioned for him not to get up just yet. In response, he sat back down and nodded. It was a momentary exchange, but no one seemed to have noticed it thanks to the Celestial Knight standing in front.

A man who grasped what was happening stopped the proceedings and spoke up. "We're in the middle of the ritual here. What's the meaning of this?" he asked, his voice deep and somber.

The man standing at the podium had dark, turbid eyes. He was wearing attire that was very distinctive even among his fellow priests. Both his garb and demeanor told me that this was that Pheydelt person. He seemed terribly resentful that the ritual was falling behind.

“Ack, sorry about that, good Sir Chancellor,” replied Palinchron aloofly. “He’s a wee bit late, but a guest of honor has graced us with his presence, so I guided him to the shrine room.”

Then, he stepped aside so that everyone could see me. I bowed lightly. For the time being, I intended to follow Palinchron’s plan. If it failed, I’d just use force to kidnap her as originally planned. While it came at the cost of the element of surprise, I was able to ascertain Lastiara’s current state this way. If I could exchange even one word with her before kidnapping her, it would make Palinchron’s plan worth it.

“All of the guest-of-honor seats are taken. And I do not know this person. Leave at once.”

“But Sir Chancellor, sir. After the lad told me his circumstances, I figured he has a right to be in attendance...”

“Stop your prattling. I don’t care what his circumstances are; it’s a no.”

The mood in the air wasn’t about to accept sudden visitors either. The priests and knights who were waiting by the walls approached to let the suspicious stranger out. However, Palinchron didn’t move an inch.

“But you’re laying your eyes on none other than the person for whom all seven of the Celestial Knights cleared the way, who passed through the cathedral’s barrier unscathed, and who made it all the way here. If he’s not a guest of honor, then what on earth else could he be? The likes of me couldn’t make the judgment call as to whether he’s a proper, legitimate guest of honor, so I brought him here.”

God, this guy’s glib. But I had to hand it to him, he knew how to persuade people. The priests and knights who’d been approaching started slowing down and easing off. The knights were the Celestials’ subordinates, which meant their superiors had let me through. I was more than just unwounded—I was wearing fine garb. The more faith the knights had in the Celestials, the greater the effect

Palinchron's lies had on them. They were sure that so long as the Celestials were outside defending the cathedral, there was no way a brigand or intruder could get all this way without a scratch on them.

"Such drivel... Entering at such atrocious timing in the first place is—"

"What's this? It looks to me like Lady Lastiara *recognizes* the lad. I knew it—he may just be telling the truth when he says he has a blood connection with Saint Tiara," Palinchron lied, his expression nonchalant.

"Wh-What? *A blood connection?!*" Pheydelt looked flabbergasted.

The buzzing and chattering around us grew louder, including from the guests of honor. The priests and knights who were approaching stopped walking completely now that this was about someone with connections to a saint. The barometer of opinion shifted towards us slightly. I seized upon that opportunity to talk to Lastiara. She was standing dozens of meters away, which was a little too far to talk, but I refrained from shouting. Instead, I tried to muster a calm voice that could nevertheless be heard throughout the room.

"Tell me, Lastiara. There's something I wanna ask you. Something I wanna ask you as your friend and comrade."

Lastiara looked as surprised as before. "S-Sieg..."

She didn't seem to know what was going on, but she still spoke my name. She appeared a little confused. I didn't know if Lastiara was simply taken aback or if this was because the spell cast on her had fallen away.

Pheydelt, who was listening next to her, could no longer abide this. "Her...her *friend?! Enough lies! Capture and arrest that boy this instant!*"

The surrounding priests and knights start walking towards me, seemingly at a loss. The reason they were hesitant was that there was no inconsistency to what Palinchron had said, and because Lastiara had looked at me and said my name.

Palinchron capitalized on that hesitation. Before the priests and knights could reach me, he pulled out his own sword and thrust its point at my back.

"No worries, gents. I know you guys'll have trouble pointing your swords at a

relation of the hallowed saint. But it's okay. As a Celestial Knight, I'll take the burden of responsibility and arrest him from behind, as is proper."

How brazen of him, pointing a sword at the guest he himself had ushered here. At first glance, it appeared to outside eyes that I couldn't move due to one of the Celestial Knights. They'd see no reason to press forward if a Celestial had the situation well in hand. Or, more accurately, they were thinking that such a judgment call was too difficult for base-level knights like them to make.

"What?! Why, you lot!" scolded Pheydelt.

I spoke over him, my voice louder than before and oozing confidence. "Lastiara, I'm sorry I couldn't answer you yesterday. But now I can. I'll grant your wish. I say yes to it all."

Lastiara's wish. I remembered it: *Will you save me, Sieg? Will you go adventuring with me someplace far away? Can you make an enemy of all of the knights of the Dungeon Alliance and the nation of Whoseyards? Will you wreck tomorrow's ritual for me? Will you come rescue me, knowing what a huge risk you'll be taking?*

Yep. I'll make every one of those things happen for you.

"Right, you have my answer now," I said seamlessly and gracefully, like I'd become a stage actor. "Now I want you to answer me, Lastiara. What's your dream in this life?"

"M-My dream?" Lastiara had turned pale. The look on her face screamed, "I heard something I shouldn't have at a time I shouldn't have."

Pheydelt looked panicked. He descended from the stage to the carpet she and I were standing atop. "Why, you little..."

I hadn't failed to hear his quiet groan. Little wonder, given he was the organizer, that the flow of events Palinchron had orchestrated would prove troublesome for him.

"Knights!" he shouted as he drew closer. "Just listen to me and arrest the boy!"

In response, one guest seated in a pew to the side came on out.

“Please wait, Mr. Pheydelt,” said Dia. “I’m interested in what the boy is saying. What’s the dream of the one who would become that vaunted saint? I’m *very* interested. Very interested indeed.”

Like Lastiara, Dia was dressed in a pure white dress. He’d jumped onto the carpet lining the center of the room and was now blocking Pheydelt’s path. His voice sounded calm, but the magical power wreathing him was beyond the ordinary. He was pressuring Pheydelt with terrifyingly powerful magic energy.

“M-Miss Sith? What are you saying? He’s just some brigand...”

Dia’s unexpected entrance into the fray had taken the wind out of Pheydelt’s sails. Plus, getting hit by a colossal amount of magic energy had left him perplexed and bewildered.

With gratitude in my heart for Dia, I hastily wove together my next remarks. I just needed to do it one more time. I had to give her one more jolt. That was all. There was no more artificial Lastiara persona to contend with. Or at least, that was what I chose to believe as I continued.

“Do you remember, Lastiara? Do you remember our contract? When we first became allies, we made a contract. I would grant your wish and you would help me return home. I just want you to tell me the dream you told me then! That’s all I need!”

Her breath caught and her body stiffened. She remembered now. That night, behind the pub. That moment we’d told each other our dreams.

She just needs that last push! I took a step forward, raising my voice little by little.

“I never had a say to begin with. With that contract in effect, I *have* to see your dream realized. You helped me so much in the Dungeon; it’s only right...”

She was staring at me with tearful eyes, but she still wouldn’t say anything. I had to shake her heart even more. I took another step towards her.

“You did tell me that you ‘have to’ become Saint Tiara. I won’t pretend you didn’t. But you know what?! I never heard you say becoming Saint Tiara’s your dream! Not even once!”

While the knights, priests, and guests were watching, I moved slowly towards her, one step after the other.

Lastiara, please answer me. One sentence out of your mouth and I can fight without hesitation. One simple sentence, and I swear I'll save you no matter what. So please...

“So c’mon! Answer me, Lastiara! Right here, right now! Lay it on us, loud and clear! What is your dream?!”

I took another step forward. And another. And another. And another. I was getting closer to her. Palinchron had warned me to mind my volume, lest I be taken for a brigand. But now that we’d reached this point, I could hardly keep my voice on an even keel. In fact, it was better not to. Of course it was. I wasn’t a brigand. I was her friend!

“Don’t worry! The contract’s still kicking! If you tell me that everything here’s getting in the way of your dream, then I’ll destroy it all! And all I ask in return is that you come back to my place! That’s all I want from you! So let me hear it! Right here, right now, clear as day! Shout it out one more time for everyone to hear! What’s your dream, Lastiaraaaaaaaa?!!!”

There was no going back after that scream. I was now undeniably and completely a nemesis of Whoseyards. And I had nothing more to say. All that was left was to wait for her reply.

She was trembling. She tried to speak, but she was stymied by the frog in her throat. I knew she was confused, but I wanted her to answer all the same. What she said would make all the difference in the world. Or was it our misunderstanding that the spell on her had been broken? Was the artificial Lastiara all that she had ever been?

“My... My dream...” she said hoarsely, staring me in the eyes as she strung the sentence together. “To be a hero... To become Saint Tiara...” she said, as though repeating from memory.

“...is NOT my dream! It’s not! *Becoming* the hero was never what I aspired to. My real dream is the *story* leading up to becoming the hero! THAT was what I dreamed of!”

I shook my head. *Yep, there it is. I knew it all along. Lastiara doesn't desire glory to gratify her vanity. What set her eyes aglow was always the adventures leading up to that glory. That's why, back in the Dungeon, she always emphasized the process over results.*

"If I become Saint Tiara now, my own story will be cut short! For my dream to just end after only a few days with you, Sieg...I can't accept it!" she said, her shoulders heaving and her eyes cast downward. "I can't take it! I can't stand it!"

That was everything and more. It was Lastiara's—no, it was the everything of the girl who was standing there. The ordinary girl who shouted what she actually wanted with all her body and soul.

"I'll take a story that's only just beginning over Saint Tiara's, which'll end in no time! I wanna be *me!!!*"

She had just disavowed the saint. And she'd shouted clearly so that everyone could catch an earful. There could be zero doubt that she was no longer agreeing to this ritual.

Ahh, excellent. Now I could break everything that had made a plaything of Lastiara with peace of mind in my righteous rage. I nodded at her; she seemed so feeble as she stared my way.

"Got it! Leave the rest to me, Lastiara! The story that starts today is yours, not Saint Tiara's! The first chapter of your tale begins now!"

"Okay!" Her expression turned cheerful, and she nodded back. That was the moment the girl who'd been so lost for so long finally found a signpost. It was the moment her story received its lifeblood...



Once Lastiara and I were done shouting at each other, I heard a loud laughing voice break out behind me.

"Ha ha, ha ha ha ha! Sieg, ol' buddy, ol' pal! Good job pulling those words out! That'll be enough! Ahh, how splendid! Bearing witness to the birth of a new hero always gets my heart racing! Ah ha! Aha ha ha ha ha HA Ha hA!"

I wasn't gonna begrudge him a good laugh, but since I'd fulfilled my end of

the conditions he'd laid out for me, I would have liked him to fly into action more quickly. This standoff was reaching its natural end.

Sure enough, Pheydelt stamped his feet. "Wh-What?! What're you saying?! Lastiara Whoseyards!!!" As he made his way back to the stage, he called out to another young woman. "Lady Leki! I don't mind if you get a little rough!"

Judging by her identifying distinctions, I figured her for the senator's proxy that Mr. Hine had told me about.

"Hrm. We're in the middle of the ritual, but—" said Leki calmly.

"No matter!"

"Well, if you say so..."

The woman muttered something, and Lastiara held her throat and dropped to her knees moaning. It appeared some spell had robbed her of her freedom; they would brook no more outbursts from her.

"Now then, knights! Arrest the rogue who would lead the saint astray with his lies! Any who fail to obey this order will be guilty of treason against Whoseyards!" It seemed Pheydelt had no composure left.

Palinchron replied with a laugh. "Ha ha! You were too slow to make that call, Sir Chancellor! Guess who came in the nick of time! Well met, Hine!"

Somebody loudly entered through the rear entrance. As Palinchron said, it was Mr. Hine. He was so covered in wounds that it beggared belief. His body was torn up and covered in blood. In addition, the other Celestial Knights followed him in. Apparently, he'd been driven to this point after managing to hold off the other five.

"Wh-What's with you lot?!"

Pheydelt seemed to be unaware of what was taking place outside. I was surprised too—having more enemies to deal with was a thorn in my side. This was a tad different from what we'd expected. However, I soon understood what Palinchron was aiming for. He stood back-to-back with me and pointed his sword at the newly arrived Celestial Knights.

Upon seeing that, Mr. Hine lined up next to him without hesitation to cover

my back. The surrounding guests made a stir upon witnessing that surefooted motion. Lastiara refusing the ritual was already bad enough; now, two of the Seven Celestial Knights were backing me up. It was apparent they had no idea what was unfolding.

“Hine, Palinchron!” shouted Pheydelt. “What’s the meaning of this?! Are you defying the state?!”

They both kept their backs to him.

“I became a knight in milady’s service,” said Hine. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Hmm,” said Palinchron, “I’ll go with that too.”

Pheydelt’s expression contorted even more.

“Palinchron,” whispered Hine, “are you lending us a hand as well?”

“Our pal Sieg did a great job satisfying the conditions, and now a fun vision’s starting to form in my head. Don’t mind if I grab a ride on this bandwagon, Hine.”

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Mr. Hine, Palinchron.”

“Hold on, laddie,” said Palinchron, his tone serious. “We’ve got too many enemies in the way to be able to take her just yet, don’t we? So let’s stir the pot some more. The faith of the various nations is a brittle thing. All we’ve gotta do is add a tad more to our official stance.”

I was starting to see his vision too. I raised my voice without screaming.

“Please listen, people. From your perspective, you may see me as some idiot who doesn’t know a thing. But there’s one thing that even an idiot like me knows: the young girl over there doesn’t want this ritual. She’s afraid of her consciousness disappearing as a result! She’s on the precipice of meeting an end she never wanted, her freedom taken from her and her will twisted and perverted! Does that sound right to you?! Is that the will of the nation?! Is that what the Church of Levahn teaches?! Do your hearts not pang at the thought?! Does this truly, honestly sit right with you?!”

I hadn’t prepared the words ahead of time. It was just rubbish I was spouting

out, carried away in the moment. But in that moment, I didn't care if the argument was stupid or if it was childish sophistry. The purpose wasn't to convince them. No, it was to *confuse* them.

Not to be outdone, Pheydelt also raised his voice. "You think such drivel is any reason to disturb an event that the nation has decided upon?! All you lot are trying to do is treason, pure and simple! You're nothing more than criminals!" Clearly, he had cottoned on to what Palinchron was after. He was appealing to the guests, arguing that the ritual was lawful and legitimate. "Forgive me for my messy execution, but I ask for help from you capable knights in bringing this disturbance under control! Help us apprehend the wrongdoers!"

He underscored that we were the ones in the wrong, because if anybody came to cooperate with us, even just on a whim, it'd spell trouble for him. But he was practically confessing that even a little bloodshed would put him in a fix.

I was even more convinced now that the guests were his Achilles' heel. However, due to Pheydelt's unreserved request, several skilled guards with their hands free tried to come at us. They were guys who wanted Whoseyards to owe them.

Pheydelt welcomed this development. He didn't want the guests in harm's way, but their security details were a different story. The balance of power had begun to shift, and Pheydelt smiled faintly.

However, a huge wave of magic energy threw his calculations out of whack and shook the entire shrine room. The energy coursed through the chamber, freezing those who'd stood up with terror. Dia took up a space in the center, his power undulating out.

"You're not wrong," he said. "It may be strange to bring up the ethics of it at this late hour. One person's sentimentality shouldn't interfere with what a whole nation has decided on. That being said, what that boy said was very entertaining. I don't particularly wish to lend him a hand. All I want is to hear the boy and that god incarnate over there chat for a little longer. Is that so impermissible, Sir Chancellor?"

Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed he was in a smidgen of a bad mood.

As might be expected, Pheydelt could not hide his wrath from the one who had snapped back at him so openly.

“Lady Apostle, this is no time for play!” He glared at Dia sharply, but Dia didn’t care. Deciding that this was not the time to be concerned about Dia, Pheydelt called out to the knights at the entrance.

“Celestial Knights! What’s got you so befuddled?! Move it!”

“Urgh! We’ve no choice, do we?!” said a deep, seasoned voice.

“But Hine and Palinchron, they’re...” said a female voice that resonated with dignity.

I was happy to be faced with someone I’d have an easy time throwing off-balance. I turned around and called out to her. “Ms. Radiant! Lastiara is suffering before your eyes! Do you think she looks happy? Is that the sort of sight you want to see? Is that really okay with you?!” I shouted, pointing at my target.

The black knight next to her objected. “You’re wrong!” he said, in his seasoned, deep voice. “You’re wrong, Hine, Palinchron, Radiant! Remember, the Celestial Knights exist for the sake of Saint Tiara, who’ll be descending among us momentarily! We mustn’t mistake our mission for another!”

I wasn’t about to concede the point. There was no way I’d hand them Ms. Radiant’s heart. “That’s news to me! At the very least, the Celestial Knight I know, Hine Hellvilleshine, doesn’t feel that way! He’s not a knight of Saint Tiara! Isn’t that right, Mr. Hine?!”

“Y-Yes, that’s right! Of course! The one I serve isn’t some figure from ancient history like Saint Tiara! It’s not a dead lady I’ve been wanting to protect with all my heart! It’s the maiden living and breathing here and now! And now I can finally say it with my chin held high! I am milady’s knight!”

Mr. Hine gave a great reply despite how suddenly I’d thrown him the mic. He’d declared he was Lastiara’s knight and no one else’s with utter delight, shouting it like it was everything his life meant. I could even swear I saw a hint of tears in his eyes.

Grateful to Mr. Hine, I added more. “As you just heard, Mr. Hine is Lastiara’s

knight! So tell me, Ms. Radiant, which side are you on?! Are you Lastiara's knight or are you Saint Tiara's? Decide where you stand and decide it now! What's it gonna be?!" I yelled, aiming not to give her any time to agonize over it.

"Urgh! I..." said Ms. Radiant, trailing off.

"M-Miss?!" came a younger girl's voice. It was Raggie. She screamed when she saw Ms. Radiant point a sword at the black knight.

If Ms. Radiant had merely been frozen by indecision, that would have been enough for me. Yet, she'd changed sides unexpectedly quickly. The impact this had on the people around us was substantial.

Ms. Radiant approached us and shouted at Raggie, "Ragne, you're still too young! Now take some advice from your senior! I may have gone and done it, but you should give me or one of us a perfunctory fight before tapping out and falling over! You're working for your hometown, so don't put yourself out!"

Now Ms. Radiant was telling Raggie not to put up an actual fight. So many happy surprises. If this took Raggie out of the picture, the balance of power by the entrance would tip the other way. The situation was in flux as the Celestial Knights, who were standing idly by the door continued talking, beaded with sweat from nerves and exertion.

"Needless to say, this old man's going to carry out his public duties," said Mr. Hopes. "Goodness gracious..."

"I am too," said the Celestial Knight who specialized in magic.

"So in essence, it's only us three," said the black knight.

All three sounded pained. Mr. Hopes looked reluctant as he addressed the black knight. "No fewer than three of the knights who were trained for times like these have switched sides, so what're we to do, Sir Head Knight? Do you feel like this lineup can win? I've got a bad feeling; I'm not good against magic, see..."

"If we were outdoors, we'd have some means of attacking, but...fighting here would mean getting innocents involved..."

Pheydelt saw the Celestial Knights were at a loss, and he grew impatient. He faced one of the guests and shouted, “Glenn! Or should I say, the Laoravian who’s the strongest hero of all! Apprehend them!”

“Wait, huh? You want *me* to?!” answered a man in the front pews pathetically.

The man stood up and turned to face us in a dither. He had copper-colored hair and an enervated look on his face. If I hadn’t misheard, they’d just called the man “Glenn.” That meant he was the mightiest Dungeon diver alive.

That guy with the whiny voice...the strongest in the world?

Just as I was starting to sweat the entry of a powerful newcomer in the enemy’s ranks, a girl sitting next to Glenn pulled at the hem of his clothes.

“Bro,” she said, under her breath, “wait and see how things go for now.”

The girl was the dragonewt Snow Walker. I’d met her a few days back in the Dungeon and had been part of her party once before. She’d called Glenn her brother. They bore no family resemblance whatsoever, but given that they were sitting next to each other in the guest seating area, that had to indeed be brother and sister. Ms. Snow was speaking quietly as she looked towards me.

“If you make the wrong move, he’ll have business with you later on. And besides, he’s not a bad person.”

“I mean, you can say he’s not a bad person... Well, if you say so, I believe it, Ms. Snow.”

I had a feeling our eyes met. And just like when we’d last parted ways, and she had told me I wasn’t suited to being a diver, she had an exasperated look on her face.

“I’m real sorry!” Glenn shouted to Pheydelt. “We’re giving this a pass!”

“Glenn Walker!” spat Pheydelt indignantly.

“C’mon, I’d be fighting Celestial Knights under your supervision!” he replied, his voice pitiful as he made no bones about it. “I’ve got no idea what’s happening! I don’t want to kill them only for you to yell at me later!”

More than a few people there agreed. They had no idea what was happening.

They didn't know if they'd be told off after the fact. As such, they had little choice but to wait and see. Glenn, the man renowned as the strongest among them, had voiced their own thoughts quite clearly, and the tide shifted. Pheydelt sensed the danger in this, so he quickly gave up on Glenn as a lost cause and called out to the next guest of honor.

"Then what about you, Blademaster?!"

Blademaster? It seemed somebody with quite the moniker was also in attendance. A title like that would excite the little kid in me during times of peace, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear at the moment.

"Sir Chancellor, I'm eager and willing," said a voice from the guest of honor crowd, his tone awkward. "But see, just like ol' Glenny said, if we go at it, you're gonna get lots of bodies. Plus, the bloodthirst a certain unexpected someone's radiating right now is insane. Like, for real, though; it's mental."

The aging man spoke rather pathetically as he stared at Dia, who was still exerting pressure from the center of the room. Dia himself had been glaring at the man they called Blademaster, who evidently believed Dia to be the most troublesome opponent in the room.

Dia reverted to his more natural, casual form of speech. "You're making me look bad, Mr. Arrace. Looking at it objectively, I don't think that kid's altogether in the wrong. So can you blame me for just wanting to hear him out?"

"'Objectively,' huh? Up until a second ago, you were being so well-mannered and polite. Sithy, honey, don't tell me you've fallen for Black Hair over there?"

"Rggh! Stupid old man!"

From the look of it, the two were acquainted, and sparks were flying as they stared at each other. However, it didn't seem as though the Blademaster was leaping into action any time soon. In response, Pheydelt called out to several other famed fighters in the crowd, and I had no intention of stopping him, as I got the feeling that somehow, we'd gained the upper hand.

People shouted all across the cathedral, and the commotion was only intensifying. Perhaps due to Glenn's and the Blademaster's listless reactions, the mood in the air had gotten more lax. While there were those who called to

aid Pheydelt, there were a lot whose reactions were tepid at best. Eventually, the movers and shakers from the host of nations in attendance began to openly make whatever remarks suited them. Gone was the rigid air of a ritual. And the volleys of words from the various nations' representatives had the priests and knights frozen in place.

It was all as Palinchron had anticipated before we'd busted into the shrine room. Naturally, he was getting carried away and then some.

"Ha ha ha ha! Hey, Sir Chancellor, sir! If we go at it now, we're basically evenly matched, wouldn't you agree?! Hine and Sieg are no pushovers, let me tell ya! Ha ha ha ha!"

"Palinchron, you louse!" said Pheydelt. "Ugh, this is why I was against taking in a knight from a savage country!" He was about to say more so as to remedy the situation, but just then, a roaring rumble resounded from the stage.

"Grah..." The woman on the stage grimaced and distanced herself from Lastiara, who was out of breath and sweating profusely. From what I could see, my friend had thrown off the spell affixed to her and was now able to speak again.

"Lady Lek, your barrier!" shouted Pheydelt. "But how?!"

The woman sighed. "I say, this 'jewelculus' is really something else. She forcibly broke the barrier while her body was in *that* state. This is beyond me now. I can't pin her anymore."

"You can't be serious!"

"If anything, you should be praising me for holding her off for a few minutes."

Pheydelt drew closer as he reproached the woman. Meanwhile, the now liberated Lastiara staggered to her feet with a determined expression before making a ringing pronouncement to all with ears.

"Hff, hff, hff... I, Lastiara Whoseyards, issue the following command to my knights! To Siegfried, Hine, Radiant, and Palinchron! If this dumb 'Saint Tiara' person should take me over, thrust your swords into my heart!!!"

I didn't detect any artificiality to her orders. This was Lastiara's will and no

one else's.

I shouted, "You got it, Lastiara!"

Her knights chimed in as well.

"Nice first words, milady! You can at least rest assured that Sieg and I shall do so!"

"If that's the will of the girl named Lastiara, then so be it!"

"I... I won't let you die, milady!"

This exchange was witnessed by a great many guests. Some looked amused. Some looked displeased. Some looked moved. Some looked unfeeling. The reactions were diverse. I deployed *Dimension* and picked out voices amid the din. I got the sense that the number of people who wanted to get involved had decreased, which made sense after they'd just seen the person who was actually supposed to undergo the ritual reject it in no uncertain terms. The balance of power had once again shifted.

Lastiara was beginning to walk, albeit staggering. Her eyes set on me, she descended gently from the stage and took it one step at a time. Pheydelt moved to stop her, but Palinchron and I moved to stop Pheydelt.

"Wait! Don't move a muscle, Pheydelt!" shouted the woman on the stage.

Pheydelt stopped in his tracks, allowing Lastiara to continue walking to the center of the room unimpeded. Palinchron and I just stood there, having missed our moment to leap in. Nevertheless, with that, it was definitively over. One of this place's organizers had given up on engaging Lastiara. Needless to say, the guests, the priests, and the knights did nothing to stop her either. No—they couldn't.

All the while, I was listening in on the grit-toothed back-and-forth between the pair via *Dimension*.

"Why must I stop, Lady Leki?!"

"If you try to stop her, Palinchron will most certainly take action."

"But we can handle one measly—"

“That boy likely isn’t some ordinary kid either. More importantly, we mustn’t allow the Celestial Knights to brawl with each other. Not in this situation.”

“But madame, if you join the fight, we can make up for that!”

The woman shook her head. “If even one foreign dignitary is killed or wounded, we lose,” she explained calmly. “And losing Celestial Knights would sting too. Within the shrine room, at the very least, our hands are tied. Subduing that boy and the jewelculus without any casualties isn’t possible anymore. Even if we were to obtain the pawn named Saint Tiara, it’s putting the cart before the horse to lose too much in the process. Grin and bear it for now—all for the sake of the plan. If you do, there’s still a chance the jewelculus and the Celestial Knights will return to Whoseyards at some point. This fight was lost the moment Palinchron and Hine turned traitor and that boy showed up without a scratch on him.”

Pheydelt bit his lip and glared at me, his baleful stare full of rage and hatred for the spanner in the works that was Siegfried Vizzita. It appeared that he had finally recognized they were on the back foot.

The man named Pheydelt was no longer a threat.

I turned my eyes from the stage to Lastiara, who had staggered over to me without obstruction. Exhausted to the bone, she smiled feebly as she expressed her gratitude to her comrade with a single, brusque word: “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” I grasped her hand.

Then Dia appeared from behind her, looking somewhat displeased. He’d followed her to the center of the room. Clearly, he was sticking to the plan as it had originally been laid out insofar as he was following our lead. Having recovered Lastiara, I spun on my heels to find Ms. Radiant there in her lupine form with her back to me, motioning for me to hop on. She’d seen the state Lastiara was in and decided to be her ride.

“Ms. Radiant, could you let Dia on as well? He’s another ally of hers.”

After a beat, the wolf lowered her head. Dia, for his part, understood how lacking his own physical prowess was, so he mounted Ms. Radiant alongside Lastiara without grumbling. The moment he did, the irate voices of the priests

who'd accompanied him here cried out, but he ignored them and fixed his gaze on the entrance, where four Celestial Knights were barring the way.

"Please move aside," said Mr. Hine. "If you refuse, we will be forced to employ our magic. And if that happens, this room may collapse. Need I remind you which side will be in dire straits if any harm comes to the guests here?"

He showed them the palm of his hand with an icy look, having spoken the words that Palinchron was meant to say.

The black knight heaved a sigh and stepped off to the side. The other three followed their superior's example. That was the moment all the conditions fell into place.

"Lastiara Whoseyards is with me now!" I shouted, declaring victory. "Mr. Hine, Palinchron, Ms. Radiant! Let's be on our way! We're running straight out of here!"

Ms. Radiant was the first to take off, dashing faster than the eye could see and exiting the room with the pair on her back in tow. Mr. Hine, Palinchron, and I sprinted in their wake. The four enemy knights ran after us, of course, but they didn't immediately attack, probably because they believed they were still too close to the shrine room to risk the shock waves of battle reaching it.

Mr. Hine, however, didn't give a toss about the enemy's concerns. He incanted a windstorm spell as he ran and launched it at the four pursuers behind us. "*SEHR WYND!*"

After they were blown back, he turned right around and started running with all his might. We went down the stairs, through the corridor, and past the entryway, returning the way we came. However, when we made it back to the entrance, Ms. Radiant stopped outside the cathedral for reasons that weren't apparent to me. Befuddled, I approached her. Palinchron and Mr. Hine seemed to be in a similar boat. However, our doubts were cleared when we saw Dia sitting on Radiant's back...or to be precise, when we saw the pillar of magic rising out of him. We three ran through the entrance of the cathedral and lined up next to Ms. Radiant. At that instant, Dia activated the high-density spell that he had compressed and compressed and compressed some more.

"Flame Arrow: Petalrain!"

The pillar of magical power erupted, scattering petals of flame into the air, which then transformed into over a thousand arrows of fire, blotting the sky before pouring down onto the cathedral. His *Flame Arrow* was no longer the laser it had once been. With Alty's guidance, he had learned how to adjust its firepower. These arrows were shaped like your standard flame arrows, and innumerable scores of them crashed into the cathedral's entrance, destroying it. A good many windows and all the entrances and exits that could be seen from where we stood were also sealed off in the attack, preventing any pursuers from easily emerging.

I turned my attention to the source of that havoc. Dia was looking at me with a proud expression as he tempered even more magic energy.

"Sieg, should I go further? If I wanted to, I could tear the whole place down."

"Uhh, nah, that's enough. Any more than this and we'll just be incurring their resentment."

"Got it. Looks like we're good, Ms. Wolfy. Let's keep going."

With that, Ms. Radiant sprinted off. Palinchron stifled a laugh, while Mr. Hine's eyes were open wide. My reaction was similar, but we could hardly afford to gape indefinitely.

"Let's go, Mr. Hine. We've bought some time."

We resumed our escape on the double, fighting our way through the knights on the grand staircase. Against the three of us, however, the base-level knights had a lot on their shoulders. Some among them couldn't move simply because there were Celestial Knights allied with the brigand.

We mowed our way through them down the stairs. It seemed that the trio ahead of us was doing much the same. No one had the AGI to keep up with wolf-form Radiant to begin with, and even if they got near her, they'd just get shot by one of Dia's spells. From what I'd seen, they seemed even safer than the three of us, which was reassuring. Judging by the feeble resistance, I could tell we would get off scot-free.

Delighted, I smiled and turned to Mr. Hine to confirm what we were all planning to do after fleeing from Whoseyards.

“I think we’re going to go ahead and make for Greeard in the south. What will you guys do?”

“You’re running south, huh? That’s wise. I’d like to come with you, if possible. Believe it or not, I do have some clout, so I’ll be of use to you. You can count on that.”

“Ah,” said Palinchron, “I’ll bail at some point en route. I will go with you part of the way, though.”

That was what I wanted to hear. Maybe that was heartless of me, since he *had* pitched in, but still, I didn’t think this guy was an ally. In truth, I didn’t want to be with such a dangerous unknown quantity for even a second longer simply because our interests had happened to align this one time. I was still on my guard.

I nodded back at the two of them, signaling my agreement. Then we routed the enemy knights in the vicinity, passed through the courtyard with the fountain, and ran down the path sandwiched between conifers. A group of knights was waiting at the gate of the bridge ahead, but Ms. Radiant jumped over them with ease. Needless to say, we couldn’t do the same, so Mr. Hine unleashed his magic to open the way. And with that, the six of us made it across the bridge without mishap.

The next obstacle was the sea of citizens awaiting the ceremonies of the Day of the Blessed Birth. The sudden appearance of a giant wolf startled them, but they didn’t immediately make way since the crowd was too packed. Ms. Radiant could only move ahead by avoiding the people, crushing the outdoor lights and stall roofs underfoot. The masses began shrieking and panicking in the confusion.

We took advantage of the chaos and chased Ms. Radiant, weaving our way through the crowd. When we reached a group of buildings that could serve as platforms, the six of us climbed onto them, our two groups of three rejoining. From there, we leaped from rooftop and rooftop, ever closer to escaping Whoseyards. Some of the folks below looked at us roof-running and pointed up, entertained. They must have mistaken us for festival performers or something.

I looked behind me to see who was chasing us. The knights trying to pursue us

couldn't get past the barrier of people, and none of them possessed the physical prowess to climb onto the buildings after us.

"Phew... Ms. Radiant, please head for Vart for the time being. I want to go to my house and join up with a comrade of mine. Once we're all together, we'll make a beeline for Greeard."

Seeing Ms. Radiant nod back, I was now convinced that the mission to take back Lastiara had been accomplished. *It's over.*

Of the possible outcomes I'd pictured going in, this was close to the best one. It was safe to call it a smashing success. There'd been more holes in the ritual than I'd anticipated, which had proved fortunate. Or maybe it was more that I was simply too strong. No one in this world could stop me anymore. The mission was such a success that I didn't feel off base thinking that. I was able to save Lastiara without losing anyone or bringing about any enemy casualties. I knew it was still too early to relax, but I naturally ended up grinning. Dia and Lastiara noticed me smiling and sent smiles of their own my way, their dresses fluttering in the wind. The smiles of those two dressed in pure white costumes were so radiant it ought to have been illegal.

Ahh, I'm so relieved.

I was so glad I was able to safeguard those smiles. All we had to do now was get back on our feet in the south and resume Dungeon diving from there. Moreover, given the circumstances, the chances were high that Mr. Hine and Ms. Radiant would help us on our dives. My friends and allies would increase in number, making exploring the Dungeon progress that much more smoothly. The two knights were suitable for labyrinth exploration. Mr. Hine's wind magic meant we wouldn't have to worry about flying monsters. Ms. Radiant's wolf form, meanwhile, meant she could give a ride to the slow-moving magic-users, causing the collective power level of the party to jump dramatically. That being the case, Maria participating in the dive was no longer a pipe dream either.

At the thought that I had good news to report to Maria, my lips curled even more. I could finally tell her with confidence that we should explore the Dungeon together.

For real, I'm so relieved...

I'd assumed that absconding with Lastiara would be highly risky, but at the end of the day, I'd incurred no losses. In fact, I'd increased the number of allies I could rely on. Dia had made a full recovery and returned as a mage—one who was better than ever before. Lastiara would regain her true identity and go on adventures with me again. Mr. Hine and Ms. Radiant's loyalty to her was authentic and ironclad, and they would make trustworthy companions.

With Maria in the mix, it was a party of six. On the larger side as far as parties went, but having a lot of people wasn't a bad thing in my eyes. As long as I had *Connection*, we could progress while swapping party members in and out. There was no need to go in every single time as a unit of six. And if I kept gaining more comrades, we could explore the Dungeon using various rosters and rotations. Ahh, my dreams were expanding. My Dungeon diving options were multiplying, and I was delighted from the bottom of my heart. *Everything's going great!*



It made me want to show the passive, negative Kanami of a few days ago how I was now. I could say it out loud without embarrassment: with a little courage, you can make wonderful things happen. If you do your best, the results of your hard work will bear fruit. That was what I wanted to tell my past self. Sure, this was a fantasy world where everything beggared belief, but for that very reason, a happy ending right out of fiction was awaiting me. My past self needed to know that.

My body felt light as a feather as I ran. There was no more anguish or rage over my “???” skill. *I can do anything.*

I continued along the path of roofs and crossed the nation’s border, dashing down the Vart highway and heading for the hill where my house was located. The house where Maria was waiting. I felt like now, I could properly engage with her feelings. I could face everything I’d been avoiding and solve that problem. I’d gained the confidence to be able to do it. That was how decluttered my heart had become. And that was the reason I wanted to see Maria.

Ahh, I wanna see Maria quick. I wanna see her, and then...and then...

But what met my hopeful eyes when I laid eyes upon the hill wasn’t my house. It was smoke. Something was burning there atop the hill. A large dark plume was filling the sky.

Huh?

My jubilation was dampened in an instant. I got the distinct sensation that the peace in my heart had been dropped into a pitch-black puddle. I turned pale. My head was empty. I bolted home, running alone up the hill to reach the source of the smoke. And then I got there...and I saw it.

It was my house. My house was on fire.

Two girls were staring at it too. At my house, which was crackling like a campfire as it burned. They turned to look in my direction.

“Look. Sieg’s here,” Alty told Maria with a smile.

Maria found me and smiled innocently. But that smile soon disappeared. She

looked behind me, and her expression stiffened. Alty comforted her, whispering something as she stroked her head consolingly.

This is nuts. They've got their backs on the burning house, calm as can be about it. The way Alty's looking at Maria so adoringly is just odd. And then there's the way Maria looks ready to kill after seeing Lastiara and the others. It's so weird. It's just weird, weird, weird. It's all too crazy.

My head was going blank. A voice resonated clearly inside my empty mind. It was such a limpid, pure voice. The voice of a girl who might cry. Who sounded so sad, so tormented.

Maria's voice.

"Give me...Master...back..." she muttered as she looked at us.

Her eyes were darker and more sunken than I'd ever seen them. She was looking at me with eyes that were emptier than nothingness. My heart thumped, and I could feel a small prick of pain in my chest—the first damage of any kind I'd taken since the plan to retake Lastiara had commenced.

Thinking back, the only person who'd been able to make me feel any pain that day was Maria. Only the girl who was standing there and none other. That fact gave me chills. In the face of Alty and Maria, who were supposed to be my allies, I felt only terror...



Chapter 4: Maria _____

It's burning.

Ahh, it's all burning. Every little bit. The cherished house entrusted to me by Master, my one place to belong. Burning. I blinked and it was burning. I don't know when it started...

Did this much really accumulate over time? Is there really so much of that dark red emotion in me? That frothing feeling screaming to be let out. That sticky sludge boiling and roiling and moiling in the recesses of my soul. The fuel that I'd kept pressing down had grown too dense. My mad crush and my envy.

It had started with a spark—that whole new world opened up by the magic the Thief of Fire's Essence had given me. That spark had burned everything that had been piling up in my heart, igniting it into a hellfire blaze that suffused my innermost being. The abyssal blaze had burned my heart, illuminated it, exposed it.

The shadow of what I truly wanted was cast in sharp relief upon my heart. The daily life of a certain _____, projected like a shadow puppet play.

That's right. That right there's what I'm supposed to desire more than anything. I just want to go back. Back to that happy place. Back to my hometown. Back to the past. Back to those wonderful days. I just wanted to regain that slice of peace. Everyone was happy there. I had the company of _____, of _____, of _____, of my friends, of my family, my clan, there in the Fanian hinterlands. It was farmland with nothing interesting to speak of. The sticks were a metropolis by comparison. Day after day, we were busy working the fields, hunting, and helping with the household chores. But everyone was smiling and laughing. Each and every one...

It was me who destroyed that place. No, the power of my eyes destroyed it. These eyes that can see the true nature of things. They didn't find it or spot it or look upon it. They actively saw it. Which is why, even when I was working the fields, my eyes would immediately be drawn to the fundamental improvements

that could be made, and my hands would stop. Whenever I went on the hunt, I stopped being able to use traditional methods. Whenever I did housework, I invariably brooded, thinking this wasn't the sort of work I should be doing. And every time, I'd be yelled at. Oh, how nostalgic. ____ would always gently admonish me.

"You've got a more discerning eye than the other kids," they'd say. "Those eyes of yours are a gift from heaven," they'd say. And faintly, I remember them making this request of me: "Use that power and find what can be of use to the village."

But now I can't even remember ____'s face.

Where did I go wrong? When those disturbing rumors began to circulate in the village? When the country went to war? No, maybe the decisive moment the dominoes fell was when the army started stationing their troops in the village? Or maybe when I mouthed off to military command about their policies? Or maybe when I said I could win the battle? Or maybe when I took the battle into my own...

No. That's beside the point. The exact sequence of events isn't important. And it's because of my eyes that I know the real problem lay elsewhere.

In the end, that village was destined for destruction no matter what. Its fate was sealed long before the army came. That village was in an unlucky location. It was simple but true, and I understood it full well. Its ruin was destiny in action. Oh, I'd hastened its downfall, sure. But I could see that wasn't the root cause. Even if I could go back to those wonderful days, as I so wished, I would merely suffer the same fate again. The rare black-haired, black-eyed clan living in such a small village was destined to perish in an era like this. That's all there is to it.

"That's why I don't want to return to the past."

The Thief of Fire's Essence replied forlornly, "Yeah, I don't blame you."

Then what do I want to do? What do I want?

I viewed the silhouettes created by the light of the flames, witnessing once again the world that portrayed the vista of my heart. That world didn't contain my hometown or ____ or anything of the sort. All that stuff had burned to

cinders. _____, _____, and _____ had all turned to ash, and I could no longer remember any of them. Such was the cost I paid for fire magic. That, I remembered. I knew that they were important to me and that they'd vanished from inside of me. So now, there was just one shadowy figure left. The person with the same black hair and eyes as my clan. He was all that was left to me. The person who kept depositing more sediment into the bottom of my heart. He was the only thing projected in my world.

Then the Thief of Fire's Essence whispered to me sadly, "Look. Sieg's here."

My liar of a Master, "Siegfried Vizzita," emerged from below the hill. He was a kind person, chosen in my eyes to be _____'s replacement. And he was so noble that I couldn't fully grasp it, not even through my eyes. He was a hero among heroes. He was my darling. He was the destination of the burning blaze.

My Master had returned at last...

From that day...

At last...



The Thief of Fire's Essence was uninterested in any ordinary romance.

Three days prior. That was when I had met her for the first time in any real sense, after hitting the festival with my Master and Ms. Lastiara. On the way back, the Thief and I were left by ourselves, and that was the beginning of our tale together.

"It's wonderful! You're wonderful! Ohh, it's just so precious, Mar-Mar!" The Thief of Fire's Essence—Ms. Alty—had deemed my crush "wonderful."

"Mightn't you be looking for the word 'stupid'?"

"Oh no, you're precious. You're adorable. You're by no means *stupid*. You're just a normal girl with normal feelings. What's a pity is how outmatched you are. I mean, when it's Lastiara you're up against, anybody would be out of their depth."

"You're right. Anybody would be. That's how perfect she is. In fact, she's so pretty and perfect that it's like she was *created*, not born." I heaved a sigh,

despairing of the power gap between me and her.

“Heh heh, ‘created,’ you say? You hit the nail on the head. She really is a creation, and one that’s overpowered.”

“I resent God. Why didn’t God make me a bit taller? If only I had a nice physique like hers, and I had smooth hair like hers, and I had nicer-looking eyes like hers, maybe then Master would look at me at least a little.”

“Well, I think you’ve got your own appeal, Mar-Mar.”

“Ha ha. In what way, shape, or form? I’m tiny and flat, like a little kid. My hair’s tousled and my eyes look mean. I’ve got no sex appeal.” I could almost feel my spirit sinking into a muddy mire.

“I can’t agree.”

“Even if I’m wrong about that, I’m still unqualified to be standing beside the hero of the story. What Master wants is for me to be strong enough to help him Dungeon dive, and I lack that strength. If only I were strong...”

“Hmm. You want strength, eh?”

I remembered what had happened a few days back. I’d been far from useful in the Dungeon. In fact, I’d only dragged him down. I knew I’d never be able to find a place to shine in the Dungeon again.

Back then, Lastiara had said she’d make sure we didn’t “die or break on her” from the sidelines. I understood that she was rooting for my crush in a roundabout way, but it was an ill portent. It wasn’t as though I had a good pretext for getting closer to him. When he told me he wanted me to cook his food for him every day in this house, I’d managed to step out of the pit of despair, but the tunnel was still dark.

I sighed.

“Don’t get so down in the dumps. You’re gonna make me sad too.”

“S-Sorry...”

Ms. Alty truly did look sad. “No, you don’t need to apologize. Never mind that; you said it’s strength, right? You said it’s power that you lack.”

“Ah, right, yes. Without it, I’ll never be of use to Master.”

“About that. I’ve got a way. A method to make you stronger.”

“Whoa, what, you do?!”

“Yep, of course I do. I am now and always a friend to all girls whose crushes are unrequited.”

“What sort of method is it?!”

“I’ll teach you magic. As a professional specializing in fire magic, just wait, because I’ll make your fire magic primo stuff.”

“Magic?”

“Granted, the method’s a bit of a brute-force tactic. After all, you’re gonna be drinking blood with my magic formulas packed into it.”

“I’m drinking blood?”

If it were a formula-inscribed magic gem I was to swallow, I’d understand, but I’d never heard of drinking blood packed with formulas. I had my doubts that doing so would actually teach me the spell.

“I don’t blame you for being suspicious. The method doesn’t seem to exist in this day and age. But I guarantee you it’ll work. You have my word as the pinnacle of fire mages. With this, you’ll be closer to standing at the peak of all fire mages too.” Ms. Alty stared at me with earnest eyes.

“But if I drink blood, the magic formulas won’t—”

“This fact’s not well-known, mind you. But drinking blood and swallowing a magic gem are ultimately the same. Magic gems are an improved, easier-to-learn method, I’ll give you that. With those, all anyone needs is the elemental affinity to learn a spell. But the mechanism is the same. Of course, the conditions required to learn magic through blood are very limiting. It’s really only for a small subset of people. That’s why the method hasn’t permeated enough for anyone to know of it.”

Alty knew a lot about magic. Though what she said was a bit eccentric, I could be certain that she possessed a deeper insight than Ms. Franrühle, the girl who attended that academy. She was more than a little persuasive.

“And I fulfill those conditions?”

“Yeah, you do. For better or for worse, it’s perfect. Your affinity is basically perfect.”

“What would those conditions be?”

“Hmm, well, it’s actually supposed to be a secret, but...you’re the one and only Mar-Mar, so I’ll let you in on a little bit. Basically, it all hinges on how much the blood giver and the recipient have in common. You and I have the same worries and similar personalities. Our lives are also similar. Honestly, we’re really alike. That’s important.”

“Err, uhh, so in other words, you have an unrequited crush too, Ms. Alty?”

“Heh heh, I do. You and I are the same.”

That fact came as a shock to me. Somewhere deep inside, I’d been laboring under the impression that I was the only one with such woes. “So that’s why you’re spending so much time trying to help me.”

With that, the doubts I was harboring in a corner of my mind were cleared. To be frank, I’d regarded her providing me with so much support as odd and worthy of suspicion. But if she viewed me as a kindred spirit, it was more credible. My Perception skill—my eyes—also saw her as benevolent towards me.

“That’s right. At any rate, if you drink my blood, it’ll all make sense. So whaddya say? Gonna have a drink?”

Ms. Alty extended her arm towards me with a smile. I hesitated. I wasn’t particularly worried about the risk of her lying. I was worried that I was inconveniencing her. I felt bad, receiving so much from her without giving her anything in return.

“Are... Are you sure you don’t mind? Isn’t it the case that mages cherish their spells and don’t generally think nothing of sharing them with others?”

Her reply was immediate. “I don’t mind. I just want to be helpful to you.”

“In that case, I’ll drink it,” I said, replying instantly myself. “If it’s how I can obtain more power, I’ll drink it.”

Seeing me lose any hesitation, Ms. Alty chuckled. “Heh heh, that’s what I like to hear.”

She wasted no time slitting her wrist and shedding her blood. The merciless act of self-mutilation shocked and startled me, but it seemed a mage of sufficient skill and experience could do it without any issues. I steeled my resolve and brought my mouth closer to her wrist. Red blood spilled out and landed on my tongue. Then it traveled down my throat and permeated my insides. The taste of iron spread through my mouth, and it quickly sank in that, yes, I’d just drunk somebody’s blood. At the same time, I felt something hot welling up from the bottom of my stomach. It felt like I had acquired something new. Like my blood was making a stir. Like the magic energy inside my body got startled somehow.

Ms. Alty saw that it had taken and nodded. “Now all of the fire spells that I possess have been recorded in your blood.”

“Th-That’s all it takes? For every spell?” It seemed so abrupt. It had been even easier than when I’d swallowed those magic gems.

“Yep, though you won’t be able to use them right away. It’ll take time for your body to adapt. If you use high-level magic too soon, your constitution’ll take a dreadful hit. Why don’t we start by practicing a few of the simpler spells?”

Ms. Alty smiled faintly and ignited a small flame in her palm without incanting. I didn’t think for a second that the piddly flame would do anything in the Dungeon, so I got a bit anxious. Even if I’d gained more options for my fire magic, it didn’t mean squat if it had no use against monsters on Floor 20 and beyond. The reason I wanted power to begin with was so I could keep up with Master.

“I... I’m sorry, but if you could, I’d like you to let me practice some powerful offensive spells. Spells that would work on giant monsters on the deeper floors of the Dungeon!”

“Heh heh. Just as I thought, you want the fast track, huh?”

“Yes, please. If I don’t hurry, I’ll have missed the train on just about everything. That’s the feeling I get.”

“But using magic that’s above your capacity demands a corresponding payment. Magic is an art that runs off the mind, heart, and soul. By biting off more than you can chew with your spells, you’ll be driving your mind too hard.”

“I’m fine with that. Please help me.”

Needless to say, I had no hesitation despite Ms. Alty’s ominous warning. I could get stronger immediately just by sacrificing something? That deal was just too sweet. There was no way I wouldn’t jump at the chance. Up until that point, I’d sacrificed plenty and never gotten any power out of it.

“Ahh,” said Ms. Alty, muttering quietly. “I knew it.”

Those words weren’t meant for me. It seemed she was talking to herself. I was about to ask what she meant by “I knew it,” but I was interrupted by her vigorous reply.

“Your determination pleases me, Mar-Mar. Now, it’s going to take a bit of a toll on you, but I guess I’ll teach you fire magic that’ll be of use on the deeper floors: *Midgard Blaze*, which specializes in sheer firepower, and *Flame Flamberge*, which is good for close quarters. Both of them pack tremendous power, but they’re hard to control. I want you to practice these spells with caution.”

She wordlessly produced a fire serpent with one hand. Seeing that sinister spell, I nodded, my breath catching. We veered off the road home and shifted to a vacant lot on the outskirts of town. First, she taught me the basics of magic and the tricks to fire magic. I naturally came to call her “Teach.” Within hours, I had mastered both *Midgard Blaze* and *Flame Flamberge*. Unlike her, I could only cast them after a long incantation, but the speed at which I’d learned such high-level magic was mind-blowing.

“To think I can already use spells this amazing...” A fire serpent of terrifying lethality swam in the air around me, totally under my control.

“That’s thanks to how compatible you and I are,” she said. “What else is there? Oh yeah, let’s try changing up your signature *Firefly* spell too. That’s a spell that improves dramatically depending on how you use it.”

It was getting late, so all that was left was some not-so-taxing practice.

However, thanks to her guidance, my options for magic multiplied even more. On the way home, I bowed my head to her.

“Thank you so much, Teach!”

“Oh, I don’t need any thanks. I’m doing this because I like it.”

“No, I insist! I will return the favor one day, mark my words! Thanks to you, I think I can be of use to my Master!”

“You really are fond of Sieg, aren’t you, Mar-Mar? Just try not to go overboard, okay? The incantation for the fire spells I taught you are all special. Heavy use of them will cause the heat of your emotions to increase. For your purposes, I made them use your past as fuel to fire up your present crush and nothing beyond that, but even so, I suggest you don’t overuse them.”

“It’s okay. If my crush gets more heated, I greatly welcome that outcome.”

“Just be careful to make sure you don’t get burned.”

“Right!” I replied with a smile. In my heart, I felt strong.

For some reason, though, Alty stared at me sadly before smiling and taking her leave. Then I, too, headed home.

That day, my strides felt lighter than ever.



The next day, I used the fire magic I’d learned to battle against the furies of Floor 21. To get straight to the point, I discovered that I *still* couldn’t keep up with them in the Dungeon.

And of course I couldn’t. Even if I got stronger, the other two would get stronger at a faster rate. But it still felt worth it. I didn’t feel the despair that hit me last time. And Ms. Lastiara, who was rooting for me, said, “See you.”

Left to my own devices, alone at home, I analyzed what I lacked. First, I lacked staying power, as Ms. Lastiara had told me. There was no arguing that point. In addition, my inability to defend myself, which Master was so concerned about, was a problem as well. Unless I could resolve those two issues, I had no future.

“I need more power! I need to practice more magic!”

As I wiped the sweat from my brow, I stepped outside the house and resumed my magic training. I was about to collapse from the rigors of that dive, but I couldn't allow myself to moan and give up. If I got good at controlling my magic, I'd be able to adjust my firepower and economize my magic energy usage. If the speed at which my magic activated got faster, it would open me up less to attack. The more I practiced, the more my problems would resolve themselves.

I practiced until I reached the cusp of passing out, and then I did chores around the house instead of resting my body. And I kept repeating that cycle. While my consciousness grew hazy, I was assailed by the strange sensation that a variety of things were leaving me. But I knew that my skill with magic was growing in inverse proportion to that too.

It was during a break from my training, while I was doing the cooking, that the two returned. And from the sound of it, they'd hit a snag deeper in the Dungeon. As the problem they faced had to do with fire and heat, I was tempted to tell them I'd lend a hand, but I resisted that urge and spent more time training my magic instead. At my current power level, I'd once again be of no use. This was the time to bear with not going.

But that night, when they returned again, I noticed something was a tad off. Every time I tried to look Master in the eyes, he'd avert his gaze with superb timing. Looking closely, I got the feeling he was blushing somewhat. Ever since meeting with Ms. Alty, he'd remained that way. Perhaps Ms. Alty had been "thoughtful" in a way I didn't need her to be.

Through my Perception skill, I confirmed that Master was feeling awkward and embarrassed. I felt like I was seeing an honest human emotion in him for the first time in a while. And that made me happy, so I didn't stoop so low as to pry.

The day after that, I got up early in the morning to hone my magic some more, and to start preparing breakfast for when those two woke up. I didn't neglect my training even while I was making their meals. I used my own fire to cook, not the house's.

Then, my flame started transforming, but not because I willed it to. Flustered, I tried to keep it at bay by pouring more magic energy into it, but the fire

shrugged off my magic energy manipulation and took on the shape of a mouth.

“Mar-Mar. It’s me. It’s Alty.”

“Huh? Th-That’s you, Ms. Alty?”

I’d seen this sight before. When Master and I had entered Floor 10 of the Dungeon, the fire there had also spoken to us.

“Sorry for startling you. But this way’s the fastest. There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“This method’s certainly convenient. So, what is it?”

“I’ll teach you how to do this too, one of these days. But this time, I figured I’d teach you another spell.”

“Wait, you’re going to teach me magic again?” My voice naturally grew louder.

I’d thought Ms. Alty was a busy person, so I’d braced for the idea that it would take a long time before I got to see her again. That was why I thought it was such a stroke of good luck to be taught more magic this soon.

“Yeah. Sieg asked me nicely, so now I’m gonna teach you a spell to remove the Dungeon’s lava.”

“Lava, you say?”

“Yep. Floor 24’s lava zone. This spell’s gonna be handy for crossing it. If you learn it, you’ll be of use in the Dungeon.”

“I see...”

What I actually wanted was fresh new attack spells. Learning how to remove lava would only be useful on Floor 24. If it wasn’t a spell that could work all throughout, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with them in the long run.

“Hee hee. Don’t worry, I’ll teach you other spells too. Oh, I know. Why don’t we meet at the pub where we first met at noon today?”

“Ah, sure, okay.”

The flame then reverted to its prior kitchen flame shape. I smiled broadly and resumed my cooking. If my arsenal of magic kept increasing like this, I could

perhaps establish a place for myself in the Dungeon. It was with that hope in my heart that I cooked their meals.

That day, Master and Ms. Lastiara headed out for a Dungeon dive after having breakfast, but their dive was immediately cut short and they came back in next to no time. Ms. Lastiara seemed reticent, and she departed for her home in Whoseyards in a hurry. Of the two, only Master remained in the house, and he looked disheartened.

While this was my chance to do all sorts of stuff with him, just the two of us, I couldn't afford to renege on my meeting with Ms. Alty. In the long term, learning magic would be absolutely necessary, and I couldn't let short-term pleasure win out, so I left him behind and went to meet up with my teacher.

She was seated in the same chair as the last time around. In addition, a man I didn't know was sitting at the same table.

"Sup, Mar-Mar?" said Ms. Alty. "Over here."

"Ah, coming." I took the seat that Ms. Alty guided me to. I gave the tall man with the sharp features a little bow of greeting. Was he an acquaintance of hers?

"Oh, him? You don't gotta worry about him. He'll be out of our hair shortly. I guess you could call him an old friend of mine."

"Ha ha, an old friend, huh? Yeah, that tracks. Don't you worry, little missy. I'll be on my way in a jiffy."

And just as he promised, he got up out of his chair right away and left. It was only after he was gone that I noticed that I'd met him before. Perhaps thanks to my unique eyes, I was able to compare his features against a man I'd seen in the past, even in such a short span of time. If I recalled correctly, he had been there when Master had won the bidding for me at the slave market. I didn't know how he and Master were connected, but he had to at least be an acquaintance of his. I regretted not greeting him a bit more politely, but my Perception skill rejected the notion. It was telling me that I ought to do my best *not* to have anything to do with him.

"Now then, let's grab something to eat first. It's lunchtime, after all." Ms. Alty

gave me a menu.

Soon, we were eating as though nothing had happened. As we partook, Ms. Alty engaged in small talk with me.

“How’ve you been lately? Do you think your relationship’s about to develop further?”

“No. Nothing’s really changing on that front. But thanks to the magic you taught me, I’m now able to take down strong monsters.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“But I don’t have enough magic power to cast spells without instantly losing my breath. So in the end, the Dungeon is Master and Ms. Lastiara’s domain. It’s not going my way,” I reported as I stirred the soup that was placed at the table.

“I see. I’m rooting for you, Mar-Mar, so that’s rather lamentable news.”

“That being said, I *will* become like Ms. Lastiara one day. Even if it’s beyond my reach now, I will one day, mark my words!”

Ms. Alty’s expression remained somber. “One day, huh?” She looked sad, like she was remembering something.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Well, it’s just that we don’t have that kind of time. According to what I heard a short while ago, Sieg and Lastiara’s relationship’s about to take a sudden turn, see.”

“A sudden turn?”

The two *had* been acting strange that day. Then again, Master was pretty much always in a hurry over something or other, and Ms. Lastiara was always fairly unhinged.

“Heh heh. Just as you figured, Mar-Mar, the two themselves haven’t changed. They’re not about to change either. In their eyes, they’re fine the way they are. It’s just that it seems the people around them don’t approve of that. It looks like we need to hurry things a bit up.”

The people around Master? Wouldn’t that just be the folks here, at the pub

where he worked? Yet it didn't sound like that was who she was referring to. The only other possibility was the people around Ms. Lastiara. Was she referring to the Whoseyards knights who had encountered the party in the Dungeon? It was certainly true that they were thorns in my side, in that they might deepen the pair's relationship.

"Do you mean those knights?"

"Yeah, it's just as you fear. The Whoseyards knights are trying to play matchmaker with them."

"Th-Then in that case, we need to be faster... Quickly, Teach! Please help me learn more magic!"

"Heh heh. No hesitation, huh? Acquiring even higher-level magic will adversely affect your health. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes, of course."

"All right, then let's move this elsewhere."

We finished our meals and moved to an unoccupied stretch of land, specifically a grassy field far from town. Vart had a lot of untapped land. In a place like this, we wouldn't be noticed by anybody else.

Ms. Alty's expression turned serious. "Now then, from what I can see," she started, her voice piercing, "you keep biting off more than you can chew, over and over again. You're firing spells in battle in rapid succession. That, plus the magic training you've been doing on your own, has wrecked your body."

Her tone wasn't critical. She was more just confirming that was the case. A mage of Ms. Alty's caliber could probably see all that at a glance.

I nodded. "Yes ma'am..."

"Hmm. I guess I saw that coming, or I don't know. I have to say, you're really just like me."

"Just like you?"

"Yep, we're peas in a pod. Which is why I know your current symptoms well too."

“Symptoms?” I said, startled. “Am I suffering from some sort of disease?”

If I was contagious, I wouldn’t be able to live with Master anymore.

“No, it’s not a disease. I told you, didn’t I? If you run your mind ragged through magic, you have to pay a corresponding price. And your psyche’s more damaged than you realize.”

“It is?” It really didn’t feel like I was damaged.

“In my case, I overused magic to the point of memory impairment. Hearing that, I bet that’s ringing a bell for you. If there’s something you can’t remember, I want you to tell me sooner rather than later.”

Memory impairment? I had none...or at least, I didn’t think so.

“Err, no, ma’am, no memory impairment at the moment...”

“Sometimes, making use of high-level fire magic burns old memories away before the caster even knows it. And since you’re always using magic that’s above your weight, you run that risk at all times.”

“It burns away old memories?”

“Yes, it burns away your past and inflames your present. That’s the quintessence of fire magic. The incantations that I taught you contain expressions to that effect.”

If you asked me, memories faded eventually anyway. I didn’t shy away from burning them. I had steeled myself for that much from the moment I’d heard about overworking the mind through spellcasting.

“I don’t mind. If it’s for the sake of obtaining power, I don’t need a past!”

Ms. Alty smiled sorrowfully once again. “Heh heh. I figured as much. You’re that way too, huh, Mar-Mar?”

Still smiling, she slit her wrist just like last time. I understood what she wanted, lowering my lips to her wrist and licking off her blood.

That day, I learned not just about magic but also about the way that incantations were structured. The link between incantations and magic was deep. The words one recited altered the effects of a spell. The general public

thought that using magic invariably expended MP, but Ms. Alty, being as well-versed in magic as she was, taught me a different method—a way to shoot spells without MP. Incantations that made my memories the price to pay. Incantations that made my emotions the price to pay. Incantations that made my life the price to pay. I learned a whole host of them. If I could use them skillfully, I could cast spells continuously without running out of steam. My understanding of magic deepened, and I could sense that I was growing stronger. I could also sense, however, that whenever I was incanting, something precious was flaking away from my heart. Ms. Alty was teaching me with the foreknowledge that this would happen, and I had braced myself for it. I would rather die than be separated from Master.

I'd rather die. Yes, I...

A passion filled my head, and I grew dizzy. Before I knew it, the volume of my thoughts had ratcheted up. The incantation that made emotions the price to pay had to be padding them out, so to speak. The price didn't necessarily mean I lost what was paid. It could also amplify it.

At the realization that my very being was being altered by my magic, I got the chills. But I didn't care. Losing my feelings was bad, but my feelings being magnified was something I welcomed. Ms. Alty had expressly picked out that kind of incantation to teach me. She was rooting for my crush with all her might. That was the purpose of the incantation, of the price. So I continued studying magic without any unease.

The stronger I grew, the more passionate I became. This fever pitch caused the emotions rattling in my body to seethe and boil. My emotions turned into a viscous syrupy thing, and in the end...

"Let's call it quits for today."

I felt like I had blinked one second, and the next, I saw her looking down at me. At some point while I was practicing, I'd crumpled to the ground.

I got back to my feet, wiping the sweat from my brow. "I, I can still train—"

"I know. But Sieg's gonna be home soon. We need to go greet him."

Evidently, Ms. Alty had a grasp of Master's movements, probably due to the

magic that allowed her to use flames as an extension of her senses.

“Okay,” I said, after a pause. “Thank you very much for today’s training.”

“Oh, that’s okay, I don’t need thanks. This is all for my own sake too.”

“For your sake?”

“I wasn’t able to get there, but if you can, it’ll make me feel better. Yep, I’ll feel better after... That’s the reason I’m making use of you, Mar-Mar.”

Something about it all seemed like self-flagellation to me. I didn’t want her, someone to whom I was so indebted, to look so sad, so I tried cheering her up.

“I don’t know you very well, Ms. Alty. I don’t know your circumstances. But I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I think that normally, if somebody who never managed to achieve their goal saw somebody else trying to do the same, they’d hamper them out of spite. The fact that you’re supporting me instead makes you such a fantastic person.”

I laid it all out, clear as day. She and Ms. Lastiara were beautiful human beings, and I was base and dirty. *That’s right. I’m the only one with such an unclean soul...*

She grinned. “Heh heh. Thank you, Mar-Mar,” she said, staring into the distance.

I could tell that a confluence of emotions was rattling in her heart. And not even my perspicacious eyes could ascertain the full story. It seemed her emotions were nigh fathomless and wound together in a complicated knot.

“Ms. Alty?” I prompted her, the complexity of her emotions disorienting me.

“Thank you, Mar-Mar. I mean it. Now then, I’ll be going.”

She burned the clothes she was wearing and turned into pure fire before vanishing abruptly. A vague melancholy hung in the air, like a dying candle flame. Unable to fully read her emotions filled me with mixed feelings of my own. But so as to make the most of the knowledge that Master was due home, I headed back without delay. I had to be there earlier than him so I could prepare his meal. Cooking was my only purpose at that moment, the kitchen the only nook for me in this world.

As usual, he returned while I was getting his food ready. Yet he was behaving oddly, like he'd rewound the clock. The mood in the air was the same as when we had first met. His expression was exactly the same as when he'd spotted me in the slave market. His face was that of a lost little kid roaming about alone. I could tell that something was beginning to crumble.

Worried, I trotted over to him. "What's the matter, Master?"

He chose his words carefully as he murmured a reply, his eyes wandering. "Well, it's just...the day after tomorrow... Lastiara...she..."

"The day after tomorrow? What about it? Is Ms. Lastiara doing something?"

"On the Day of the Blessed Birth..."

"Yes?"

It seemed Master was unnerved by something to do with Ms. Lastiara. The horror of that fact chilled my heart, but I suppressed the feeling so that he didn't catch on, and I waited for him to continue.

After much hesitation, he choked out his next words. "She said, 'Let's hang out again on the Day of the Blessed Birth.'"

He's lying to me?

My eyes told me he was. Master had just decided that he didn't need to explain it to me. I could feel my seething heart spin into an out-and-out tempest.

"Yes. That's fine; of course."

I knew I'd been lied to. I could also tell that, unlike always, this was not a lie he was telling with my well-being in mind. Yet, I nodded, docile. He looked so utterly worn out that I couldn't say anything beyond that.

Master walked slowly to his room, and I glared as I watched him go, muttering to myself, "So in other words, I'm so unworthy you won't even air your concerns to me."

I could feel it. I could feel the sensation of being left behind, which I was always feeling already, intensify. At that moment, he was preoccupied with Ms. Lastiara. I wasn't on his mind at all. It was glaringly obvious. I didn't need to

verify that it was true.

My hands balled into fists, and I went back to the kitchen. I strengthened the flame using fire magic and quickly brought the cooking to a close. I stored the food for later, knowing he wasn't coming back to the living room, and then went outside by myself. From the unoccupied hilltop, I walked and walked towards where there were even fewer people in the vicinity. Then, after confirming there was no one around, I got to training.

Violent, wild flames danced in the air, as though reflecting the state of my heart. In order to amplify them, I incanted over and over and over and over again. Telling myself I couldn't waste too much of Ms. Alty's time, I incanted the words she had taught me many, many times over. And the more I did, the more power gushed forth. Above all, it felt nice to vomit out my emotions like this.

My body was screaming. My heart was breaking down. And it felt so, so good.

My control over the fire was improving with frightening speed. The speed of the incantations was also steadily increasing, and soon enough, I didn't even need to say the name of the spell to cast it. This had to be the silent casting that Ms. Alty had told me about. She'd said it would take years to learn, but it turned out that wasn't the case. If you learned the trick to it, it was easy.

I gave birth to more fire without incanting, and I manipulated it with meager amounts of magic energy. How could I use fire magic when I possessed so little MP? That was the hurdle I had to vault over, but one could say I'd come quite close to putting a bow on that conundrum. I knew the way to compensate for my lack of MP. I just had to use my pointless, stupid emotions and my poor excuse for a body as fuel. If I sacrificed my memories and recollections, as Ms. Alty had, I could cast and hone as much of my magic as I liked.

I made multiple *Midgard Blaze* fire serpents dance in the air, and I controlled every inch of them. And I checked that, indeed, very little of the magic energy in my body had been used in the process. I cracked a smile—I was working the grandest magic with the lowest energy expenditure.

With that, I dispelled the serpents. I was strong now. It was nigh tangible. And that spurred me to train even more. If I just gained more power...

If I gained more power, what happened today wouldn't happen again. If I

stopped being so weak... If I stopped being so useless... If I stopped being so unfit for him to even so much as bounce his troubles off me...then Master would never lie to me again. I could start walking alongside him, just like Ms. Lastiara. And for that end goal, there was nothing I wouldn't sacrifice. Memory impairment was a minuscule price to pay. The present was what was important, not the past.

Don't pine for a hometown that's gone. Forget all about _____. _____'s gone too.

As long as all that was left was my flame magic and my feelings for Master, that was all I needed. Those two things were all I required to lead a happy life. They were all that was important. And it would only take a little longer for me to unlock that happy life.

"Heh heh. Heh heh heh heh heh!"

I could hardly handle how fun practicing magic was. I could tell that I had acquired so much power that I was a fair match for even Ms. Lastiara now. I could face off against a whirlwind of violence like her without fear.

Just a little more. Just a little longer... And it won't be Ms. Lastiara beside him. It'll be me!

"Huh?" I wasn't smiling or laughing anymore. I was shocked and aghast at myself. At the beyond-pitch-black emotions swirling in my soul. I shook my head. "No, that's... Ms. Lastiara is a good person..."

It wasn't as though I wanted to drag her down. That wasn't what this was about. Sure, the girl had an offbeat frame of mind, but she wasn't a bad person. If anything, she was an actively good person who was helping me out. Yet here I was, catching myself wishing her out of the picture entirely.

I put out all of my fire spells and shook my head repeatedly, the night winds chilling my head. I'd paid the price for my spells too much, and it seemed my head was boiling from the inside. That was to blame for me thinking all these strange thoughts.

There's still time to train, but let's go rest instead. Light-headed and staggering, I went back home and flopped onto my bed. As I stared at the

ceiling, I recalled my dark thoughts from before. Now that I was resting, that wicked emotion didn't well up in the slightest. I was tempted to chalk it up to the magic, but Ms. Alty had never said that using magic would engender such dark emotions. I figured the true cause lay within me. In all likelihood, it was an ugly emotion that had been lurking in my deepest recesses and had simply bubbled up to the fore due to some trigger.

I closed my eyes tight to escape the disgraceful thoughts inside me. I fell asleep with the belief that come the next day, I'd be back to my normal self.

Thanks to the day's training, my control over fire magic had reached the point of perfection, and I'd solved the magic energy problem too.

Starting tomorrow, I'll get them to let me dive with them again. Then it'll be back to normal.

I'll be back by Master's side.

If I show him my power in the Dungeon, he'll never see fit to lie to me again.

I'll finally be able to see Master as his true self!

As I juggled those dreams in my head, I let go of the waking world...

Only to be betrayed the next morning. And to think, I'd thought that from today, it would all go back to normal. But I happened to overhear Master and Ms. Lastiara chatting.

"If so—if that's how you feel, then will you come save me? Will you do as Hine said and go on a journey with me someplace far away, just the two of us?"

It was like a scene out of a romance narrative. All I could do was give a crooked smile. Ms. Lastiara was pleading with Master, as beautiful and tragic as any storybook heroine. How underhanded. How utterly underhanded. How sneaky. How craven.

"Ms. Lastiara..." I let slip in the hallway. "Didn't you say you were going to watch from the sidelines?! Why are you..."

That was what she had told me when it was just the two of us alone together. She had said she would root for my crush. And yet the reality unfurling before my eyes was a merciless gut punch. There was no mistaking it—Master

currently saw her as the heroine of his story...and me as a bit player.

There was the world with Master and Ms. Lastiara and it, and then there was my world. I leaned against the door that cut our two worlds apart, a single tear streaking down my cheek. That tear turned to fire and disappeared before it could hit the ground. Black did it burn, and black did it blaze, before vanishing.

But in the end, Master wasn't able to give her a solid answer. Unable to fully grasp her unstable soul, he effectively ran away instead of replying to her supplication. That outcome gave my heart an ounce of relief. But I reckoned I couldn't afford to bask in that small comfort; I steeled my resolve and opened the door.

There he was, with an expression like it was the end of days.

"Maria, were you listening?"

"Yes," I replied, seeing no need to lie. "So, err, does that mean Miss Lastiara..."

"She left. Just as you heard." Master pointed feebly at the window.

"Are you sure you're okay with this, Master?"

"The problem's just too big... At least, as I am right now, I can't drift away from the Dungeon."

When I heard how resigned he was, it soothed my stormy heart. I didn't let that show on the outside, of course.

"So when the new version of her, Miss Tiara, comes along, are you going to think of her as Miss Lastiara and continue Dungeon diving with her?"

"She won't be Lastiara at all. She'll be someone else in her skin. Of course I can't just go on like before."

My heart went from soothed to outright delighted. I endeavored to lock my expression such that Master didn't take note of my shameful glee.

"At the very least, there's no way I could think of her as my comrade."

But when I learned that Ms. Lastiara would no longer be with us, my mirth shot past my ability to curb it.

“I see. I’m happy to hear that. Truly.” The sense of relief in my heart was spilling over, morphing into open callousness.

“You’re... You’re *happy*?” Master gave me a puzzled look.

At first, I thought I’d slipped up, but I concluded that actually, this was a good opportunity. Now that Ms. Lastiara had left us alone and Master was at his weakest, perhaps I could lure out the words I wanted to hear from him. This was my golden chance to lay some firm bedrock. Inferring opportunities was the specialty of me and my eyes, and my eyes were telling me that now was the time to strike. Ms. Lastiara had done something similar herself. So it stood to reason that I too...

“I mean, I thought you maybe *liked* Miss Lastiara or something, Master.”

His eyes snapped wide open. It seemed his mind was having trouble keeping up with my sudden remark. Thanks to my eyes, I could sense his fluster quite distinctly. And, with his mental state so jumbled up, there was only one thing he was bound to say in response. Having been unable to stop Ms. Lastiara, he would never in a million years say that he did, in fact, like her that way, even if he did. It wasn’t that he chose not to. His personality was too logic-based—he *couldn’t*.

His thought process was as follows: if he did like her that way, he’d never sit back and do nothing after she asked him to save her. The reason he ignored her pleas was because he didn’t like her. Master was the type to be thinking that way. As though he acted logically.

If I got him to say out loud that he didn’t like her, even once, then it would *become* the truth. This was Master we were talking about. He was very good at fooling himself. He’d believe his own words and give up on the whole affair. I knew that for a fact.

If I knew my Master, and I did, he’d give in before the might of a whole nation. There was no doubt in my mind that he’d be risk-averse and select the passive option. And since I understood that, I continued.

“Well, yeah. Miss Lastiara had her odd qualities. But you’ve seen how pretty she is, plus she was so strong and cheery. And she likes mischief, but at her core, she’s always thinking about her companions... And she’s a dreamer, but

ideal as a Dungeon diver... She's a lot like you, so you got along well."

I watched as his face contorted. But that was a necessary evil. It had to be done for the sake of the separation to come. I was asking these questions for his sake as well.

"So I'd been under the impression you maybe liked her. But you don't actually, right, Master? You don't like her, right?"

He was speechless, but the gears in his head were whirring a mile a minute. He called to mind the past and the present, frantically searching for the right reply.

Answer me, Master. Please. Go on. Quickly now. Say you don't like her. Muffle your emotions with your "logic," just like you always do. C'mon. Do it. Let's hear it. Tell me you don't like h—

"Huh? Ha, ha ha, ha ha. Ha ha ha ha... Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

He laughed. And at that very moment, for a fleeting instant, the colors I saw turned negative and my world warped itself.

His expression turned into that of a man possessed, laughing vigorously and without reservation. He kept cackling, and what's more, he seemed to be angry even as he laughed.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp stinging in my eyes. I pressed my hands to them, bewildered. They hadn't predicted a reaction like this. I had no earthly clue why he was laughing, or why he was incensed. I was watching him with the eyes I had such faith in, but I was totally lost. Granted, he was someone who had always been difficult to grasp through my eyes. But never to *this* extent...

"Wh-What's the matter, Master?" I asked timidly.

"Ha ha... It's nothing; it's just a little funny... You're right, Maria. I don't like Lastiara. And you can take that to the bank."

"H-Huh? Is... Is that right?"

Those were the words I'd wanted to hear. But he'd said he didn't like her so flatly and readily that it actually made me more uneasy, not less. The way I had imagined it, he was supposed to answer in a more forced way, like he'd done

forty compromises in his head first. But all I could see was a reinvigorated smile.

“But never mind that. You said something interesting just now. About how Lastiara and I are similar,” he said cheerily, paying my discomposure no heed.

I had no other response; I had to be straightforward. I was too flustered to word things more subtly. “Right, yes, I uhh, I don’t know how to put it exactly, but your cores are similar. From where I’m standing, you’re *both* flawless, like you were created that way.”

“Ha ha!” Upon hearing my honest reply, he laughed again. This time, it was a cold sort of laugh. “I see. So we’re similar at heart, huh?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t know why he was laughing. Sure, his personality was a handful, and he was hard to understand in general. He was indecisive, his values and ways of thinking were unique to him, and your average Joe would naturally fail to comprehend where he was at. But even in light of that, this was abnormal. Up until that point, I could still use my eyes to understand him at least a little bit. But now I had no idea what to expect. It was like he’d become a different person altogether.

While I was standing there in a state of dismay, Master zipped into motion. “Maria, I’m going out for a while. I’ll be back by noon.”

“Wait, huh? Master, where are you—”

By the time I tried to stop him, he was already leaving. With a stride full of conviction, he exited through the window like Ms. Lastiara did. I could do naught but watch. My brain was trailing behind, and I couldn’t take a single step. My outstretched arm slowly fell, and I sat in one of the living room chairs.

“What the heck is going on?”

I couldn’t accept the fact that I couldn’t fathom Master’s feelings, and my whole body was shaking. He was someone whose feelings were utterly lost on me—someone I loved, at that. I never thought it would be this disheartening or terrifying. In my whole life, it had never happened to me before. I boasted an advantage that other people didn’t: the Perception skill. Thanks to that, this had never happened to me. Even with Master, who was good at deceiving himself,

and with Ms. Lastiara (her being her), there was never a moment where I had absolutely no inkling whatsoever of what was going through their minds. Until now.

“Could it be? Not again... Did these eyes doom me *again*?”

An old memory resurfaced. Images of the village, of _____, burning thanks to the conclusion I had come to via Perception.

Wait. ____? Huh? What the... What's ____? The word won't come out? Is it that I can't remember? What was it I lost again?

“All, all right, calm down. First things first, just calm down...”

I tried regaining my composure through my tried-and-true method. Back in the village, and during the war, and after I had become a slave, not one good thing had ever come from losing my presence of mind. I took deep breaths and took the time to sort through my muddled thoughts. This was the first time I was completely stumped as to what Master was thinking. But in a way, wasn't that what interpersonal relationships always entailed? It would be ridiculous to count on understanding everything all of the time.

Indeed. This skill of mine was what was truly odd. But I put aside my rage against my eyes for the time being. What was important right now was being calm. Priority number one was predicting his next actions.

He had indeed said he didn't like Ms. Lastiara in *that* way. But that was the point where it had all started going amiss. He was clearly laughing at something in particular and was angered by that something as well. I just didn't know what it was. I did know that something wasn't me or he himself.

Calmly, I assembled all the puzzle pieces, the information I had gathered thus far. I had to take a wider vantage point, considering not just how Master and Ms. Lastiara had acted that day, but everything else too. I searched for the primary factor, and then it dawned on me. I recalled what Ms. Alty had told me.

“They're not about to change. It's just that the people around them don't approve of that.”

I figured that might have been what had given rise to this situation. Nothing else sprang to mind. To sum it up, Master had been changed by outside hands.

And the only outside force that I could think of was the knights of Whoseyards. If they used the most cutting-edge drugs or magic tools on offer in a large nation like Whoseyards, it might not be out of the question. Maybe he was forced to change through some nefarious means, and he had just realized that, started laughing and fuming at his own gutlessness, and then left to save Ms. Lastiara? The chances of it were high. In fact, if that wasn't the case, then why would he go out like that, right then and there? The only reason he could have had for leaving me alone in that moment was to go save Ms. Lastiara. If he'd gone to the Dungeon, he would've used his magic door instead.

Which led me to my ultimate inference. *Master left me behind, telling me nothing, to go where Ms. Lastiara was?*

"N-No, not that. Anything but that..."

The answer I had come to left my body shaking from head to toe. The situation was too similar to when I had made that blunder back in my hometown. It was that horrible incident all over again. Once more, I was going to lose everything that was important to me.

I couldn't handle it. I ran outside and tried to dash towards Whoseyards. But a man was standing in the middle of the path, and I stopped in my tracks.

This was my third encounter with him. I had met him at the slave market, and then again at the pub with Ms. Alty.

My Perception skill was sounding alarm bells, screaming that the tall man with the sharp features before me was a threat. The corners of his mouth curled as he approached me.

"So, we meet again."

That smile was still pasted onto his face, as ever.

"I'm in a hurry. Please step aside." I figured I shouldn't get near this guy, so I was blunt. Not that he cared.

"I reckon it's about time. I came to see how you're doing."

"About time?"

I didn't know what he was saying. All I knew was that whatever it was, it

wasn't on the level. I decided not to give him the time of day and attempted to go around him. But his next words stopped me in my tracks.

"Aren't there some things you'd like to ask a Whoseyards man? I may look like this, but I'm a real eminent sir knight of Whoseyards, I'll have ya know. I've got deep ties with milady Lastiara and with ol' Sieg. If you want, you can ask me for advice."

"Wait...you're a knight of Whoseyards?"

If he was, then that made him one of the people I suspected of leading Master astray.

"Yep, in the flesh."

I could feel the blood rush to my head. My emotions, which had had no outlet, now found a target in a knight of Whoseyards and came flowing to the fore.

"Wh-What did you people do to Master?! He's been acting so strangely! He's acting stranger and stranger because he's been consorting with you Whoseyards people!!!" I shrieked.

But the man remained unruffled, replying coolly, "We did do something, but only to our lady, Lastiara. We didn't do anything to Sieg."

"You lie! I know that you people are trying to use him! That's why you cast a spell on him, right? You're trying to control him!"

"Nope, didn't cast any spells on him. And you of all people should be able to tell I'm not lying," he said, pointing to his own eyes.

It seemed that through his own skill, which was similar to mine, he'd detected my having Perception. And he was telling me to use my eyes to verify his claims. But I'd already determined their veracity. I knew full well that he wasn't lying. Even so, I no longer knew what I could have faith in. I bit my lip.

"If that's so, why is Master in such a state?!"

"I haven't seen what state you're referring to, so I can't say, but there is something I do know."

A pause. "Please tell me."

“I know that at the end of the day, for one reason or another, Sieg can’t abandon anyone,” he answered readily. “He may suffer, he may swing back and forth, he may make loads of mistakes, but in the end, he can’t forsake anyone he’s emotionally connected to. That’s just the sort of guy Siegfried Vizzita is.”

Master was kind, so he had gone to save her. This man was stating definitively that that was all there was to it. I didn’t want to acknowledge it. Maybe because I wanted to hog his kindness for myself. Maybe for some other reason.

“That may be so. He certainly has that quality. But even more so than being kind, he’s cowardly, indecisive, and pitiful! He’d never normally risk trying to save her!”

“I’m sure you’re right. It’s just as you say. I’m fully aware of that too.” The man didn’t deny it. He continued to agree with my remarks. “He’s a coward, so he fears the Dungeon. He’s indecisive, which ends up wounding his comrades, and he doesn’t say what he wants to say. But the boy’s only strong point is Dungeon diving. That’s just how Sieg is. He was worse in the beginning. There’s no way he’s got the guts to save someone if it means antagonizing an entire nation.”

“Right? So—” I tried to use the words of the man who was agreeing with me to push forward my own opinion, but I was interrupted by his nasty smile.

“Ha ha. So, I daresay Sieg is striving to change as a person. He’s doing his best to get stronger so he can bring about a better outcome, don’t ya think?”

I couldn’t say no. I wasn’t in any way confident that he was mistaken. What if, hypothetically, he was spot on? If Master became even stronger, he’d go to some far-off heights with Ms. Lastiara. Heights I could never reach. All I’d done was learn a little fire magic. Him leaving me behind was a foregone conclusion.

Hold on...no. Maybe he’s already left me behind?

I was alone in the house, after all. I was the only one left.

“Th-That can’t... I don’t know about something like that. I’ve never seen anything like that...”

“I’m sure. That’s the limit you hit when you rely on eye skills too much, little lady. You never actually understood the first thing about Sieg.”

Master was trying to change? I hadn't noticed because I was relying too much on Perception? I'd made yet another mistake thanks to my eyes? Master's heart had turned stronger before I knew it, and he'd actively gained the will to fight against the colossal barrier called Whoseyards? That was why he had gotten angry with Whoseyards and was trying to save Ms. Lastiara?

"Now then, little lady, there's no time left. Come tomorrow, Sieg's likely gonna run off to rescue milady. And since he'll have grown stronger, he'll probably do a bang-up job and *succeed*."

Arghh... He'll actually save her; I just know it.

Master was strong. His heart was that of a boy, but if we were talking just his abilities, he was like an old veteran hero. I was sure he would save her in dramatic fashion and then advance even further.

"If that happens, the hero Sieg and the heroine Lastiara will be united through a predestined bond. It'll tie their knot, if you catch my meaning."

As the hero and heroine of the story, the two whose "knot" was tied would go on to the next stage. And would I be there? Me? A minor role in a previous chapter? Would I have my turn on that next stage?

No. Almost certainly not. A character without a role to play was only going to get written out.

"Ahh, but you know, you don't have anything, little lady. You and Sieg can't understand one another, you don't have any connection to speak of, and you don't have the strength to follow in his wake."

He was right. I had nothing. I lacked Ms. Lastiara's perfection. I had no beauty. My personality sucked. I wasn't from a respectable family, and my past wasn't special enough to involve nations. I had no talent, no power. And since I had nothing, there was no way I could stand beside Master. He would leave me in the dust.

"All you have left is the unilaterally secured agreement regarding your master-servant relationship. An agreement that we can't even be sure Sieg is aware of."

He didn't have to tell me. I already knew. It was precisely because I knew it

that I desired an alternate bond. I wanted strength. I'd sacrifice whatever it took in order to obtain that which Master wanted more than anything.

"It... It's..." I said in between short gasps. "It's still okay. If I just get strong, strong *magic*..."

I pointed out the potential that I possessed so that I didn't get squashed flat by those words. Yet the man continued without mercy.

"You think mages who are more capable than you won't show up in the future?"

He was trying to crush my hope, delightedly thrusting reality in my face. And I couldn't deny it. The more time passed, the more people Master would become acquainted with. There was no guarantee that a mage who surpassed me wouldn't appear. And if that happened, I...

"But hold on! Master told me I could stay here! He said I could cook his meals for him here, and that's enough!"

"You get it, don't you? That's him pitying you. He said that out of sympathy, don't you see? Food isn't important to him. He himself is good at cooking, and there are plenty of people to replace you."

I knew that. I knew that task had been given to me out of consideration for my feelings. He didn't actually need my cooking.

My heart was shedding tears. I could hear it moaning, weeping.

"But... But Master didn't say he would go! He hasn't yet! He hasn't breathed a word that he'd go to where she is!" I didn't want to look reality in the face. I was hanging on to that slender ray of hope.

"Are your glasses truly that rose-tinted?"

"I haven't heard a word about it from him! Master hasn't gone to whatever stupid place Ms. Lastiara is! Starting tomorrow, we'll be alone together again! We'll progress through the Dungeon, just the two of us, once again!"

Upon seeing me stubbornly shake my head, the man shrugged in exasperation, turning his back to me as he left me some parting words. "You can believe that if you like. But you do realize that if luck's not on your side, he

may just leave you along with the whole house? Mull it over, little lady.”

With that, the man left the scene. His words struck a chord. All this time, I’d been kept in the dark and out of the loop. And today, I’d been left alone in the house yet again. I was unable to keep up with them, and they’d left both me and the house in their wake. That was everything I needed to know.

The fear from when I had fallen into slavery came roaring back.

Once again, ____ left my side. And just like I’d lost ____, ____, and ____, I’d now lose Master too.

That terror rocked me from head to toe, and I fell to my knees. My head was still swimming as I got to my feet, and I started walking dazedly like a ghost. I stalked the streets of Vart in search of Master, checking locations I thought he might have headed to. I scoured the pub, the churches, the shops vending Dungeon necessities. But he was nowhere to be found. And that could only mean he’d gone someplace that wasn’t Vart.

I put one foot in front of the other, suppressing the urge to hurl. I just wanted to see him.

I can’t stand being alone. I hate it. I can’t take it anymore.

That was running on repeat in my head when I bumped into a familiar face. I was walking down the street when a red-haired girl appeared out of nowhere with a shimmer of hot air.

“Ms. Alty!”

Having found a confidante I could depend on, I approached her, tears in my eyes. She greeted me with her own affectionate, benevolent eyes.

“Mar-Mar, you okay?”

“Ms. Alty! At this rate, Master... Master’s gonna...”

“I know, Mar-Mar. Calm down. It’s gonna be okay, so calm down.” She held my head and caressed me. With each stroke, I grew a little calmer.

“Ms. Alty...I think Master and Ms. Lastiara are gonna run off someplace without me. And then, and then, I...”

“You’re still good, Mar-Mar. I met with Sieg a moment ago.”

“You met with Master?”

I felt a modicum of relief hearing someone I trusted mention the one I loved by name.

“He hasn’t gone anywhere yet. He’s gonna be home in no time.”

That sliver of relief ballooned inside my heart. Those words—“he’s gonna be home”—returned a smidgen of my composure.

“But from what I’ve seen, I don’t know if Sieg’s gonna go save her or not. Sorry. Probably can’t know until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, you say?”

A sense of discomfort. The sensation I felt whenever Perception came across some contradiction or inconsistency. But I didn’t want to distrust my confidante, so I didn’t press. Besides, at this stage, I’d totally stopped trusting in my eyes. The only person I could trust was the one who had gone out of her way to help me thus far.

“Yep. If he’s gonna save her, it’ll have to be early tomorrow morning. Which is why you’ve gotta be by his side tomorrow morning no matter what, Mar-Mar. Then you can check and see. See everything, that is,” she said earnestly.

Ms. Alty was telling me of a way to comprehend Master’s feelings. She was always doing her utmost for my sake. I didn’t have it in me to doubt her spirit.

“Okay...so it’s tomorrow...”

“Yep, do that tomorrow. Everything happens after that. Now then, let’s go back a sec.”

She and I returned to the house. Then she left, but not before promising to meet me the next day. She said she had a lot on her plate that day, so I couldn’t stop her from leaving.

Holding on to the hope that Ms. Alty had given me, I waited for Master in the otherwise unoccupied house. The Whoseyards knight had pompously crowed that Master would save Ms. Lastiara, but it wasn’t set in stone. Ms. Alty had said it wasn’t a foregone conclusion, which meant that without a doubt, there

was hope left.

As I brooded, I stayed home, practicing my magic and cooking. During that time, Master returned.

He came home! Just like Ms. Alty said: he came home! I received him with a smile. *I knew it. It was all in my head. It's obvious we're gonna go back to our life with just the two of us now.*

Certain of that, I greeted Master. We ate together and talked a little too. Nothing felt odd or off. The topic of Ms. Lastiara never came up. Perhaps out of fear, I unconsciously never mentioned it.

After our meal, he went right to his room. It was only later that night that something strange cropped up. Curious about how Master was, I noticed cold air leaking from the gap under the door when I passed by his room. I focused on the room's interior to ascertain the cause.

The flow of that magic energy rang a bell. It was the same as when I was practicing my fire magic. Master was practicing ice magic in his room. And he was trying to cook up spells at a level beyond anything he'd done before, to boot. As I'd been doing the same, I could tell.

"Why's he practicing magic *now*?"

If it was for the Dungeon's sake, I didn't mind. In that case, he'd just use the magic to dive again and nothing more. But there was a chance that wasn't the case. Would Master go to the Dungeon the next day or would he go to the cathedral? I couldn't get it off my mind, and I couldn't get a wink of sleep that night.

Right next to the room where he was practicing ice magic, I continued practicing fire magic.

"Burn, nixfire! At the mercy of threads and oneiric reeling—"

Over and over and over and over again, I incanted. For some reason, it calmed me down. My emotions peeling off, overflowing, and toppling to one side felt so calming. I got a nagging feeling that something valuable and important was mutating. But even so, I couldn't stop. If I didn't keep at it, anxiety threatened to squash me flat.

That was why I muttered, “Sprout, birthfire! Bleeding bonfire!”

I continued to incant, like I was making a wish. I kept on incanting and waited for daybreak.

“Don’t go.”

“Don’t abandon me.”

“I...”

“I...”

Through the brain fog, I incanted, and in so doing, I continually paid the trade-off it demanded.

And yet, the next day, that wish...



Early morning of the Day of the Blessed Birth.

Master had tried to slip out without giving me a shout first.

In other words, it’s what I thought...

“You are going after all...aren’t you...Master?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna come right back with Lastiara in tow, so could you wait here for me?” he replied, trying to smooth it over.

I tried to intuit whether he was telling the truth, but it was totally lost on me. I didn’t know anything anymore. I understood nothing. Nothing. Not one thing. I understood nothing at all.

Would he come back? Was that much true?

“After we return, we’re planning to flee to a different country. How about you —”

At that, I recalled when Ms. Lastiara had asked him whether he was willing to travel to a far-off country with her. If I hadn’t stopped Master just now, he might have tried heading to a different land, just the two of them.

Just the two of them, leaving me behind...

“How about you come with us? We’ll run away, the three of us.”

Did he mean to be with just her, or did he mean to be with both of us? I didn't know. As such, I asked him what I did know about.

"Run away? What about the house?"

The way he was talking, it was like we would never return...even though Master had entrusted this house to me.

"Unfortunately, I'm thinking we'll have no choice but to abandon it. What a waste, I know..."

This house was my dream. My dream of living a happy, modest life. And now that dream had been dashed against the wall, the shards changing into black fire.

"No... No, I don't want to."

Overnight, the recesses of my heart had filled up with the black fire. It quavered as it spilled out of my mouth.

"Huh?"

"Please don't go, Master. I'm begging you; please don't go!"

"Maria...what's gotten into you?"

"If you go, I'll never get through to you. You'll leave me to rot."

"C-C'mon, Maria, calm down. I said we'd run away together, didn't I? I promise I won't leave you behind. How could I ever abandon you like that?"

"Liar. Even if we run away, the three of us, I know I'm not really there in the end. It doesn't matter if I'm there or not. And I can't stomach that."

I couldn't believe his pleasant words. Master had lied to me. He'd tried to go save Ms. Lastiara without telling me.

I like you, but... No, it's because I like you that there's no way I could believe you!

"Why are you going to go save Miss Lastiara? I thought you didn't like her or anything?"

"Whaddya mean, why? She's one of us, isn't she? We need her to Dungeon dive going forward. I can't afford to forsake her."

Stop. I don't wanna hear about what's to come. I wanna go back. I wanna go back to when it was just you and me!

"Dungeon dive going forward? How long do you plan to dive?!"

"C-Calm down, Maria, please!"

"If you go, then I'm sure Miss Lastiara will be saved! And if that happens, it'll be the same as before! I don't wanna reach the stupid depths of the stupid Dungeon! Not going to the Dungeon won't kill you, will it?! If you live a nice quiet life here at home, that's all you need!" I shouted all of my self-centered opinions at him. The heat of the black fire burning in the pit of my stomach made my true feelings spill out from my mouth.

"I can't do that, Maria. I can't stray from gunning for the depths of the Dungeon. I'm in the Dungeon Alliance for the sole reason of reaching the deepest level, so—"

"Yeah, well, that's just greedy! You don't need to reach the depths! You can earn money nice and safe around Level 10 and live a normal, happy life! That's what I want! And Miss Lastiara isn't necessary for that, is she?!"

Master grabbed me by the shoulders. "Listen, Maria, that is not what this is about! At this rate, Lastiara's gonna *die*! That's why I've gotta save her! Are you okay with Lastiara dying, Maria?!"

I remembered how nice Ms. Lastiara was, rooting for my crush, and it snapped me back to my senses a little.

"Miss Lastiara's a good person. I don't want her to die."

"See? So we need to go save her. She's our comrade, after all."

For a moment, my muscles went slack. Ms. Lastiara had treated me nicely in the past. But when I remembered her words the day before, I tensed right back up.

Yes, she is a friend. But yesterday, she tried to steal Master away from me. She tried to go beyond her "friend" station through devious means. Master and Ms. Lastiara, just "comrades"? How could I swallow that?!

"Our comrade? That's why? You're putting your life on the line to go save her

just because she's our 'comrade'?"

"Uh, yeah."

A lie. Ahh, he lied again.

It was bound to be a lie. What had happened the day before had happened because he wanted her to be more than a friend.

"Yeah, right. Because she's 'our comrade.' Lies. Who would risk their life just for *that*? That's right. No one would. Listen, I *know*. I get it. You want to show her your good side, right?! You want to show off, but only to her, never to me, right?! Even though when *she* wasn't in the picture, you'd try to look good for *me!!!*"

The fact that he'd lied to me made the black fire inside me rage all the stronger. And now, the black fire was finally beginning to spill out from inside my body in the form of real fire. I wasn't even actively casting a spell either. My body's magic energy was being converted into fire. But I didn't care about that, not one bit. I was convinced now: Master was a liar. He intended to keep everything to himself and leave me in the dust.

That being the case, there was only one thing I could do. One single, solitary thing. I slowly approached him, creating a fire sword as I did.

"Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash*, spellcast: *Freeze!*" he shouted.

His pesky cold magic attempted to negate my fire. I didn't let it, though. This was the fire I needed to make him mine. These flames existed to sever the legs of the man who would otherwise abandon me.

As he drew closer, I held the fire sword aloft and swung it in a wide arc. Through his abnormally high-level kinetic vision, he tried to dodge the blow by a hair and grab my hand. It was his ordinary response. And while my Perception skill wasn't privy to his inner world, I *could* see such stale battle moves coming. I grabbed the hand that meant to grab me and burned it.

"Yoww!"

Master's body stiffened in surprise and pain. I took advantage and brandished my fire sword once more, but that swing sliced vainly through the air.

His magic energy swelled up. Our eyes met. It was only for a moment, but the look in his eyes meant business. His expression was the one he wore when fighting in the Dungeon. The moment my spine went icy, everything was decided. He grabbed me by the arms, pinned them behind me, and pressed me against the floor.

“Maria, listen to me! Have you met that Palinchron guy recently?!”

“P-Palinchron?”

“The knight who won the bid for you at the slave auction! The guy with the watchful eyes who’s a bit taller than me and wears merchant clothes! That dodgy-looking dude!”

“Never... Never mind about that!” A little thing like that didn’t matter to me. My priority right then was to seize hold of Master.

“Maria, has someone cast some kind of spell on you?! Your confusion is crazy high!”

“A spell? Confusion?!”

That sounded like what had been done to *him*. He was the one who’d been brainwashed by magic, not me. But the cold wave of magic energy that I felt circulating from my back stopped me from replying to that effect. Just like when I blasted fire from my body, Master emitted sheer cold from his. That chilling magic dampened my fire, down to the black flames within my very heart. My body froze over, it was so cold. The cold sealed my fire, the source of my power, from the roots.

“That’s it; easy does it... Breathe in, breathe out...”

I could hear his voice close to my ear. I did as I was told and took deep breaths, soothing my heart. Gradually, little by little, I regained my presence of mind and the emotions that had dominated my body faded.

“Huh? Wait, what?”

“You okay, Maria? Nice and calm now?”

The more I cooled down, the more I grasped the situation. There were scorch marks throughout the house, and Master was holding me down.

I came at him with my fire sword? But...why?

It wasn't like I could beat him one-on-one. And it wasn't like doing such a thing would make him like me. If anything, it would only turn him off of me. So why?!

"I... I'm sorry! What have I done?!"

"It's okay. I know you were saying stuff you don't mean because of the Confusion." He seemed exhausted as he left my side and his thoughts turned away from me to the world outside.

Ahh, no, not that. That's not good.

Now that my furor had subsided, I realized that I'd passed a point of no return. I'd vomited out all of the emotions I had kept hidden from him until then. It was baffling. Why had I done that? My mind grew blank, and I couldn't do a thing besides apologize over and over.

"I'm sorry, Master. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I wanted him to forgive me. I didn't want him to hate me. I didn't want him to go. I wanted to be with him. A mishmash of thoughts blended together, and all I could do was keep on apologizing.

"It's okay, honest. You don't have to apologize. Never mind that; are you hurt anywhere? From what I can see, your Confusion is way down, but..." he said, stroking my head.

"Yes. I'm back to normal now. I'm truly sorry..."

Ahh. His hand was cold. It felt good. But it was wrong to be happy. I couldn't allow myself to indulge in this pleasure. I'd done what could not be undone, and I didn't understand why it had gone that way. All I knew was that I had to apologize to him some more.

"Maria, I'm gonna go get Lastiara back. I think it'll all be over before you know it."

"Y-Yes, understood. If that's your decision, I will of course abide by it," I replied without giving it much thought; I figured I shouldn't incur his displeasure.

“Until we’re home, wait for us here, if you would. We’ll be back in no time, promise.”

“Yes, understood. I’ll wait for you here. For you both...”

If I didn’t listen to what he said, he’d hate me. That thought alone swirled inside my brain. If he started hating me, I wouldn’t be able to be with him. And that was the one thing that was not on the table for me. If that happened, then I... I’d no longer...

“See you later, Maria.”

A pause. “Yes, Master. See you later.”

In truth, I hated the idea of letting him go. But I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t afford to act any more disgracefully than I already had. I didn’t want him to go. I wanted him to stay with me a little longer. I didn’t want him to leave me. I wanted him to tell me what was going on. I wanted him to save me.

I wanted him to save me.

I wanted him to save me. I wanted him to save me. I wanted him to save me.

Please, Master.

Please don’t leave me behind...

But my thoughts remained in my head. And Master went on his way without so much as a backward glance.

He headed off to Whoseyards, off to Ms. Lastiara. Leaving me there...



Abandoned and alone, I sat in a dazed stupor. I’d gotten swept up in my emotions and gone on an absolute rampage. It was my first fit of rage in a long time. The last time my heart had been that riven was so far back that I couldn’t remember. The ugliest thoughts, the ones stuffed into the bottom of my heart, had started flowing out and the brakes weren’t working.

It was a nightmare. It was like I had become something I wasn’t. I didn’t know why I’d attacked him. I had known that doing something like that wouldn’t solve anything. And yet, while I was in the grips of it, a terrifying thought had

run through my head. That being: if I burned him with my fire—if I immobilized him—he would become mine and mine alone. I was seriously thinking that way.

Deep down inside, am I really that disgusting a person?

I didn't even understand myself, let alone Master. I was sitting in the center of the living room, staring into space.

"You okay, Mar-Mar?"

Before I knew it, someone was standing right by me. Ms. Alty was there like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I clung to the one person I could trust. "Ah, aughh, Ms. Alty... I don't know what's what anymore. Please help... Please help me..."

"Don't worry. I'm here. I'm here for you, Mar-Mar," she murmured softly, pulling me in close.

"But...I tried to burn Master! I tried to burn him because I wanted to make him mine!"

"I get it, Mar-Mar. I know that feeling well."

"Huh?"

"Wanting to monopolize your crush. Wanting to hold them back, by force if necessary. Wanting, if they won't fall into your hands, to make them yours through fire. I understand. Those feelings are only natural."

I didn't want her to go so far as to say it was natural. "Only natural? No, there's no way something like this is natural. That's not—"

It wasn't like I wanted her to console me. What I wanted was for her to tell me how and why this inexplicable situation had come about. Why had it turned out this way? What had happened to me? What was to blame, and who should I bear a grudge against? I just wanted to know. After all, I didn't even know *what* was amiss. In fact...

"It's me who's crazy! What other explanation is there?! I hate this! I don't even know what's wrong! Help me! Somebody, somebody save me!"

I felt like I was losing my mind. Or maybe I was already insane. Which screws

had come loose? I didn't know. I couldn't believe in anything. In the end, my eyes had served no use whatsoever. _____ had lied to me about that. Far from helping me, they'd *destroyed* what was dear to my heart. I had them to blame for being left with nothing.

I screwed my eyes shut and put my forehead to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Mar-Mar," came a voice from the distance.

I didn't have anything, so I didn't understand anything. My consciousness was sinking, sinking into a sludgy world of black. I sank and sank and sank into the sludge until I hit the bottom with the kindling coals of black fire.

"I wanted to end this in the way most amenable to you, if possible. We could have taken it more slowly. But that wasn't cutting it. It just wasn't cutting it. I'm really sorry. Honest."

I wasn't alone, though. I had someone who would sink alongside me. Ms. Alty would be with me through thick and thin. That was the only thing I could believe in.

"The timing was too good. Now I can't restrain myself. Lastiara's in no shape to move today. Today's the only day that I can go one-on-one with Sieg, who's on par with me—and I mean that in every way."

As we reassured ourselves of each other's passion and intermingled, she and I fell towards the black coals.

Ahh, I can find security in Ms. Alty. She's the only one who won't leave me behind. I can be sure of that.

"Today's the only day that past me and Kanami, the wound-riddled hero, can start our lives alone together..."

I finally understood. This was the affinity of which Ms. Alty was speaking. Our lives *were* similar. This was the true meaning of their being so overly similar. As a consequence, she and I had progressively assimilated. Our consciousnesses blended together, flames and more flames firing each other up.

"My dearest wish, realized at last. My tragic love, requited today at last," she murmured. And with that, she had declared the beginning of the end.

It was then that I learned why Ms. Alty seemed so sad all the time. In the process of combining and melting into one, I learned of her life. And her life was a tale of an exceedingly fruitless love...



And then, I torched it all.

It's burning. Ahh. The house I wanted to protect, in flames. Also in flames, all of the trammels that were tying me down. The ethics. The self-serving calculations. The consequences. I don't need a single one, or anything else for that matter. So let's turn them all into fuel.

As I burned the world, Ms. Alty and I ran into each other, and we understood then what we ought to do from there on out. She was the same as me. That was why she treated me so warmly. She had earnestly taken me into consideration, as if I were her.

"I'll make your tragic love story not so tragic too, Ms. Alty."

Making an unrequited love not so unrequited. That and that alone was her wish in this world. And now, after all this time, it was my wish too. I was one with her, and since I had lost all of the fetters constricting me, I could finally level with that desire.

I can't take it anymore. I don't wanna be alone anymore. To be so unhappy anymore. To suffer anymore.

I don't wanna lose anything. I wanna be with my beloved forever and ever.

Master. It's Master. It's him I want. It's him. I wanna make him happy. I want him to stay here and go nowhere else.

Look at me. See only me. Live with only me in your eyes. I'll live for your sake alone, so I want you to live for my sake alone too.

That was my singular desire, plain and simple. I had reached the end of the tangled mess of emotions, and at long last, I had come to learn what I truly wanted. I was also able to steel myself to lose everything if it meant I could realize that wish. Just like Ms. Alty in the past, I didn't hesitate to burn it all down the ground. Of course I didn't. The respectable human trait of hesitation

had turned to fuel and disappeared a long, long time ago.

As I stared at the towering, flaring flames, time passed, until the Thief of Fire's Essence whispered to me sorrowfully, "Look. Sieg's here."

My liar of a Master, "Siegfried Vizzita," emerged at the bottom of the hill. The kind soul chosen by Perception to be ____'s replacement. The apple of my eye had returned.

But my darling hadn't returned alone. The nuisance buzzing around him just *had* to be right behind him. There she was. Ms. Lastiara. The number one object of my envy. The one I wanted out of our lives. All she had to do was *be*, and Master would always be pulled in by the light she radiated. She could *say* she was rooting for me until she was blue in the face, but the fact of the matter was that her mere existence was a hindrance.

Abhorrent. Everything was just *abhorrent*. The kind and radiant Ms. Lastiara. The Whoseyards knights sticking their noses where they didn't belong. All of the new "comrades" trying to step between me and Master. Every single one of them was a lance in my side.

Alone together. The two of us. You and me, Master. That's all we need. If we live modest, humble, blissful lives, just you and me, that's more than enough.

All of the bastards trying to snatch that tiny ray of happiness from me had to burn—along with everything else.

Master left me alone today because of her. That's why I need to recapture him from her. She will return him to me. I was the one who found him first, so!

"Give me back...my...Master."

Some of the hellfire spilled from my mouth. Once it flowed out of me, I could no longer stop it. All of the fire inside my body started rushing towards the way out. The inferno that was my emotions poured out in its bid to set the world ablaze.

Let's do it. Let's use this wildfire to incinerate it all.

I had to. It was the only way I could see my tragic love requited. Even if, as my eyes were telling me, it would lead to the one I loved turning to ash and

vanishing, just like ____.

Even if Ms. Alty, who could see the conclusion of it all, was smiling sadly.

The only thing I could do now was burn things.

Chapter 5: And Then the Hero Reached Floor 10 at Last. The Monster Has Been Waiting for You All This Time.

It's burning.

It crackled as it burned, like a campfire. The house that we used to live in.

Crowds were beginning to surround the home in twos and threes. I had to take Maria and get out of there, and fast. I had no attachment to the house. I just knew I needed to act swiftly.

But even though that was all I needed to do...the girls standing before me made me hesitate. Maria was staring at us with blank eyes, while Ms. Alty floated right behind her, half of her body having turned to flame. From the looks of them, I couldn't approach either one lightly. Then again, just standing there wouldn't solve a thing. I took a step forward.

"I'm back, Maria... Let's go. For the time being, let's just get out of here..."

It was a race against time, after all. But her stare remained vacant, and she murmured under her breath, "With this, he's mine... He's mine forever... All that's left is to take Master and..."

Clearly, she didn't absorb what I'd said. She stared at us intensely as she muttered and was about to take a step forward when Alty stopped her, whispering something or other to her. Then Maria grew placid and cast her eyes down.

I concluded that Alty was the problem and shifted my focus from Maria to her.

"Welcome, Sieg the adventurer," she replied with a smile. "Starting now, this place—yes, this very space—is the tenth floor. The floor of Alty, Thief of Fire's Essence. Forgive the hasty construction and my being on a work trip, so to speak, but I don't mind if you think of this hilltop as the tenth floor. Now then,

while it's a little belated, I think it's time I had you take on the Decimal Trial."

She bowed in an exaggerated fashion as she spoke, which reminded me of another Guardian. It was the same smile, the same attitude, as that intransigent and self-centered Tida.

"Alty. Were you...were you the one who did it?"

"That's right. I incited Maria, pulled her in, and had her create conditions that are advantageous for me."

The moment she said that, I was assailed by the sensation of the world flipping upside down. Deep down, part of me had begun to *trust* the entity known as Alty. That was why I was more shocked than I might've anticipated by her betrayal.

I shouted as I drew the treasured sword Dia gave me from my inventory. "You can't be serious! Why, Alty?! You're a monster, sure, but still! We were able to talk things out! I thought we'd come to an understanding! Are you saying you're just another Tida?!"

Alty drew closer as I yelled. "Yep, I'm the same as Tida. But can you afford to approach me so recklessly, I wonder?" she asked, pointing behind me.

I looked in the direction she had indicated, but I was no fool. Taking my eyes off the enemy was out of the question. Thanks to the special qualities of my magic, checking my back was a free action. And the ghastly spectacle occurring behind me made my breath catch.

"Apostle Sith. You're a bit of a third wheel!" said Palinchron as he slashed Dia along his torso from above.

Dia's blood sprayed out, and Lastiara's and Ms. Radiant's clothes were instantly dyed red. My best guess was that he tried to fire a spell upon seeing Alty bare her proverbial fangs, and Palinchron had cut him down while he was defenseless. He'd been standing in the wrong spot, and worse yet, he'd been in poor company. Among us, only Dia didn't know Palinchron. He didn't know Palinchron's chaos-loving disposition and hadn't been on guard around him. Hence, this outcome.

Palinchron tried to reap Dia's head on the backswing, but Mr. Hine was close

enough to block him with his own blade. Ms. Radiant realized that the situation had been turned on its head and instantly leaped away, Dia and Lastiara on her back.

I was relieved that the worst-case scenario had been averted. However, since Mr. Hine had been forced to wedge himself into the fight without assuming a proper stance first, the force of the blow made him lose his balance. Palinchron mercilessly took the opportunity to slash him across the abdomen.

It was only then that I reached them, taking up position between Palinchron and Mr. Hine as I assumed my battle stance.

“Palinchron! You bastard!”

He chuckled. “Heh heh, I’m not your opponent, laddie. Didn’t you hear? You’re gonna be taking that Guardian’s test starting now. I’ll be having a spot of fun with milady and the others.”

“You’re with *me*, Sieg. *Flame Arrow*.”

Alty shot an arrow of fire my way. I wrenched my body aside, glanced over, and found her and Maria staring fixedly at me, madness filling them to the bones.

“Urgh!”

Quickly and calmly, I analyzed the situation. My obvious enemies were Alty and Palinchron. Chances were high that Maria had been manipulated into opposing me as well. My team numbered five in total, but most of them were extremely fatigued or gravely injured.

Dia was bleeding profusely, and his consciousness was beginning to ebb. Lastiara was mustering her remaining strength and casting a healing spell, but the magic light was feeble and the results were none too good. She had precious little MP left due to the effects of the ritual and was in terrible condition, unable to adequately move.

Mr. Hine was also unable to keep on fighting. He was, without a doubt, the one who had already fought the most that day. Although the laceration that Palinchron had given him seemed shallow, his overtaxed body was reaching its limit. Ms. Radiant was the only one who wasn’t grievously injured. The cuts I’d

given her had since been fully healed. If I lent her a sword from my inventory, she would aid me in battle. But then that would expose the two defenseless people on her back to attack.

Analysis over. I shouted to the rafters, “Ms. Radiant, take those two out of here and run! Lastiara, take care of Dia! Mr. Hine, follow them and protect them! I’ll be fine by myself; just leave it to me!”

If the unthinkable were to happen to Dia and Lastiara here, everything would be ruined. My priority was to get those two far, far away from this havoc.

“Wha?!” shouted Lastiara as she continued to heal Dia. “Sieg, let me fight too — Guh!”

She held her head and staggered. Clearly, she was in no state to fight. To be honest, she would just be in my way. If Palinchron took her hostage, that would turn the tide for the worst.

Mr. Hine pulled a sour expression, running towards Ms. Radiant as he glared at Palinchron. Ms. Radiant’s sharp eyes shot mine a piercing stare before she bowed her head. She must have analyzed the situation in much the same way I had. She let Mr. Hine climb onto her back and broke into a run.

“Sera! Wait, don’t leave Sieg alone! Seraaaaaa!”

But Ms. Radiant didn’t heed Lastiara as she dashed away from the hill, leaving me flanked by our enemies.

Palinchron looked impressed. He addressed Alty like they were old chums. “Speedy judgment call. Exceedingly close to the correct play too. I’m going after those four, missy; I trust you’ve got this? Only I can get the Vart soldiers going.”

“Yep, you can go and do that for me.”

“Right, then; I’ll be back.”

True to his word, he sprinted in the direction Ms. Radiant had fled. Alty watched him go, expressionless. I watched him as well.

Now there were only three of us: me, Alty, and Maria. Upon realizing that, Alty snapped her fingers. The flames blazing all around us intensified, spreading and flying here and there and everywhere until the hill was completely

engulfed. Surrounded by this much fire, it felt as though I were back on Floor 10 of the Dungeon. Alty wasn't kidding when she said I could think of this hill as such.

"Now then, what say we get this rolling? Then we can realize my dearest wish..." she muttered, a solemn look on her face.

To start things off, I used Analyze on both of them.

【DECIMAL GUARDIAN】Thief of Fire's Essence

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 107/122

MP: 855/132+723

CLASS: Slave

LEVEL 10

STR 4.48

VIT 4.02

DEX 2.96

AGI 2.37

INT 3.97

MAG 6.89+34.23

APT 1.52

CONDITION: Mind Taint 1.98, Confusion 3.42, Memory Impairment 0.78

INNATE SKILLS: Perception 1.50

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Hunting 0.68, Cooking 1.08, Fire Magic 1.52+2.00

Concurrently, I gathered information on my surroundings as well, confirming that the barrier of fire cut off any escape. If at all possible, I'd have liked to take Maria with me and catch up to Ms. Radiant. But fleeing without defeating the Guardian before me would be tough. Besides, judging by Maria's menu, she wasn't going to come quietly.

I glared at my enemy. "Alty, was this what you wanted?"

"Sure is," she answered, spreading her arms out. "This place is my dearest wish. *This* is my dearest wish."

This situation... This wretched dumpster fire is what she's always wanted?

"So your wish is to kill me, huh? That romance thing was a downright lie, and you've been playing me for a fool this whole time!"

"No, the 'romance thing' ain't no lie. Nor have I ever deceived you in any way. If Maria's love becomes requited, then make no mistake, I *will* lose my power and vanish. As such, however it may happen, I'm probably gonna be no more before the day is over," she said, speaking dispassionately of her own death.

I couldn't conceal my discomposure at that declaration. "Then why?! I don't get what you're trying to do or say! What do you want from me?!" Before the human-shaped monster who entreated death, I was beside myself with fury.

"I want you to grant Maria's wish. To make an unrequited love requited—in the form of a love tragedy."

"Love tragedy?" I didn't get what the difference was between an unrequited love and a so-called "love tragedy."

"Maria's love is a tragic one. A blighted love. A love that comes with a sad ending. Our eyes can see it coming. I'd like that tragic love to be fulfilled. If it's not, I'll never fully die."

Alty was courteously trying to explain it to me, but I still wasn't following. I hardly thought it was reason enough to go this far.

"I don't understand! I don't understand what you're saying!"

"I failed to win his heart, so I need to step aside? My prospects are hopeless, so I should give up? Don't be ridiculous. That's not how infatuation works. It's

more all-consuming than that. It makes you feel like you're losing it. If your crush doesn't reciprocate, there's no point living. That's why I want a double suicide. I wanna steal him for myself even if it means killing him. The ends justify the means, and I can't even think straight. That right there is *true* love! Tragic love is the truest love!!!" she asserted, casting her cracked love as Truth with a capital T.

Her expression had changed drastically. Her blank look was no more, the passion inside her writ large over her face. Her sheer zeal made me take a step back.

"Maria has what it takes to realize the love tragedy," she continued. "More than anyone else..."

Her expression grew peaceful as she stroked Maria's head. I could tell from everything about those caresses that her affection for Maria was real. There could be no doubt—she felt for Maria more than anyone.

"That's why, Sieg. That's why right here, you're gonna become Maria's. Even if your bond becoming eternal can only happen through a double death, I'm happy with that, and I'll make it happen...and then, I'll disappear too. If all three of us die today, that's fine by me!"

She'd made her intentions more than plain. She planned to make me Maria's. That was the goal and the trial. That was the purpose behind setting up this arena.

"All this for...for *that*? You broke Maria's mind for something so stupid?!"

I didn't want to dignify it. Not Alty's objective, not her methods, not the battlefield, none of it. The way I was now, the number one thing I couldn't abide was something or someone toying with the hearts of others for their own sick purposes. And that was exactly what Alty was trying to do.

"Stupid? Yeah, that's right! When I was alive, I couldn't even do a stupid little thing like that! And the regret's been weighing on me like crazy, okay?! I can tear apart my throat or rip my heart out, and this maddening regret keeps torturing me! Back then, he left me behind, and I couldn't do anything about it! There's no doubt in my mind he went someplace I don't know and led a happy life with some stranger! And I regretted that till my dying day! I regretted it till

my dying day, and then even after I died! So I'm gonna make another love requited! Through Maria, my tragic love *will* be realized!" Alty made the fire blaze brightly, an expression of her inner emotions.

"Don't drag Maria into your personal bullshit! Solve that shit yourself! You're telling me that's any reason to be throwing somebody's heart into disarray?!"

Whatever feelings lurked inside Alty had nothing to do with Maria. I could hardly allow this nonsense from her, not when she was trying to make Maria act on emotions that weren't her own.

I looked at Maria. Her blank gaze shifted towards the ground, and she continued to mumble incoherently.

Augh! It's just like "???"! If there's one thing I absolutely refuse to allow, it's tampering with people's hearts!

"All I did was make Maria true to her own heart. That's a fact. I simply uncovered her buried desires and the true fire behind her crush. This is her proper form!"

"Yeah, and that's what making somebody unhinged *is*! As if everybody could be honest all of the time!"

The discussion was already over. At this rate, it was nothing more than a verbal sparring match. Alty and I were converting the emotions inside us into magic energy and crafting spells even as we gainsaid one another. We both knew that the fight couldn't be avoided.

I was the one who completed my spell first. I cast it as I thrust my sword. This was the absolute full-power mode that I had been unwilling to use even during my save-Lastiara mission. This spell was winter in the purest sense.

I extended the freezing magic across the whole of the hill, and my dimensional magic stopped where my sword could reach. Two layers of magic circle came into being, and the snow made of magic energy known as tiarlay began precipitating over the blazing hill. A winter world overlaid on top of a world of flame.

"I knew it! I *knew* it! You're the same as Tida! You're just an enemy, Alty! Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash*! Spellcast: *Wintermension*!"

In response, Alty started wrapping Maria in the gentle flames flowing out of her hands. A pillar of fantastical flame shining in a color that was neither red nor yellow nor blue rose up above the pair's heads. The rising flames scattered into the air, a fiery snow raining down.

“Sieg! You remind me of the past! Of a thousand years ago! That face reminds me of what once was! By taking you down, my tragic love will finally be consummated! Spellcast: *Flame Calculash*! Spellcast: *In Cadeus Blazer!!!*”

Red tiarlay joined the white. Alty's moves mirrored mine; strangely, our respective secret moves were the same type of magic.



I didn't understand why that would be. It was too exact to be a coincidence, but I didn't have the leeway to be thinking about that at the moment. Sensing danger in the enemy's surges of heat, I went on high alert, obstructing the fire magic through *Wintermension*. But that was pointless against her colossal amounts of magic energy.

Alty whispered to Maria as she clad her body in blazing fire. "Now, wake up, Mar-Mar. Just a little longer and your love will bear fruit. You'll finally be happy."

Maria's downcast gaze slowly rose, and she stared at me. Her eyes were blank. They were even worse than when she had been a slave. These were eyes that were despairing of all things. I glared at the one responsible for tossing her into that abyss, and Alty stared right back at me.

"Here I come, Sieg the Hero. Lament that fact you didn't choose Maria until your last breath!"

"Fuck you, monster. Rot in regret and disappear by your own damn self!" And with that as my cue, I flew into battle.

The Decimal Trial, the Trial of the Thief of Fire's Essence, had now begun.



As I charged, I ran through battle simulations in my head. I had a singular aim. My sole goal was to slay the monster Alty. I was confident that if I didn't kill her, I wouldn't be able to come out of this in one piece. She was prepared to die. She wouldn't stay her hand until the moment she perished.

Unlike the fight with Mr. Hine, there was no hesitation on my part when it came to killing her. I had no intention of sparing an enemy who was actively trying to die, and that was all the more true when she was seeking a forced double suicide. It did give me a twinge of conscience, but even so, even though it pained me to have to make that choice, I swore to myself that I'd kill her.

As I ran forward, Alty jumped back. Then, she swallowed up the surrounding flames and tried to compress them. That reaction told me that the Thief of Fire's Essence differed from that of Darkness's Essence. It seemed that unlike Tida, her strong suit was not close-quarters combat. Seeing her make that move

suggested that my odds of winning were high. If they weren't, I wouldn't have stayed to face her alone.

I was confident in myself. The confidence I had gained after successfully saving Lastiara gave me some peace of mind. That sense of self-worth had me all worked up that I was going to save Maria while I was at it. Once I killed Alty and brought Maria back to her senses, this mess would end. Luckily, I knew from experience that it was possible to cure Maria of her Confusion by way of my chilling magic.

I tried to close the distance between Alty and me at full speed—

“Master!”

But then Maria swooped down on me with the flame sword in her hand, stopping me in my tracks. Her blade of condensed fire locked with my sword, the residual heat burning my hands even as the fire changed shape in order to hit me.

I distanced myself. “Maria, don't get in the way! Don't let them delude you! Those emotions are false! You're just being controlled by that monster over there!”

“These emotions—false?! There's no way that's true! You're the only liar here, Master!”

Maria was converting her fierce fervor into fire. Flame gushed out from under her feet, and that flame was now transforming into two fiery serpents. They were the *Midgard Blaze* serpents she'd once shown me in the Dungeon. Back then, creating and controlling just one of them had left her totally worn out, but now she had instantly given form to two of them without so much as an incantation.

“Wha?!”

The snakes twisted and coiled violently, opening their dread jaws.

“Leaving me behind, keeping secrets, telling me nothing but lies!” she shouted, conducting her flame sword like a baton and directing the snakes to attack me.

“Sure, there’s stuff I kept to myself! But I’ve never *lied* to you!” I yelled back as I moved away from the snakes.

“You did! You hate me, so you lied and tried to abandon me!!!” she replied as she made the serpents of flame run wild.

The heat of their fire was making me sweat. This was not the relatively weak Maria of days past. She had become a skilled enough mage to be capable of dealing me a fatal blow. Under normal circumstances, I’d have preferred to ignore Maria and fight Alty instead. But if I didn’t immobilize her first, I wouldn’t be able to close the distance between me and Alty, who was behind her. Maria was the advance guard and Alty the rear, and they were thoroughly holding to that formation.

“I’d never abandon you, Maria! Never! And I’d never lie either!”

I wanted to end this by persuading her. I wanted to avoid swinging my sword at her if at all possible. That overly optimistic thought had crossed my mind, and the words had come out of their own accord.

“You’re a liar! Your very *name*’s a lie! Every time you give your name as Siegfried and every time somebody calls you Sieg, part of you treats things like somebody else’s problem! Through your false alias, you keep fooling yourself, never once intending to reveal your true self!”

I dodged a flame snake only for Maria to brandish her sword and leap after me. I managed to block her with my sword, but only barely. She was clearly reading my movements. I was sure she was being told how to fight by her Perception and Hunting skills.

“You’ve got it all wrong! I may be using an alias, but I’ve never thought it’s not my problem—”

“I... I knew it! So it *is* just an alias!”

The moment I admitted that, Maria’s sword intensified in sheer firepower. Its fire turned from red to blue, its heat increasing to the point that it began melting my sword.

I immediately turned the sword aside and distanced myself again. Then I cursed myself for picking the wrong tack. Her response just now confirmed that

she wasn't conversing rationally. She was just riding her emotions and listing whatever had filled her with suspicion and doubt. It seemed that before that exchange, she hadn't known for sure I was operating under an alias—she'd just had a hunch. And because I'd confirmed that hunch, her mania had gained yet more steam.

I cooled my overheated head with *Freeze*. Trying to talk her down while engaged in combat was backfiring. Maria saw no need to hold her tongue. I, meanwhile, had to choose my words carefully in order to calm her down. And since instakill-level spells were shooting across the battlefield, selecting the right words was a Herculean task.

"If your name's a lie, then so's your supposed birthplace! The idea you're from the Fanian countryside is just another lie, isn't it? For one, there's no place in Fania that's more countryside than where I used to live, and yet you'd never heard of the Day of the Blessed Birth! That's just not a thing that can happen!"

As I continually dodged her rampage, I finished assessing the situation in my head and screwed up my resolve. I gave up on trying to talk her down, aiming instead to knock her out. There was no helping it; I would be forced to get a little rough with her.

"Maria, bear with me, please!"

I sprinted after her, intending to knock her unconscious through hand-to-hand combat. However...

"It's no use, Sieg," said Alty unfeelingly from the rear. "Now quit it and listen to more of what Maria has to say."

The Guardian raised condensed fire over her head and incanted, "Burn, nixfire! At the mercy of the threads of the world serpent. *Agni Blaze!*"

Chills instantly ran down my spine. I stopped moving closer to Maria and jumped back. Just then, something went through the gap between us. And that something was fire. A thin white streak of flame, remaining in the air like a fiber splitting through space. That thread was extending from the fire Alty was holding above her head, and it was piercing the ground. The area around the point in the ground where the white fire was lodging itself melted like lava, bubbling menacingly. I could scarcely imagine the temperature it boasted. All

my gut knew was that if that hit me, my goose was cooked.

The white fire trembled. Through *Dimension*, I could tell that a section of the ground behind me was transforming into lava. And from that softened, molten portion of earth, the tip of the flame-thread flew at me.

“Grah!”

I twisted my body to the very limit and barely evaded the attack. I understood now that that white fire was fire made into the shape of a thread. And it had traveled through the ground and attacked me from behind. I’d twisted my body out of the way as best I could, which had thrown me off-balance, and Maria used that chance to attack, giving me no time to breathe.

“You tell nothing but lies, Master! You said you didn’t like Ms. Lastiara! Lies! You went to go save her! You left me behind and went after her! You left me because you don’t like me, and went to the girl you *do* like!”

She swung her flame sword, which clashed against my blade. I jumped back from the recoil. The ground where I landed grew slushy beneath my feet, and the tip of the white fire came sticking out. I crouched down and managed to dodge it by the skin of my teeth, grimacing at the incessant attacks. I couldn’t withstand the constant aggression coming from both Maria and the flame indefinitely.

As such, I reached out my hand and concentrated all my magic energy into it as I crafted an ice spell. “Spellcast: *Blizzardmensioooon!*”

The bounds of the spell didn’t go past the palm of my hand. I had extended the magic winter-zone into my palm, thereby hindering the white fire’s movement. *Wintermension* wouldn’t cut it to stay Alty’s magic, but given *Blizzardmension*’s sheer density, it might just pass muster. And by concentrating it into a smaller area of effect, its efficacy was maximized.

Unfortunately, the moment I tried to analyze the white fire, I started feeling like my brain was burning. Trying to grasp fire magic whose roots were so intricately woven made my head spin. Most terrifying of all was the deep-seated grudge infused into the spell—the hatred that made it tick. Since it had been constructed using a host of negative emotions, including pent-up resentment, envy, and loathing, it punched a hole in my brain’s processing

capability.

Yet, if I failed at this, my hand would melt into nothingness, and I couldn't have that.

"DROWN IT OUUUUUUT!" I roared as I stole away the white fire's heat. I shifted the magic's construction off course, and by pouring in multiple times the usual amount of power, I managed to forcibly dissipate the flame.

"Good!"

I figured my chances of winning had risen, and I faced Maria with bright eyes. I was keen to make her fire dissipate too—but then I tripped over my own feet.

"Huh?"

"Heh. I'm surprised you interfered with my fire. You surprise me, Sieg. But just how much magic power did you expend to erase a single one of my spells, hmm?"

Alty smiled, and I hurriedly checked my menu.

【STATUS】

HP: 286/372

MP: 91/657-200

I was astonished. That had taken way too much out of me to be worth it. Erasing the white fire had depleted my MP by around 200 points. That was approximately a third of my total.

Not that I had the time to be standing there shocked. One of Maria's fire snakes attacked me where I stood. I reached out my hand to disperse it but then stopped myself. If I extinguished this flame, it would further reduce my MP. And if my MP dropped to zero, I'd lose my one means of fighting Alty. I didn't know yet if physical attacks worked against her. Maybe her body was amorphous like Tida's, and only ice magic would work against her. If I didn't leave myself a minimum amount of MP to work with, I'd be hard-pressed to do anything.

With that realization, I could no longer see a path to victory, so I shouted at Maria in another bid to persuade her. I knew it was pointless, but I tried anyway. The sweltering temperatures and my own anxiety were clouding my judgment.

“Maria, would you calm down already?! At this rate I’m gonna *die*! If that fire hits me, there’s no way I’ll make it out!”

“That’s okay! Even if your limbs get burned off, I’ll take care of you. You don’t need your limbs; you’ll be okay as long as you have me. I’m strong now. And it’s thanks to you, Master. With this power, I can earn us money through the Dungeon. There won’t be an issue! Let’s just live life, the two of us alone in that house!!!”

Maria pointed at the house, which was on the verge of collapsing, and smiled broadly. As I fought on the scorching red battlefield, ice ran down my spine. There was no hope of persuading her. Her smile made that abundantly clear.

Since my words had lost their power, I moved to restrain her using just my physical prowess. But of course, Alty wasn’t about to let me.

“Sprout, birthfire! Universal blestfire of the original sin! *Janua Blaze!!!*”

A flower of flame bloomed at Maria’s feet. It spread its petals like a lily and came at me. I couldn’t avoid it—I had to distance myself from her.

The flower of flame then wriggled and something red scattered at its center. It fluttered like pollen and fell to the ground, giving rise to yet more flowers. Realizing that it was a wide-range spell, I once again tried to put more distance between us, but my movements were blocked by the wall of flames behind me. Due to the many fire spells in play, I’d lost any way out before I knew it.

The fiery flower garden was proliferating like mad before my eyes. I considered how to break this deadlock, counting all the cards up my sleeve and searching for an effective way forward. But though I thought through various combinations of card plays, none of them proved game-changing.

The gears in my head were turning at hyper speed, but my simulations were all predicting naught but my demise. At the same time, I was attacked by the sensation of something crawling up my back. It was “???” sidling up to me.

I do not accept that. I absolutely refuse to submit to “???”

I continued to rack my brain for a solution, unaided by “???” And then, I found one card up my sleeve that I had yet to use.

“All skill points to Ice Magic!”

A notification box appeared in my field of view.

【ALL SKILL POINTS ALLOTTED TO ICE MAGIC】

Ice Magic 2.06+1.10

I used the eleven skill points I’d never touched. I also released the *Connection* spell that was applying a -200 to my MP and poured all of the magic power inside me into my ice magic. By using every one of my trump cards, I successfully strengthened the cold of *Wintermension*. My understanding of ice magic deepened; my grip on the molecular vibration grew.

How can I put a stop to the world’s vibrations? No, how can I glaciare the whole wide world?

And I arrived at one facet of the answer. “Freeze! FREEEEZE!!!”

An unprecedented giant wave of cold grew more and more refined. I clad myself in it like a robe and braced against the oncoming flames. Moreover, I took water and cloth out of my inventory, soaked the cloth, and donned it like a mantle from my head downward before breaking into a dash.

In response to my attempt to run through the field, the fire flowers enlarged their petals so as to catch me. Some touched me.

“Yarrrrgh!”

They caught me on the back. The cloth was burned away, scorching my flesh. I didn’t feel the sensation of heat anymore. Nor was there pain. All that blared in my brain was, *Warning, warning, warning*.

I ignored all that and kept on running, only to be blocked by Maria, who was walking through the flames freely. I couldn’t afford to pay her any heed. I simply endured the flame sword tearing through my shoulder and ran as fast as my

legs could carry me past her over to Alty.

“Made it to me, huh, Sieg?!!!” The Guardian smiled at the sight of my desperate charge. The very same smile Tida had once shown me.

“ALTYYYYYY!!!” I screamed. It burned my mouth, my throat, my insides, but all the same, I screamed.

“World-shaking flames almighty! Resolve more red than the passion of all creation!” Alty was screaming too. In much the same way, she incanted while igniting it all. Her spell would probably be complete before I could reach her. “Bonfire of spurting blood! The crimson snow flurry is my body! The world that is me is now aflame!!!”

And yet, I had no choice but to press forward. What little remained of my life force was urging me to see that this was the moment of truth. I kept running, fully intending to plunge into the midst of the fire spell she would no doubt be completing in short order.

“Spellcast: *Diana Blaze!!!*”

The completed spell was an orb not unlike a small sun. The instant it flashed on like a lamp, everything was wrapped in flames. My sense organs lost all their faculties, and I could feel my body burning.

Regardless, I kept going, advancing into the thick of the inferno. I knew that I had no other choice, both to protect my body and for all the other reasons. My limbs lacked all sense of touch, but I forced them to keep moving.

I guarded my face with my left hand and used my right hand to slash Alty’s torso. In that same burst of forward motion, I went past her and kept running. As a result, I took the brunt of the heat blasted by the miniature sun from behind. Concentrating my cold towards my rear, I ran with the intent to flee the onslaught.

Due to the impact and the heat pushing me from behind, I couldn’t even fall safely. I tumbled and rolled like a ball. Although the cloak I had been wearing was burned to ash, it seemed I was able to avoid a fatal blow due to my strengthened ice magic. And I could feel it in my hands—I’d definitely given Alty a nice gash.

I slowly got to my feet and checked to see how she was doing. She was standing, having been slashed diagonally from shoulder to waist. She looked at me and smiled, holding in the blood flowing out of her with her hand. It was on fire. She smiled despite the wound, which would be more than grievous for any human. That smile was enough to tell me that our fight wasn't over.

In place of the MP I'd run out of, I cast more magic by dipping into my life force.

"Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash...*"

【STATUS】

HP: 246/372

MP: 0/657

HP: 238/366

MP: 0/657

I wasn't there yet. It wasn't over yet. Recalling the time I had battled Tida, I watched calmly as the measure of my life ticked down.

"I expected no less, Sieg. You do have the mettle it took to kill Tida, after all," Alty said placidly as she bled burning blood.

"Shut up! Just eat shit and die already!"

I pulled a fresh new dampened mantle from my inventory and put it on, then brandished my sword once more. I had 238 HP left to work with. From a numerical standpoint, I could keep going. It was too early to throw in the towel. I vowed to myself that I would save Maria, just like I'd saved Lastiara.

"But it's still not enough. You're still lacking. Isn't that right, Maria?"

"Yes, that's right! It's still not enough!"

Alty staggered closer to Maria and hugged her from behind. Then, the two of them repeated those words. "Not enough..." "From now on..." they said over and over.

I got a bad feeling about that, so I mustered my remaining strength and ran. I had to stop them. My gut was screaming as much.

Propelled by the momentum, my sword stabbed the monster behind Maria right through the face.

The tip of the blade plunged into her face. But I didn't feel any resistance. Alty's features warped as her form lost substance. She turned into fire and looked my way, smiling.

Her whole body morphed into flame, and then she became one with the fire that was wreathing Maria. Part of Maria's fire formed a mouth: "This battle's just beginning, Sieg. We've got a ways to go!"

My body stiffened. The enemy I was intent on slicing to ribbons was no longer there, and I just stood there. I understood that Alty had simply turned into more fire and mixed in with Maria's.

Does that mean I'm not gonna get anywhere unless I extinguish all of the fire here? Or does that mean that she's mixed in with Maria's body, forcing me to kill Maria if I wanna kill her too? Or does it mean something else entirely? I had no idea.

While I was standing there, shocked, Maria came forward, slashing.

"Master, please stand down! If you do, we can start over from square one! From that point in time! This time, we won't need anyone else! Let's start over, just the two of us!"

All I could do was keep deflecting her blows, because I didn't know how to attack Alty. Left with no other choice, I resorted to trying to persuade Maria again.

"Maria! I need you to come back to your senses! Everything about this is just dancing to her tune! There's no point in fighting me! There are no do-overs in life!"

"Even if that's true, Ms. Alty was there for me until the end! I was so lonely, and she did her best to help me! Unlike you, she didn't leave me out, or leave me alone, or leave me behind!"

She merely fired back with more criticism. I got the sense that the more we talked, the stronger her fire grew. There was no doubt about it—there was a close link between Maria’s mentality and her fervor.

I shouted as I strengthened the cold air using *Wintermension*, “I’ll never leave you alone or leave you behind again! I promise! So please, retract your fire!”

“More lies! If you’re not lying, why did you go save Ms. Lastiara? If she’s around, I’ll never be able to keep up. I’ll get left behind. I’ll be all alone again. How could you go save her when you *knew* that’d happen?!”

“Nothing will change if she’s around! It’s okay; we’ll all be together! So—”

“Ever since *she*—ever since Ms. Lastiara came around, it all went wrong! That girl plays dirty. Being born such a dazzling being is cheating. I can’t even tell you how anxious it made me, watching you get sucked into her radiance! As long as she’s there, I’ll wonder when you’ll leave me behind, and when you’ll lie to me! I’ll be constantly uneasy!”

The more she talked, the more her true thoughts were laid bare, and by the same token, the more all my mistaken impressions came into sharp relief. Little by little, the root of Maria’s inner turmoil was turning clearer. I’d figured her infatuation or envy was getting the best of her, but that was slightly off the mark. What Maria was raging against, over and over again, was something else.

She and I were dropping years off our lives screaming at each other. And if I wasn’t wrong, that was precisely why we were finally beginning to understand each other.

“That’s why we’re starting over,” Maria continued. “We’re going back to the time you were limp-wristed and lost. Back then, you clung to me and depended on me, and that made me feel so safe. I was able to think to myself: *Now, here’s someone who’ll be by my side! Here’s someone I can find happiness with!* So we’re gonna turn back the clock to when *she* wasn’t with us!”

Maria was telling me that she wanted to scorch everything and be together with a weakened version of me. She was saying that she couldn’t rest easy otherwise. If I wasn’t weaker, she’d always be worried I’d run off someplace...

Ahh, I finally get it. Long story short, Maria’s a ball of fear and apprehension.

After all, I hadn't told her anything. Not my real name or my actual place of origin, or my goals. Nothing. She was beside herself with worry *because* she didn't know the first thing about me. No matter how often I told her everything was fine, no matter how nice I was to her or how much favoritism I showed her, there was no point if I didn't give her a single piece of the truth. It only had the opposite effect.

What Maria wanted was assurance. She wanted the security of knowing I wasn't going anywhere.

"I couldn't do anything but watch as the boy I like drifted away! And try as I might to follow after you, I couldn't catch up! Well, I don't want to lose everything again, okay?!!!"

Perhaps now was the time to stare the emotions I'd been fleeing square in the face.

Maria likes me. That's why she can't abide Lastiara, who knows my real name, my real place of origin, and my real objective. She's scared of her, scared that she's always by my side. Devoid of any guarantees, she's always on pins and needles, wondering when she'll be discarded.

In all likelihood, Maria had *always* been uneasy. She'd *always* been uneasy to the point of madness. As I uncovered her feelings, I started understanding her more, little by little. Or, to be more honest, I was being *told* how she felt—by this, the Trial of the Tenth Floor.

"You belong to me, Master! I was the first one to find you! So you're no one else's!"

Maria's fire blazed unto the ends of earth. She burned her whole body, the intensity of her flames exceeding the power of my cold. In the end, even her swordplay outpaced mine, and she deflected my blade to the side.

Rendered defenseless, I was thrust away by a blow to the torso, putting some distance between us and giving Maria time to incant.

"Burn, nixfire!"

That was the verse for obtaining what she wanted, no matter the sacrifice. For some reason, I was able to understand the meaning of that incantation. The

feelings she seeded into it reached me. And at the same time, I realized just how much she had tossed onto the pyre of her magic. She'd discarded her body and heart, her memories and emotions, her past and her future, her everything—all for me.

Then I'll feed my own pyre.

“Spread, nix-ice!” I incanted. Those words spilled out of my mouth as though I'd thought of them myself.



I could sense a precious memory disappearing. I could feel my emotions being fiddled with. But that was the same as what Maria was experiencing. I couldn't very well flee from it if she didn't.

"At the mercy of threads and oneiric reeling!"

"At the mercy of threads and oneiric reeling!"

The magic being crafted was probably the fire snake spell. As things stood now, I knew I should be able to do it too.

I've trained my ice magic, come to understand it, strengthened it, risked my life, and added an incantation! Now that I know the source of Maria's fire, I can cast the same spells!

"Swallow the stars! Flamespell: *Midgard Blaze!*"

"Swallow the stars! Icespell: *Midgard Freeze!*"

Two serpents were born from our bodies. They streaked through the air and clashed. Neither was corporeal; they were pure heat and pure cold. A flame snake and an ice snake. Due to the collision of opposing elements, they ate away at one another in their attempt to negate each other.

Their struggle for supremacy lasted for nary a moment. And needless to say, the fire snake was the victor. My spell didn't have a single advantage over the other. However, the clash did heavily weaken the fire snake. I leaped to the side, and the serpent hit the ground and dispersed.

I resumed my battle stance right away and forced my screaming body to move in order to close in on her.

I won't let her use more fire magic. I won't let her make any more sacrifices.

With this vow, I shifted our fight to close quarters. But in response, the floating mouth of fire incanted. It was Alty's voice.

"Shine, flamesword! *Flame Flamberge!*"

In concert with Alty's magic, Maria's fire sword grew hotter. The flames were now denser; the blade became blue in color and then a dazzling white.

My sword and her flamberge clashed. Although for a "clash," I didn't feel

much resistance. And the reason for that was simple: the tip of my blade was melting on contact.

“Urgh! Spellcast: *Ice Flamberge!*”

【STATUS】

HP: 219/345

MP: 0/657

HP: 208/332

MP: 0/657—

I had 208 left. Juice in the tank. I wasn’t dead yet.

I coated my sword in ice, curbing the damage to its blade. However, because I had employed a spell I wasn’t used to, my life force was depleting before my eyes. The life points I’d increased with every level up were converting into magic energy, not unlike a block of ice melting.

The flame and ice swords locked, sparks of magic flying. I quickly drew my sword back for another swing, but that flash of steel and ice was shunted away by her fire sword. Clearly, Maria’s speed of motion was a different beast from moments prior. By fusing with Alty, all of her abilities had been boosted. Her strength, speed, dexterity, and the precision of her Perception skill were far better now. No matter how many times I swung my sword, all it resulted in was more sparks flying.

“It was never this painful before, even when I lost my village or when I became a slave! I’d have rather you left me alone from the beginning, before I ever felt this much pain, this much envy, this much sorrow!”

Every time I heard more about what Maria held in her heart, my body increasingly faltered. I wasn’t going to reply anymore. All of my actions had kept her in a state of torment. I’d made the wrong moves every step of the way. I knew that now.

“I’d have better off *without* any hope to begin with! There’s no way I’d be suffering as much as I am now if I’d just died a slave! To be left in the dust despite wanting to get closer, to have someone you want to know more about avoid looking you in the eyes—it’s so painful I might lose my mind!”

The end result of my blunders was Maria being wound up and played like a puppet by the monster known as Alty. I wanted to kick myself for thinking everything was going swimmingly after saving Lastiara unscathed.

“Everything’s going great”? “I’m so relieved”? I was an idiot.

I realized then that “???” was creeping in right next to me. With my current mental state, I’d easily be able to activate “???” if I just reached out for it. If I just sacrificed everything in my life outside of the Dungeon, it would all be resolved. If I discarded all of the doubts crowding my brain, it’d give me a simple recourse to follow. I could erase this pain, this sorrow, this rage, this distress. “???” was beckoning to me, a sweet temptation. And If I activated it, I’d almost certainly kill Maria. It would have me kill her.

That was one choice I absolutely couldn’t make. Seeking comfort was not what I needed to be doing at the moment. Fuck running. It was time to atone for my sins. All that should have been running through my head was delivering the girl in front of me from her suffering. That and nothing else!

I couldn’t say I was cool or composed, but I collected all the information I had and decided on the course of action to take.

“That’s all I’ve got left now.”

Leaving “???” inactivated, I made my choice. Without even incanting, I crafted a spell using just the magic energy in my body. I aimed to wrap Maria in cold, just like I had that morning. I was going to fight by wringing out every ounce of my strength.

“Spellcast: Blizzardmensionnnn!”

I frantically forced myself to stay conscious, constructing my most powerful spell by shaving away my life force. I widened its area of effect so as to engulf Maria, swinging my sword as I stole her heat away. It chilled the whole battlefield colder and colder while it obstructed Maria’s movements.

The enemy's heat sources numbered more than a thousand. I got a read on all of them, and in trying to allot my magic power as optimally as possible, my neural pathways set themselves ablaze. My brain sensed danger and dumped a truckload of chemicals. Through every pipe and tube, chemicals coursed in order to quell the pain. I reached past my pain threshold and ascertained all of the heat sources with inhuman processing power.

Blizzarddimension sealed Maria's movements and fire and everything else. Consequently, Maria and Alty's flames were contained, and I succeeded in dodging her fire sword by a hair's breadth. My ice sword stopped at her throat. But that was the extent of what I could do. This fight was over. I'd known from the outset that killing Maria wasn't something I was capable of.

With her next move, the unhinged Maria informed me that she didn't care if she got her head chopped off—she tried swinging her sword at me again. I used my free hand to grab her by the wrist and stop her, scorching my palm but refusing to let go. We were now staring at each other up close. And from this close-up, I talked to her nice and gentle. This was probably my final chance. If I didn't choose my words right, all three of us would die that day.

But I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"Maria, I'm not going to give it up. However much you tell me you hate it, aiming for the deepest level of the Dungeon is the one thing I can't relinquish. I'm going to continue diving alongside Lastiara."

"I... I don't wanna go! I don't wanna go anywhere! I don't wanna be alone anymore!"

"Yeah, I get it. I hate the isolation too. In fact, that's the very reason I'm so determined to reach the deepest level!"

I held Maria back as she tried to shake free of my hand and I divulged the truth at the heart of me. Then I let go of the sword I'd been holding at her neck and let it drop to the floor.

"Huh?"

She loosened her grip a tad. As I permeated her body with more and more cold, I stirred up the true intentions I'd kept shrouded within me. I knew that if I

spoke of it, the lock on my heart would come undone. This was a fact that threatened to drive me insane just by thinking about it. If I didn't stuff it deep down, the dams would break on my tears. I'd become unable to contain myself, unable to keep calm and carry on. I was aware of that.

But it was that sincerity that Maria needed. That was all.

Suppressing “???” these past few days had proved worth it. Now, I could put my longing for my family into words. The only thing “???” had extracted from me was my feelings for Lastiara.

I recalled my family—my sister. For a moment, I was dizzy. Merely by facing Hitaki, I was swallowed by anxiety and assailed by a persistent urge to throw up. Yet I was NOT going to activate “???”

“You heard that right. You're alone? I'm all alone too! After all, I'm the only one in the world. The only foreign body!”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“I'm not of this world. I'm just a schoolkid who got called here from a different world far, far away from this one. So I wanna go back home. I wanna go back... I don't wanna die in this stupid place, where I can't make heads or tails of anything... I mean, I haven't got family here! I'm well and truly alone in this world! I was scared! I was so, so scared to die alone in this shithole! That's why I've got no choice but to go to the Dungeon!!!”

“You're...not of this world?”

I looked her in the eye and, recalling the fear that “???” had swept under the rug, I told her about how I'd felt when I had first stumbled through the dark into this world. But what was important wasn't that fear. I'd pretty much conquered it in the handful of days I had spent with Dia. The nightmare that was afflicting me to this day was a different fear. The true desire I'd gone so far as to lie to myself in order to keep hidden. The reason I was always running from Maria's feelings. The part of me that I jealously guarded, striving never to think about it. The most important thing to me.

“I wanna go back to see my baby sister! I love her! I'm lonely here, but more than that, I'm worried to death about her! She and I are the only family we've

got. She'll be all alone without me! She can't fend for herself, yet I've been trapped in this stupid world for well over a week now! It's hard for me too—being on my own. But I know she must be suffering way more than I am! So I NEED to get back! And to do that, I've got no choice but to seek a miracle! I need the miracle at the bottom of the Dungeon!”

“You have a...baby sister?”

“Yeah. She's the spitting image of you. That's why I helped you. Why I played favorites with you. I was soothing my own soul! By making you my replacement sister and sticking you at home, I was keeping myself from falling apart! I saved you for the sole purpose of distracting myself!”

“Ah... Ahh! So that's why! THAT'S why!”

Maria's black hair. Her face and figure. Her age. Her attitude. Her circumstances. They all reminded me of Hitaki. I hadn't wanted to acknowledge it. I'd tried so hard not to think about it, because just remembering her, just talking, felt like a pair of pliers wrenching my heart out of my chest and twisting it into pretzels. The sister I loved was too far from reach. That was all it took to plunge me into this abject misery. I couldn't handle the anxiety.

On the other hand...Maria had been experiencing that pain this whole time. She'd been hurting this way for far too long. And the one who had inflicted that pain on her was me.

As my hands, my legs, my neck, and my body burned up, I apologized to her. She could char me black if she wanted to. But I was determined to save her, even if my life was forfeit. What point was there in returning if I didn't free the girl I'd caused so much agony from the fires of her torment?

My life points were ticking down. My cells perished one by one, and I could taste death on the back of my tongue. Even so, I wasn't going to stop. I couldn't stop until my HP reached zero.

I made my cold saturate Maria ever more thoroughly.

“Wait...Maria, don't believe—”

“Shut up for a second, Ms. Alty!” Maria yelled. From the look of it, she wasn't about to permit any interruptions now that I was starting to lay it out. From her

perspective, she was finally seizing on a thread leading towards the full truth.

“I’m sorry, Maria. I treated you terribly. I treated you as a sister to the bitter end, even though I knew you had feelings for me. It was what made *me* the most comfortable, so I kept fleeing in that direction.”

Maria listened to me apologize with an earnest expression. I told her what I’d made up my mind to tell her without bending the truth in any way.

“That’s why I’ve made up my mind, Maria.”

In order to make what had gone so awry turn out better, a price needed to be paid. And I had to be the one to pay it.

“You can burn my limbs and make me yours. I don’t even mind if I end up dying in the process. If you do one thing for me, you can tear my limbs to shreds right now for all I care.”

This was the course I’d chosen. Up until now, I’d labored under the assumption that this course and my sister’s salvation were at odds, but I now realized that wasn’t necessarily so.

“Promise me you’ll reach the deepest level,” I continued. “Swear to me that, come what may, you’ll save my sister in my stead. You’re strong enough now that if you cooperate with Lastiara and the others, you can do it. I know you can...”

There was no reason I had to be the one. I could leave Hitaki to my trusty comrades. Lastiara had regained her sense of self, and her talent was beyond exceptional. She also had the aptitude to be a leader. I could put my faith in her, and best of all, she was a diver who didn’t covet the miracle of the deepest level for herself. I also had Ms. Radiant, Mr. Hine, and Dia. If those five combined their powers, they could surely reach the deepest level. If Maria inherited my will, then I didn’t mind if the curtain closed on my battles in this world in such a way. She could be the one to fulfill the contract I’d made with Lastiara. At the end of the day, the feelings of the diver named Siegfried Vizzita were unimportant. Nor was it important that I remained in perfectly good health. Even my “Great Return” was far from essential.

What was important? My sister’s happiness and only my sister’s happiness.

That was the one true desire of Aikawa Kanami.

“My real name is Aikawa Kanami. My sister’s name is Hitaki. If you manage to reach my world, I want you to search for her. If you save Hitaki for me, I don’t need anything else.”

It was, without a doubt, a dumb idea. It was a choice I would never have been allowed to make if “???” had triggered. But that was how people who were backed into a corner functioned. On the verge of death, if they still had their emotions and were able to waver—as was good and proper—then they could make a choice like this. They could stake their lives on an illogical and slender thread of hope. They could dream.

“Kanami... Master’s name is Aikawa Kanami...”

No “???” No “Siegfried Vizzita.” This was the answer that plain old Aikawa Kanami gave her. And she was repeating my name, digesting it.

“Aikawa, Kanami...”

Her fire was weakening. Her fire sword fell apart, unable to maintain its shape. I sensed the kindling coals that were in her heart gradually fading. It was as I’d thought: what she needed from me now was the genuine me.

Blizzardmension stole away even more of her heat as it weakened the chaos that dwelled within her body.

“Yep. I’m not gonna torment you anymore. And I won’t let your crush become some ‘love tragedy.’ I’ll be yours. And that’ll put a ribbon on everything,” I declared as I continued cooling her body.

Hearing that, Maria let her flame brand dissipate and gently leaned against me. She buried her head in my chest and happily called my name.

“Kanami... Kanami! Mr. Kanami. Mr. Kanami’s name is Kanami!”

Using the hand that had once held a sword, I stroked her head. She looked up with tear-choked eyes and fixed her gaze on me. And then, she shouted. She confessed.

“Mr. Kanami, I like you! I love you! I like how kind you can be. I like how soft you can be. I like how pathetic you can be. I like how timid you can be. I like

how childish you can be. I just like you! I like everything about you! I finally remembered!”

Yep. She looked like her. She looked a lot like her. It hadn’t eluded me. And now, I could say it out loud. Maria looked like Hitaki, so I wanted to save her, whatever it took.

“I like you as family, as a big brother! And of course, I also like you as a *boy* too! So please! Please be with me forever and ever!”

I got the feeling that the temperature rose in concert with her shouting. The emotions she was belting out turned to fire and swirled around us. I raised my guard a little, wary that her confusion might increase again. But I could feel it in my bones—those worries were groundless. This was not the black fire of despair. It was the red fire of joy.

“Yep, I’m yours now. I promise I’ll never leave you alone. Please forgive me.”

I took her into my arms and, drawing on all of my emotions, I chilled her with the coldest cold I could muster. She didn’t fight it. I had never seen the look on her face she had as she hugged me tight.

“You feel so nice and cold.”

With those words, her flames disappeared entirely. I could feel the ardor burning in her body vanish as well. Having regurgitated the emotions she’d balled up inside her, she whispered to me, her voice newly unburdened.

“You finally, finally see me... I can finally feel you by my side through my skin...”

Those words were everything. All I’d had to do was look Maria in the face and be next to her. Infatuation and envy, fire and confusion—none of that fussy stuff was necessary. Speaking the truth to each other—that was all we ever needed...

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Mind Taint 0.12, Confusion 0.38, Memory Impairment 0.48



Maria's condition was visibly clearing up. With her in my arms, I rejoiced in the fact I'd brought her back from the brink without harming her.

Of course, a certain somebody wasn't down for this conclusion. A pool of heat popped into existence between me and Maria in a fiery gyre. That made us distance ourselves from one another.

The floating fire spoke. "Wait. Hold on a second, Maria. Are you seriously gonna believe him? Well, I don't! Sieg's told lie after lie after lie. I'm sure he's all talk now too. He's trying to fool you in order to get out of this with his neck intact. He's taking advantage of your kindness!"

There was no mistaking it: Alty was inside of her. As such, the Guardian couldn't do anything to intervene except through fire.

I tried to approach so that I could snuff out Alty's flame, my foe shouting all the while.

"You can tell for yourself, can't you? With those eyes of yours! If he really laid out his true feelings, your eyes should confirm it! Just take a look! Then you'll see that man will never make you happy! He can't! Every so-called hero's just looking out for number one in the end! All they ever spread is misery!!!"

Maria shook her head, keeping me from coming closer. In her eyes, I could see her determination to settle her own affairs. For a moment I was of two minds, but I stopped in my tracks and left it to her.

"Yes, my eyes do see it. But I choose to believe in Mr. Kanami. I want to believe in him!"

"You're making a mistake! Trust me; I know these things! Sieg the Hero'll never keep his promise!!!" Alty yelled. Her fire blazed bright in its attempt to warm up Maria's chilled body.

But Maria kept calm. "Ms. Alty...when we were one, I experienced a little bit of your life. You lost everything because of your eyes. You've been more miserable and more unhappy than I ever have. And I understand that you're desperate for me to avoid walking the same path you did."

Maria harbored no animosity whatsoever towards her. Her words were laced

with kindness, so I could tell.

“But I want to believe in him anyway. I can’t believe in ‘Master.’ But I *can* believe in Mr. Kanami. So please, let me go down the path that you once did.”

“No way, no how! Put your faith in him and you’ll just get hurt! Your feelings won’t reach him, and they’ll just pile up and fester, and you’ll suffer more and more until in the end, you’re stabbed in the back!”

“No, we can’t know that for sure. Not yet. You and I are different people, after all. As such, it’s not a foregone conclusion that we’ll meet the same fate.”

“It *is* a foregone conclusion! It’s the exact same! I mean, you’re the same as me—”

“No. You were in me, yes, but you didn’t have a Ms. Alty in your own life. And that makes all the difference.”

For a moment, Alty hemmed and hawed, but she fired right back up and, blowing her flames up, she shouted. “We’re not that different! I can see how things are! My body’s telling me where you’re gonna wind up! That’s how it was for me! My eyes clue me in! They say you’ll never, ever be happy, so you—”

“Ms. Alty, I thank you. I’m grateful. But I’m going down a different path nonetheless. I now know how to walk a different road. It’s because my eyes only saw things halfway that it was futile for me.” Maria brought her hands up to her head. “If I do this, nobody will know what’s to come.”

And then, she gouged out her eyes with her fingers.

“Ah! AHHHHHHH!” shrieked Alty. “MARIAAAAA!!!”

Maria had blinded herself of her own free will, unmanipulated by anyone. And from the sound of it, that was the hardest thing for Alty to take.

I put my faith in Maria’s will and determination, continuing to watch from the sidelines.

“Khh, urgh, aaahhhhhh!!!”

Maria put up with the excruciating pain as she took out her eyes, burning them for good measure, reducing them to ashes.

“Ahhhh! Maria, what have you done?! What have you done?!” Alty cried tearfully.

Maria replied in kind tones, “Now you and I are no longer the same. I won’t be led astray by these damned things anymore. I choose to believe in Mr. Kanami, and I’ll do so for my own sake. So please, Ms. Alty...please believe me that it won’t end in tragedy.”

“Ahh, aughhh...” Alty was sobbing, her flames trembling.

Fire of a different shade started pouring out from within Maria. It came out muddy and gooey, and when it made contact with the air, it transformed into the shape of a person. Those flames of grief formed the shape of a small girl. That fiery eidolon was Alty, and she put her hands to the ground and muttered, “Ah...ahh... My final point of affinity has crumbled. I can’t be with you anymore. I... I’m gonna be...all alone again...”

Her fire lacked its former verve and vigor. Upon closer inspection, the surrounding flames were also weakening. Alty’s heart was about to snap in half, and in response, the flames in our arena were losing their strength. Hers were also strongly tied to emotions, and there could be no doubt that their exchange just now had clinched the battle. Alty flickered like a candle flame on the verge of going out, and she feebly got to her feet. Gone was her haughty and pompous aura. She looked at me with childlike eyes, as befitted her outward age.

“Alty, are you still planning to fight?” I asked. This battle was already over, I figured.

“Ohh, I’m fighting,” she replied with her erstwhile arrogant manner of speaking, dialing back the feebleness to clap back at me. But she was a paper tiger. I could tell it wasn’t backed up by any actual strength. She was done for.

“It may be true that Maria’s love tragedy—or rather, her crush—may become requited in a way. But mine hasn’t yet. I still have a reason to fight! It still means something!” she said, continuing to put on a bold front.

She crafted a fire sword in one hand, smiled faintly, and spoke further as she walked towards me. She reminded me of a defiant death row inmate on her way to the gallows.

“‘When a person and a monster cross paths, they kill each other. That’s the unwritten rule of society.’ Ha ha. Tida’s little motto does ring true from time to time, doesn’t it?” Both her body and her fire sword threatened to up and vanish at any moment.

“But you...” I had no intention of forgiving Alty. I picked my sword back up and braced to defend myself. That being said, after hearing her cries of grief, and now that Maria had come back, it was also true that the ire inside me had subsided. With the frantic battle of confessions behind us, my brain, which was regaining its composure, suggested there was still a possibility of reconciliation.

“Shut up! I hate people like you more than anything, Sieg! Now die! I hope every ‘hero’ bites it!”

That possibility was buried under Alty’s hate-filled cry. She dashed in closer and swung her flame blade laterally. I blocked it with the flat of my sword. It had no punch. There was no weight to the blow. Her attack, her fire, her thoughts, and feelings, none of it had any force behind it.

“Alty, you...”

You haven’t got any strength left.

She’d been rejected by Maria, sure, but this lack of strength was still strange. I could only think of one explanation. It was the one way to kill a Guardian without having to fight. When a Guardian lost whatever unfinished business was tying them to life, they lost their power as well before ultimately vanishing. In other words, Alty was beginning to lose that lingering attachment. I couldn’t think of what else it could be. Maybe when she’d been riding Maria as a host, she’d sensed Maria achieving her goal up close and personal? Had she realized the requiting of her “love tragedy”?

No, that wasn’t the full picture. That may have factored into it, but I could intuitively sense that the main reason lay elsewhere. She’d had some other attachment to this world, and now that *it* had been resolved, she was beginning to phase out of existence. It had to be something only Alty herself knew about, but also the attachment she was most loath to admit existed. That was why she kept shouting.

“I’ve still got my score to settle! It’s not gone! I can still fight!”

My thoughts must have been written on my face. She shot out hot fire and swung her sword. It was similar to the bright glint a fire gave off right before it died. And I gradually became less and less able to fend off her desperate swings. While she had grown weaker, I too was at death's doorstep. As a result, I couldn't restrain myself, and I ended up mowing her down.

But that didn't stop her. Alty's flame sword was about to hit my neck. I had no choice but to cut off her arm in response. Her slender appendage flew through the air, her blood painting the ground red.

The dismembered arm turned to fire and vanished, and the blood on the ground bloomed into fire flowers. The sight was at once unbearably beautiful and unbearably unpleasant. Alty, for her part, smiled like she was right at home, and she continued fighting.

"Ahh, 'flesh and blood burns'... 'With blood and oil added, the body burns bright.' But I don't mind. After all, 'people don't live imprisoned in their bodies, they live in the fire lit in their hearts.' So long as the 'purgatory blazing in my soul' hasn't vanished, I'll never stop..."

She slashed at me, incanting as she vomited blood. No, it wasn't blood she was vomiting. It was fire. She was fighting while chipping away at her very being.

Cowed by her sheer intensity, my sword hand faltered, and her flamberge was about to reach my flesh.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Alty..."

Her sword failed to reach me by a nose. Her final sword swing was intercepted by Maria's fire sword as she stepped between us.

The flame swords intertwined, melted each other, and dissipated.

"Maria..." Alty mumbled. Her expression was changing at a dizzying rate. She looked simultaneously sad and happy, contented and dissatisfied. It was a weave of all different emotions. And after she showed me that confusing look on her face, she took one step back. She distanced herself, hung her head, and muttered under her breath, "I lose..."

She had finally admitted it.

“I’ve lost this battle. Congratulations, Sieg—or rather, Aikawa Kanami. With this, the Trial of the Tenth Floor is now over.”

Alty’s body was about to fall to pieces. She had lost an arm, and she only had a little bit of fire and magic energy left. It should have been obvious to anyone with eyes who the victor was. And that was the moment Alty herself acknowledged it.

However, it was only for a short time that she acted so meek in defeat. Soon enough, she smiled faintly and glared at me stubbornly. Just like when we had walked through the Dungeon together once before, she assumed that irreverent, among-friends tone with me.

“I didn’t lose to *you* though. I lost to Maria, so don’t get it twisted, got it?” she said, smiling at Maria.

Then, while we watched, she brought her own fingers up to her eyes.

“Hey, Alty, what’re you—”

“I know that the victor’s supposed to be getting a magic gem outta this. But no such spoils this time. Sorry, Kanami. This is the one thing I can’t concede to you.”

She dodged the question by answering a different one, and then she gouged out her eyes. Just like when Maria had done it, her eyes turned to flame and vanished. In so doing, the two of them became peas in a pod once again.

Upon witnessing that, Maria stepped forward with a serious look. Blind as she was, she’d sensed something. Fearing another violent act, I tried to stop her, but she stopped me instead. Then she approached Alty with a solemn expression I’d never seen before on her. Alty approached her with the same look on her face. And then, the two put their hands together, put their foreheads together, and said their final goodbyes.

“Now we’re the same. Take me with you, Maria.”



“Of course. You are my best friend, after all.”

I didn't know how the two of them had spent their time together. To me, Alty was nothing more than the monster that had driven Maria insane. But Maria called her her best friend. And for some reason, some part of my heart prickled with pain.

Ahh, if that's true, then surely, that role was...

Alty had some parting words for me too.

“Kanami, don't pick on Maria, okay? 'Cause I'll be watching.”

I didn't know Alty well enough to know what to say to that. More accurately, I'd never *tried* to learn more about her. That was all there was to it.

Alty heaved a sigh at my silence, but she seemed satisfied somehow. She didn't say anything else beyond that. She looked up at the sky with a gratified expression. It had turned cloudy from all of the flames and smoke, but she stared at that shroud of gray as though it were dazzlingly bright. And slowly but surely, her fire converted into light.

“Man, this feeling's the pits. But this time around, I guess I was able to say what I wanted to say. And may...be...that's good e...nough...” she muttered to the sky and no one in particular. As she faded into light, her words broke up. “I did...my...best...”

With that, she disappeared from this mortal coil. Then a magic gem fell into Maria's hands, but it instantly lost its shape and turned into a small ember before her body could absorb it.

【TITLE UNLOCKED: SOOT-DRUDGE OF FIRE】

+0.50 to Fire Magic

The notification hit my retinas, informing me that the monster by the name of Alty was definitively dead.

It's over...

Having lost its master, the fire surrounding the area began to weaken. At the same time, it started raining. Drops of water falling from cloudy skies, intent on making it seem as though this arena of flame had never been.

“Rain...”

If the flames were to be extinguished, the Vart soldiers that had previously been unable to approach the hill would be able to. I hurried closer to Maria, determined to flee before that happened.

“Are you okay, Maria? Your eyes...”

“It’s fine. I can see as long as there’s fire. But are *you* okay, Mr. Kanami?”

She created a space in the palms of her hands, and in that space, she fashioned a flame. I didn’t know when she’d learned how to do that, but it had to be the same ability as Alty’s. Using that technique, she could gather information on our surroundings.

“I’m all right,” I replied. “More importantly, let’s get out of here. Once the fire’s gone, people are gonna start gathering here.”

To be frank, my consciousness was threatening to slip if at any point I let my guard down, which was something I couldn’t allow. Not after getting to this point. I couldn’t afford to conk out until we’d left Vart and secured our safety. If at all possible, I wanted to join back up with Lastiara and the others before the day was out. Together, there would be nothing left to fear. Everything would be back to the way it was before. We’d gone through a lot, but I’d recovered Maria, and with that, we could revert things to normal.

Maria and I spurred ourselves forward despite being exhausted enough to collapse on the spot, and we started walking—

Until we heard someone clapping their hands in applause.

The cold hand of terror sent a chill down my spine. I heard the clapping coming from one section of the now-weakened flames. And from beyond those flames, a man came ambling towards us.

“Congratulations, Sieg. Or maybe I should call you Aikawa Kanami?”

It was the knight named Palinchron Regacy.

“Palinchron? What’re you doing?!”

I thought he’d been chasing Lastiara’s group. And yet he’d appeared before us as though he had been waiting for just the right time.

“Things on my end ended pretty quickly. A bunch of stuff happened, but it cooled down, so I figured I’d mosey on over.”

Things...ended?

Did that mean Lastiara’s group had been defeated? But that couldn’t be. They were all wounded, sure, but each of them was stronger than Palinchron. Besides, he looked rather dissatisfied. It seemed to me like something he hadn’t seen coming had stymied him, causing him to come back here in short order.

He glanced at his blood-soaked blade and remembered something. An unpleasant memory...

Not that his dissatisfaction was any concern of mine. I promptly considered our escape routes. In all honesty, I was confident that I could take him in a fight. I would only have to sacrifice a little more of my max HP, and I could beat him without taking a hit.

But I don’t want to fight.

My instincts were imploring me not to engage this man. The only direction in which to flee was opposite him. But that was the direction Whoseyards was in. More importantly, Maria’s AGI didn’t exceed Palinchron’s. If we tried to merely flee, he’d just catch up.

The gears in my head spun furiously. I used Analyze on his each and every move.

In response, he declared the following, his expression calm and untroubled: “Congratulations, Kanami. I commend you for overcoming the Decimal Trial—and the tenth floor of the Dungeon. But it’s not over yet. Your trial’s not over yet. You’re still in the Dungeon. Oh, I know, I’ll ape the whole introductory remark thing.”

The trial wasn’t over? Introductory remarks? Chills down my spine. I could swear the rain looked *black*.

“Starting now, yes, starting now, this very space *is* the twentieth floor. The floor of Tida, Thief of Darkness’s Essence. Forgive the hasty construction and my being on a work trip, so to speak, but think of this place as the Dungeon’s twentieth floor. Now then, while it’s a little belated, shall we begin the Vigesimal Trial?”

Palinchron brandished his blood-soaked blade, like it made all the sense in the world.

The Day of the Blessed Birth wasn’t over yet...

Chapter 6: At the End of the Day of the Blessed Birth

Upon hearing Tida's name, my body stiffened. But I instantly held my sword at the ready and shouted, "What... What do you mean, the twentieth floor?! Tida's gone! GONE!"

"Yep, Tida's gone," replied Palinchron as he approached. "So I'll be the standin. I'll do the vigesimal trial *for* Tida. The true version." He raised his blood-soaked blade overhead.

No time to think. I stood in front of Maria and retrieved a spare sword from my inventory, intercepting Palinchron's swing. Our swords crossed, and an ominous, high-pitched noise pierced the air.

My HP and MP were nearing their limits, so the only support spell I was using was *Dimension*. As a result, our fight wound up being a simple test of swordsmanship. Palinchron's one-handed swordplay was bizarrely mellow and flexible. As our blades met again, he grabbed me by the arm with his free hand.

With that, his magic power expanded. A frightful energy seeped from the skin I was touching. Instinctively, I dipped into my fast-depleting life points and intensified my dimensional magic for a fleeting moment, probing for the weakest point in Palinchron's stance and pouring my strength there.

"Get offa me!" I shook him off and thrust him away.

The bastard's hands were glowing with dim gray light. The chances were high that this frightful magic energy was a mental spell.

"I'll be damned. Impressive, Kanami. Look at you move, with your body in that state." He smiled, genuinely surprised.

I was pissed. Everything about how Palinchron carried himself pissed me off. I endured the pain and screamed, "What are you after?! You've thrown Whoseyards into chaos; isn't that good enough?!"

"Oh, that was just for funsies. And so is this. As for what I'm really after, I can't tell you that. If I did, you'd see my next moves coming."

While I was furious, Palinchron was quite calm by contrast. His detachedness blasted my irritation to its limit, and I converted more of my HP into magic energy.

【STATUS】

HP: 62/284

MP: 0/657

HP: 52/275

MP: 0/657

My max HP had decreased by nearly 100 points in total. 100 was basically the amount of life points your average pro diver possessed, and my battered body shrieked all the more for it.

“Fuck off with that shit! I couldn’t hold back if I wanted to right now! If you wind up getting killed, that ain’t my problem!”

“Hold back? At this stage in the game? You really are a kind soul. Or maybe you’re too scared to take a life?”

“I’m not too scared! Now that I’ve killed Alty, I won’t hesitate anymore!”

“Keh heh, treating her as human, are we? That’s so *you*, laddie! You’re whacked in the head!”

I tried breaking into a run with the intention of killing Palinchron. But my legs were stopped by what that asshole pulled out from inside his clothes.

“You know what, though, it’s true that if you get serious, I’ll probably bite it. Tragic as it is, I can’t beat you even with this many advantages going for me. That’s right—I don’t overestimate my own strength. Which is why this comes in handy.”

I’d seen that stone before. I used Analyze on the thing:

【GUARDIAN’S MAGIC GEM】

A crystal of the Guardian Tida’s magic energy.

“Tida’s gem?!”

“Yep. It’s the magic gem of a Guardian, which you so thoughtlessly parted with. To think you’d go straight to Vart and sell it off. Granted, it’s thanks to that that I got my hands on it now.”

Palinchron fiddled with the gem, his lips curling even further. A bead of cold sweat ran down my brow.

“Tida and the little missy both told me that there was no issue affinity-wise, but I was still afraid. Now that I’ve seen what I just saw, I know it for a fact: I can inherit Tida’s will. No—I’m the *only* one who can!”

He popped the gem into his mouth and gulped it down. That instant, his magic energy... it went wild. The sensation felt like the world was dislodging itself with Palinchron as the cardinal point. Like the very air was spasming.

His eyes were progressively robbed of their vitality. His already lacking human touch became more and more diluted, and the person named Palinchron Regacy transformed into something else. In terms of his outward appearance, nothing had actually changed. Yet all the same, he had been unmistakably altered.

“Ha, ha ha, now, let’S gET tHiS StarTed, heRO...”

I got the sense that his voice and Tida’s overlapped. Palinchron gripped his sword tightly and drew closer. Impelled by fear, I used Analyze.

【STATUS】

NAME: Palinchron Regacy

HP: 501/512

MP: 368/392

CLASS: None

LEVEL 22

STR 15.21

VIT 19.45

DEX 12.12

AGI 18.22

INT 10.11

MAG 13.99

APT 4.89

INNATE SKILLS: Observant 1.46

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.89, Holy Magic 1.23, Mental Magic 3.89, Martial Arts 1.87, Spellrite 2.54

He was completely different now. All of his stats had doubled, and his magic was an order of magnitude greater. I tried to revise my evaluation of Palinchron and reexamine my suppositions with regard to his battle tactics—but he came swinging at me with agility on par with Tida’s before I could stop to think.

I blocked his oncoming sword with my own, but the impact caused my arm to go numb. Clearly, his muscle strength was not what it had been moments earlier. His no-holds-barred blow also reminded me of my fight against Tida.

“You’re joking!”

I was assailed by regret and frustration. I’d suspected Tida’s gem was an item of importance, but I’d relinquished it anyway. And the prospect of a rematch against him had me shitting bricks.

“Now I’m something of a monster myself!” Palinchron crowed. “Don’t hesitate to kill me, you hear?!”

His every blow was both weighty and fast. And combined with his sword skills, the onslaught was elevated to even greater heights. It had technique to it that Tida had never exhibited, and little by little, it broke through my defenses. If I didn’t do something, I’d lag behind. I was forced to strengthen my magic.

“Dammit! *Dimension: Calculash!*”

But that was the wrong move. After repeatedly scraping the barrel to craft more magic, my body was on the verge of total collapse. If one were to focus strictly on the numbers, I still had more of my max HP to draw from. One might then conclude that I could use more magic. But my actual physical condition wouldn't allow it. A stabbing pain hit my brain, and the spell fizzled.

“Khh...urghh, ahhhhh!!!”

I'd shaved away too much of my life force in a short span of time. I lost yet more life, but the magic energy I squeezed out dispersed in vain. After defeating Alty, I couldn't regain my concentration now that I'd relaxed it once. The intense pain made it abundantly clear that this was not a boundary I could get away with crossing.

I was now open to a fatal blow. Palinchron disarmed me and swept my legs out from under me. Then he straddled me, grabbed my head, and slammed me into the ground, after which that stomach-churning energy from before radiated from his palms.

“Not even you can resist Tida's magic, can you? Spellcast: *Deprived Martyr!*”

Palinchron's magic power penetrated the nooks and crannies of my worn-out brain. The spell was similar to the magic Tida had once used against me. I was convinced that at this rate, my mind would be painted over. There was no time to hesitate!

If my heart's gonna get tampered with either way, then I'll go with the option where my consciousness doesn't die! I've got no other choice:

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

“I'M NOT GOING DOWN!”

I activated it. The skill I swore I wouldn't even if it killed me. I brushed aside Palinchron's mind meddling and kicked him as he was concentrating on the spell with all my strength. I broke my promise to myself, but I had to. The idea of getting hit by his magic now was even scarier than dying.

I could sense an assortment of emotions fall by the wayside. All thoughts and all vows faded away, my cooled-down brain watching them fly beyond the horizon. Then I glared at the enemy who had thus forced my hand.

Having been kicked off of me, Palinchron looked astonished. That surprise quickly turned into an expression of delight. "Keh, keh heh, ha ha ha ha ha ha! Goodness, Kanami, you're *too* strong!"

"Midgard Blaze!"

A spell from Maria. It seemed she'd been aiming for a window where Palinchron and I were apart. Sadly, the fire snake didn't carry enough force. The rain played a role in that, but her eye wounds were also a huge factor. Her HP and MP were largely depleted. I wasn't the only one who'd fought a fierce battle earlier.

The serpent spewed steam as it moved, and Palinchron dodged it with ease. The creature of fire, exposed to the rain, turned to nothing.

"Mr. Kanami, are you okay?!" shouted Maria worriedly from behind. But she didn't come to me. She understood her role. She seemed composed, perhaps due to having overcome her discord with Alty. Leveraging the experience she'd accumulated in the Dungeon, she calmly stuck to her role as a mage.

"I'm okay! Please keep casting for me!"

If Maria lost her composure, it was curtains for me. We needed this to be two-on-one.

Palinchron watched us as we clung to our last remaining hope. "Looks like I've gotta weaken both of you some more. And not just your bodies. Your hearts too!"

He started running. But not at *me*. He was aiming for Maria. I ran at full speed, gritting my teeth against the excruciating pain, and blocked his way. Yet he continued to ignore me. Instead of engaging me, he tried attacking Maria

from a different direction. I gave chase, bleeding as I dashed. Just from taking a step, my whole body screamed. Every cell inside me was ringing the klaxon, shouting at my brain to lose consciousness right then and there.

And with his composure, Palinchron had to know what state my body was in. He knew that he could get me to self-destruct just by making me move. That was why he wasn't bothering to fight me and gunning for Maria instead.

Concluding that I couldn't let this drag out, I slashed at him, summoning every last ounce of strength. But he merely laughed at the suicide charge. He'd read it like a book, and he deflected my sword before punching me in the gut with his free hand.

The pain receptors deadened by the endorphins my brain had released now remembered true pain, and my whole body stiffened as if struck by lightning. Palinchron took advantage of that opening to wrap around behind me and pinion me while still holding his sword.

"Urghh... Aghh..."

He strangled me, applying pressure to my carotid artery. That was the category of attack my body most desperately did *not* want to get hit with.

"End of the line, laddie. Now faint for me."

My field of vision turned blacker and blacker, my consciousness fading.

As my world grew dim, I could hear Maria cry out, "Mr. Kanami! *Midgard Blaze!*"

But I couldn't perceive it properly. I got the vague feeling that something hot passed by me. At the same time, Palinchron stopped strangling me and distanced himself.

Good. Now I can fight some more.

But my fighting spirit bore no fruit. My field of vision was dyed black and it failed to clear up. My cheek hit the muddy ground, and my whole body refused to listen to me.

I heard Maria's screams in the distance. But my body just would not react.

Can't...move...

“And *that’s* over with. Now the little lady’s in my hands too...”

All I could hear was Palinchron’s galling voice.

Feeding on my last scraps of fighting spirit, I lifted my head and strained my eyes. Right then, the sight of Maria fainting by Palinchron’s hand came into view. Palinchron muttered something to the unconscious Maria and slung her over his shoulder before coming over to my collapsed, immobile form and putting a hand over my head.

“Spellcast: *Deprived Martyr!*”

The repulsive magic energy once again invaded my body. Even just perceiving that was me at my limit.

I... I can still fight...

My heart screamed desperately, but my body didn’t respond. Palinchron’s power was dyeing my brain black, to go with my already blackened field of vision.

I’m falling down a pit of deep darkness...

Then, as my consciousness faded, I heard a voice.

“Guess this marks the end of the Day of the Blessed Birth...and I’m the last man standing. Just as planned, huh?”

It was Palinchron’s voice. It was different from his usual glib tone. Part of him sounded *chagrined*.

That was the last thing I heard before I fainted. Before I drowned in the darkness.

Thus did the Day of the Blessed Birth—the day where the desires of so many intertwined—draw to a close...with the outworlder named Aikawa Kanami tapping out in the middle of it.

Chapter 7: Running Up the Score

Ahh...

Ahh, I'm thirsty...

My head was fuzzy. It felt like I was trapped in a dream.

The sensation inside the dream was odd. It felt like my body always took a beat to do what I wanted, and my eyes couldn't focus. Slowly, I slipped away from the dark abyss of slumber because I knew I had to snap back to my senses.

What greeted my eyes was a wooden ceiling. It was dark, though. And due to that darkness, I couldn't be sure it was, in fact, made of wood.

I looked for a light. I couldn't get up; in order to check my surroundings, I could only move my head. First, I confirmed that I was lying on a bed. Next to the bed lay a table with a candle and a pitcher. The candle appeared to be the room's sole light source.

An unfamiliar man was sitting in a chair next to the table. A brawny fellow with countless scars on his face, he looked around forty years old. From his attire, I could tell he was a man of relatively high social standing.

"So you're awake, Siegfried Vizzita? Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Rayle from Epic Seeker, a guild under the Laoravian government. Due to your sheer strength, I've been tasked with attending to you at all times."

If I recalled correctly, Laoravia was the Dungeon Alliance nation to the southwest. But I'd never heard of either Rayle or Epic Seeker. I had no idea why a complete stranger from a country I had nothing to do with was in front of me.

"You've attracted a lot of speculation. Some of it good, some of it bad. Lots of different thoughts. As such, you're in chains."

In chains? Panicking, I tried to move, but my body wouldn't oblige. Weights or the like were attached to my hands and feet.

Little by little, I came to grasp my situation. The more I examined my

surroundings, the more I realized this was no time to be so befuddled. My right hand was being drained of blood from a cut on my fingertip. Something like incense was burning in the corner, filling the room with smoke. It didn't have a strong odor, but one got the feeling it wasn't okay to breathe in.

My physical condition was clearly out of whack. Not only was my head fuzzy, but my body was also acting up. I repeatedly tried to muster all my might to get up, but my body refused.

"I don't blame you for being confused, but calm down," said Rayle after seeing me stir. He picked up the pitcher. "First things first: drink some water. I've got some ready for you."

"I... I don't need it," I said hoarsely. There was no telling what was in that water.

"I see. Well, if you can talk, that's fine by me."

He put the pitcher back. Given he wasn't insisting, he may have genuinely offered the water out of the goodness of his heart. I strove to keep a cool head, then recalled my own abilities. I'd up and forgotten my most basic kit. I could of course verify that the water hadn't been tampered with by using my menu-sight. Then I used Analyze on him.

【STATUS】

NAME: Rayle Thanks

HP: 312/322

MP: 0/0

CLASS: Fighter

LEVEL 21

STR 11.22

VIT 10.19

DEX 6.79

AGI 4.02

INT 6.60

MAG 0

APT 1.09

INNATE SKILLS: None

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Assessment 1.03

He hadn't lied about his name. Also, his menu told me he was one of this world's big wheels.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rayle. Could you please explain the situation to me?" I asked, trying my best to be polite.

"Hrm...you're awfully fast to return to your senses," he said, looking impressed. "Not that I'd expect any less from you. First, I'll tell you where we are. This is a building in the central area of Laoravia. It's the Headquarters of Epic Seeker. Since the guild works directly for the government, you can think yourself as being in Laoravia's hands."

Rayle's explanation helped me understand my predicament, and I started remembering what had happened before I'd lost consciousness too. I'd rescued Lastiara, returned to Vart, killed Alty, and lost to Palinchron.

But at the moment, there was one thing that trumped them all in importance.

"Thank you very much. I now know where I am. Please tell me, is there another kid who's also tied up?"

"I've heard tell of your comrades. At present, Lastiara Whoseyards, Diablo Sith, and Sera Radiant are on the lam. The girl named Maria is captive at this location."

Mr. Rayle had said he'd heard about them secondhand. I didn't know how much he'd been told. Choosing my words carefully, I asked him about my allies. "Is that girl safe?"

"She's not dead. More importantly—"

The door slammed open.

“Hiya, Rayle. So, ol’ Kanami’s finally up, huh?”

A cheery voice resounded through the room. A voice I’d heard before. One I couldn’t possibly mistake.

Palinchron! Palinchron Regacy!

“Palinchron, you must’ve been *monitoring*... Well, the boy’s awake, but...” Mr. Rayle looked over his shoulder and glared at him with a pained look.

“Ah, arghh! P-Palinchron! Youuu... YOUUUUUU!!!”

In my bid to get up, I mustered enough strength in my limbs that it could’ve torn them off had I not been inhibited. I also tried to cast *Blizzardmension* by forcibly raking together my disordered magic energy. But of course, I couldn’t get up and I couldn’t formulate any magic. All the same, I strained my body, intent on beating the man in front of me to the ground.

“Don’t fly off the handle, laddie. Look, I brought you some tasty food. Have yourself a bite; you need it.” Palinchron emerged smiling from the shadows, showing me the bread he was holding.

“Fuck you! Fuck you, Palinchron!!!”

I couldn’t stop my rage from gushing out at his flippant attitude. If it hadn’t been for him, everything would have been resolved. If only he hadn’t betrayed us! If only he hadn’t attacked Dia! If only he hadn’t appeared at the end! If he hadn’t, we would all be laughing it up together in Greeard!

That was how bitter I was. Bitter that I’d lost to Palinchron. I converted those feelings into magic cold and made it run wild in order to freeze all of my fetters. And in order to attack the man before my eyes, I unfurled my dimensional magic to the maximum extent. The iron shackles and chains trembled. As they clinked, they tried to negate my power, but I gradually grew more and more capable of sending my energy out, and my body was finally able to move, if only a little bit.

“What?! I put three magic locks and five times the usual restraints on him! There’s no way he could refine any magic energy—or move his body! Wait, hold on! Hold on, both of you!!!”

Sensing the ripples of magic energy I was emitting, Mr. Rayle sprang to his feet and cut in between us.

They were in my way. Not just Mr. Rayle, but also the magic locks and the constraints. I wrenched my body to its limit, refined the cold, and set about breaking both the magic locks and my fetters.

“Rayle, let me handle this. I’ve basically got the hang of my new powers now. Spellcast: *Demystifier’s Retuning!*”

Before I could break them, Palinchron’s hand touched my head.

“Urgh, not again!”

His energy filled my body, and I could feel my thoughts cooling down rapidly.

“It’s a simple med-spell. All it does is calm you down. Cool your jets, laddie.”

I looked at my menu right away.

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Confusion 9.81, Sedated 0.45

He was telling the truth; the spell was a simple sedative. Judging by my condition menu, I’d simply regained some of my composure. It wasn’t deleterious enough for me to resort to “???” Or at least, I hoped so.

It didn’t mean all my anger was gone. However, if I tried fighting Palinchron in this constrained state, I knew he would take the initiative, giving me no shot of winning. With my newfound presence of mind, I decided I’d better try negotiating instead. Palinchron sensed that that was where I was at and sat in a nearby chair.

“What do you say we get this started? It’s time for your laugh-a-minute cross-examination.”

Mr. Rayle heaved a sigh and nervously withdrew to the back. Palinchron took note of that before continuing.

“Right now, laddie, everyone sees you as a bundle of mysteries. I figured out

basically everything about your moves over the past few days through ley lines, so no giving me the runaround, got it? That being said, I didn't get to learn anything about you beyond the past few days."

Then he started addressing me like this was some detective drama.

"The boy who goes by Siegfried Vizzita suddenly appeared fourteen days ago, emerging from the Dungeon. And that's the mystery. You suddenly appeared *from the Dungeon*. As such, all we know about you and your tendencies, we know from these fourteen days. I checked every ley line in all five nations in the Dungeon Alliance, and there was no record of you entering Alliance territory or the Dungeon itself. You well and truly *appeared* in the Dungeon."

It was now clear that Palinchron was trying to unveil my true identity and background—which were, if viewed from a different angle, the cards hidden up my sleeve. As I listened, the gears in my head turned cold but fast.

"The upper reaches of the Alliance suspect Siegfried Vizzita of being the Guardian of Floor 30. The theory goes that somebody reached Floor 30 and, just like with Tida and Alty before you, caused the Guardian to come into existence. They surmised that that new Guardian started strolling into town. They do have two prior precedents, after all. From their perspective, you'd just be example number three."

"No, I'm human..." I got the feeling nothing good could come of them treating me like a monster.

"No use denying it. For the time being, you're being handled as a potential monster. Those fetters are proof."

He pretended to feel for me as he pointed at my fetters, smirking. I didn't let it get to me; instead, I voiced the excuse I'd calmly come up with.

"I'm a dimension mage. There's a dimensional spell called *Connection*. It allows me to enter the Dungeon without leaving any record of doing so. I'm a hundred percent human."

I chose to divulge the existence of *Connection* after reviewing which aces I didn't mind revealing and which I should keep hidden. I'd have liked to have kept *Connection* up my sleeve too, but you can't make an omelet without

breaking some eggs.

“Doesn’t add up. You only acquired *Connection* after you met Maria. I corroborated that with the proprietor of that store.”

“So what? I’m telling you that sort of thing is possible with dimensional magic.”

“I see. So you used a spell that’s similar to *Connection* to enter the Dungeon, did you? All right, then, I’ll bite. What’s that spell’s—”

“I’ve got no obligation to tell you. I’m just telling you that there’re plenty of ways to enter the Dungeon without being recorded.”

All I needed to do was suggest the possibility. If I made it plausible that I could be human, they couldn’t declare me a monster with certainty. That alone was enough.

Palinchron shrugged. “Well, guess you’ve got me there.”

He didn’t seem annoyed. As always, I couldn’t tell what he was after. What were his priorities? They were totally opaque to me. I’d thought he was just some hedonist, but then at times, he’d display some weird hang-up or fixation. Then, if I found myself assuming he was acting in accordance with some logical plan, he’d say it was just for his own jollies. When it came to how difficult it was to negotiate with him, he was top class.

I decided to ask about Maria for starters. I had to seize upon that, if for no other reason than as a lead-in for negotiations.

“Palinchron...how’s Maria?”

“She’s under restraint,” he said.

I’d already expected him to say that. “Let me see her...” I requested as calmly as possible.

Palinchron’s expression changed. He looked earnest but also somewhat amused.

“No can do. You’re both our precious, precious guinea pigs. There’s zero reason to let you two meet.”

“G-Guinea pigs?”

Upon hearing that term, I broke into a cold sweat and grimaced. It was the phrase I had most feared back when I’d first come to this world. When I was Level 1, I’d been so afraid of the possibility of becoming a guinea pig that it had restricted what I could do. To think the term would hit me now that I’d leveled up so much that the danger of it had receded from my mind...

“Yep. She’s the first entity in human history to fuse with a Guardian. Isn’t it obvious she’d get the guinea pig treatment?”

My heart lurched, cracks forming on it and blood spilling from them. It hurt so bad it made me want to shriek.

“Wait, hold on! Wait a second, Palinchron!” I shouted, worried and afraid.

That, I couldn’t accept. I was fine with reaping what I’d sown, but Maria was blameless. She’d done nothing to deserve this. It was all my fault. The onus lay on me for saving her and then abdicating my responsibility to her. As things stood, I’d already forced misfortune on her by taking her in. And now I was, however inadvertently, visiting yet more disaster upon her.

“What?”

“Maria’s just a kid! A frail, weak little girl! She hasn’t done anything wrong! Please let her be! She doesn’t deserve to suffer any more than she already has!”

“Ha ha! A frail, weak little girl? You do realize that thanks to you, laddie, she’s become a monster that not even whole bands of divers could hope to beat? That’s right. Absolutely all of this is thanks to you.”

“Right, it’s my fault! It was all me! So I’m begging you, let her be! I don’t mind if I become your guinea pig! I was lying; I’m NOT just an ordinary human! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you everything—so please, just spare her!” I screamed, jettisoning all pride. I didn’t have a leg to stand on. Any thought of negotiation disappeared from my mind. All that was left in my brain was the fact that my promise to make Maria happy was funneling down the drain.

“You’re not an ordinary human? Yeah, we kind of know that already. And now you’re saying you’ll become the guinea pig in her stead? Don’t be a moron.

You're both guinea pigs. Why would we refrain from researching either of you?"

That reply stomped me into the bowels of hell. Sheer horror made me feel as if I was nosediving from the clouds above, high, high in the air. It was then that I realized I'd only *thought* I'd regained my composure.

The moment I had lost to Palinchron, everything had been decided. Maria and I had fallen into his clutches, and now we had no freedom. Nor was there any room for negotiation.

"Ah, ahhhh, aughhh..." I moaned, the remorse overwhelming.

At this rate, Maria was going to become a lab rat. And it was all my fault. This had all started when I'd saved Maria from slavery for my own ends. I'd foolishly offered her my hand, and now she was about to succumb to a fate worse than dying as a slave. I didn't know much, but one thing I did know was that being a research subject meant she'd have even less dignity than a slave. And who was the one who'd put her in that position? Me. If it hadn't been for me, nothing like this would have befallen her.

I made everybody around me miserable. If Maria had never touched the Dungeon, Alty wouldn't have set her sights on her. If Alty hadn't set her sights on her, then Maria wouldn't have been taken captive alongside me.

Upon further reflection, Dia was much the same. If he'd never met me, he would never have lost that arm. I'd taken them both into the Dungeon, and they'd both suffered for it.

It was agonizing. I was plenty scared enough for myself. To have dragged other people into this only made that fear so many times worse.

It's no use. At this rate, I won't be able to endure it. "???" is gonna trigger on me. I need to look on the bright side. Remember the good things that happened. It's not over just yet. It's too soon to despair. I've got comrades. Allies. I've still got Lastiara. I can proudly say I managed to save her, if no one else. I can say with certainty that I did some good in this world. She's safe and sound now. And given both her strength and her personality, once she's back in fighting form and learns of our predicament, she'll come to rescue us. I know it.

It's not over!

I quit my moaning, took some deep breaths, and consolidated the information I needed to surmount this situation.

“Hm, not quite there, huh? So you’ve still got some hope left—milady and the rest,” muttered Palinchron expressionlessly, before prodding me with his next words. “Question is, are they coming to your rescue? Neither milady nor the Apostle are gonna recover that quickly, you know.”

I understood right away that he was trying to crush my hopes, so I replied, undaunted, “There’s also Mr. Hine...and Ms. Radiant.”

“Nope, Hine’s dead.”

...

“He... He’s dead?”

But Palinchron left it at that, shifting right to the next thing. “Sera can’t be free to move either. She has milady and the Apostle to guard, after all. Having lost their strongest pawn in Hine, they’ve got no means of rescuing you two,” he said casually.

But none of the rest of what he said entered my brain. “Wait, hold on. Mr. Hine’s dead?”

“Yep. That idiot cashed in his life to let the other three escape. And then he ate it,” Palinchron replied curtly.

I could feel any semblance of composure crumbling. My heart was pounding, and the sweat felt nasty on my skin. I had no reason to believe him. Take my sworn enemy at his word? What kind of nonsense would that be? But my shallow, rapid breathing belied my logic.

“Ha, ha ha, oh really? Him of all people, dead? You want me to believe that?”

By implying that Mr. Hine was too strong to die, I was trying to brush Palinchron’s words aside. This was the Celestial Knight who was in contention for the mightiest of them all. I wanted to believe there was no way he could fall.

“He’s dead, all right. He was already at his limit when he arrived at the cathedral. That’s all there is to it.”

The only time my adversary wasn’t smiling was when he was speaking of

Hine's death.

"You lie. How could I believe such—"

"Hine's dead, and Pheydelt's plot is still trucking. That's the hole they're in now. They're on the run. Isn't it unfair of you to want *them* to come save *you*?"

There he was, pointing out how unlikely our rescue was. And he made sure to add that it wasn't the only piece of bad news.

"If anything, you're the one who should be swooping in to save *them*. As the big righteous hero who whisked the princess out of Whoseyards, it's your responsibility to go bail them out. Otherwise, they'll fall into Pheydelt's and his cronies' hands sooner or later."

He was right. It wasn't as though Lastiara and her group were now in the clear just because I'd taken them out of the cathedral. In fact, now that they were on the lam, their troubles were only beginning. If things had gone according to plan, I could have made our life on the run an easy one by making use of *Connection*. But I wasn't at their side.

However overpowered Lastiara and Dia were in their own right, I didn't know if they had any means of handling the waves of people the government would constantly send their way over a long stretch of time. For all I knew, Whoseyards might capture Lastiara and Dia the very next day.

"Can those three bunglers who're so ignorant about the world really give their Whoseyards pursuers the slip forever? Not a single one of them seems the cunning type."

Palinchron smiled maliciously and got to his feet. Then, as he spoke, he slowly walked to the dark side of the room.

"I'd love to join the hunt for the jewelculus and the Apostle myself, but now that the hero of legend and the half-Guardian are in our lap, I'll try not to be too greedy. We've got enough material to experiment with."

I heard a fleshy squishing sound. It gave me the willies.

Palinchron picked up an object in a corner of the room and leisurely brought it back over to me. I couldn't make it out in the darkness. I could tell the object

was round, but nothing else. He took a seat again.

“First things first, why don’t I get some use out of Hine’s body?”

He used the candle to cast light on the round object. It was a human head. The cranium of a good-looking blond man who was sleeping with a peaceful expression. There was no mistaking him—this was the head of Hine Hellvilleshine.

“Ah, arghh, aughh!”

Hair of bright gold hung over his eyes, and his cheeks were covered with a number of scratches. Red blood was dripping from his mouth...and there was nothing below his neck.

The head was that of a fairy tale-handsome prince. And it was the head of a dead man. A head so mercilessly, ruthlessly devoid of life.

“Ha ha. By using the *materials* we’ve got here, creating a being to surpass Lastiara Whoseyards is no pipe dream. I’ve got no reason to concern myself with milady or the Apostle!”

Palinchron had just referred to Mr. Hine’s head as a “material.” And I was sure that was exactly what Maria and I were to him too. I grimaced when it fully dawned on me in what way he’d be using his guinea pigs. I didn’t need a mirror to be able to tell. My face was no doubt so contorted with terror and grief that it was piteous to behold.

My pool of knowledge was broad but shallow; pointlessly, my imagination went to work. The severed head before my eyes conjured up images of dissection and disassembly. Textbook photos of a frog being cut open, which I had seen when I was younger, bubbled up into mind. I imagined myself in the frog’s place, and a small shriek rose from the back of my throat.

Am I gonna die too? Am I gonna die just like Mr. Hine?

Am I gonna die in a world separated from my sister? Am I gonna die a dog’s death, without a shred of human dignity?

And am I gonna end up dragging the girl who looks just like Hitaki, the girl I swore I’d make happy, down with me?

Am I gonna leave behind Lastiara, Dia, and everybody I tried to protect, dying with my goals unfulfilled?

Am I gonna die?

The human head thrust under my nose tolled as a death knell in my skull.

This is the end. The end. In other words, I'm gonna die.

I'm gonna die.

I'm gonna die.

I'm gonna DIE.

I'm DEA—

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

My desire not to die tripped “???” And I didn't have the strength to fight it. It ran away from me.

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Confusion 10.82, Sedated 0.12

My Confusion had hit the double digits—the threshold that my gut had told me to avoid. And a notification I'd never seen before displayed in my field of view:

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Your Confusion has reached 10.00, surpassing ???'s limit. Commencing **Repayment**. The Confusion that you accumulated

will be converted to your original emotions.

It was all getting “paid back.”

“Wait, huh? Ah, aughh, aghhh...”

Repayment? I couldn’t understand what that meant at first. I was forced to experience it personally before I comprehended it on an intellectual level.

Then, everything broke down. My thoughts, a violent torrent. A panoply of negative emotions whirled tempestuously. Feelings I had felt in the past came roaring back, exactly as I’d felt them then.

The despair of being used as bait for a savage beast hit me like a ton of bricks. The apocalyptic isolation of being alone in this world enveloped me. The anxiety that I might lose my beloved sister surged within me. The humiliation of being toyed with by nefarious means suffused my mind. The stress of the time I had been wrapped up in an outrageous atrocity gnawed at my soul. The icky sensation of one’s own world being forcibly painted over engulfed me. The fear of death roused by facing an entity of tremendous might jammed ice into my spine. Instances of mind pollution caused by mental magic recurred. And my previously buried infatuation for Lastiara was unearthed.

A mass of emotions colossal enough to beckon death was returned to me all at once.

“Ah, ahhh, AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

A mere “repayment” this was not. It came with *interest*. The emotions all intertwined, magnifying one another. This wasn’t simple addition. This was multiplication. And the exponentially swollen tumor of horrible feelings filled my heart to bursting.

My spirit rewound all the way back to that first day I had stumbled through the Dungeon, to the moment I was almost eaten by a wolf after being left to rot by fellow human beings. And now all of the negative emotions I’d experienced from that point up until today hammered into that weaker spirit. The storm of my psyche raged far beyond any single person’s maximum tolerance.

“H-Hey, pal. What’s gotten into you all of a sudd—”

“AAAAAGHHHH!!! Make it stop! I can’t take it! I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! Why?! Tell me! Why’s it gotta be this way?! What about me isn’t good enough?! Why did this happen?! WHYYYYY?!!!”

Palinchron was saying something. It sounded faint and distant to my ears. I didn’t have the composure to process any of it.

I... I can’t breathe...

I was gulping down so much air, but it didn’t fill my lungs one micron. It was unrelenting. My diaphragm spasmed. More air escaped me with each convulsion. Lacking oxygen, I panicked and tried to draw breath again, which only made my diaphragm spasm even more. Before long, it went beyond convulsions into outright pain. My whole body writhed in agony.

“Wh-Whoa there, laddie, you telling me Hine’s corpse is that upsetting to you?! Or is it death itself that’s so taboo?!”

His voice felt distant. Worlds away, even. All that time, a worrying amount of sweat cascaded from me, robbing heat from my body, which hadn’t been feeling hot to begin with.

And indeed, my body wasn’t flushed with heat. That much was certain. But for some reason, my brain felt it, and I couldn’t stop sweating. Perhaps my brain misinterpreted the burning murk of my negative emotions as heat. It was like being made to drink boiling oil while taking a shower of skin-peeling ice water.

It was unbearable. It was intolerable. I wanted to faint right that second, but the pain wouldn’t allow me to. I knew that exerting myself would hurt, but I couldn’t endure my body falling to pieces, and I ended up tensing up anyway—I gritted my teeth and twisted my neck as far as it would go. My eyes were literally, not figuratively, threatening to pop out.

The anguish. The agony. The PAIN.

It was so bad, I could die! *It’s so bad I’m seriously gonna die!*

“Oh, shit! Palinchron! I thought you said you were going to take your time whittling the boy down! I thought he was irreplaceable! At this rate, his heart’s gonna split in two!”

“I KNOW, okay?! Just shut up for a second, Rayle! Tch! Never would have thought I’d end up having to use Tida’s mental magic to *heal!*”

Ahh, aughh, can people... Can people really come this close to death just from their mental state?

Time after time in media like dramas and comics, I’d seen characters fall into shock. It looked quite physically harrowing, but I’d thought it was pure fiction. I’d figured mere matters of the heart could never cause me *this* much pain.

Well, I was wrong. I’d only thought that way because I was immature. I didn’t know until I experienced it myself.

It was no exaggeration. It felt like I might stop breathing altogether at any moment. I felt like my heart might break. My consciousness ebbed due to the knives the pain had stuck into me. It hurt so horrifically that it made me want to scratch out my throat. If my carotid artery was severed in the process, so be it. If death would release me from this torment, then as things stood, my hands were ready and willing to reach for my neck.

Ahh, of course. Death. I’ll just die. That’s right. If I die, the pain will end. I can rest again. I can rest...

My hand reached for death—

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

The hand reaching for my neck froze up.

Ah, huh, wait, what?

The pain is too much. Put me out of my misery.

I can’t take it anymore. So let me die—

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

No, stop, please, no...

You can activate till the cows come home; it won't do a thing for me. How do you not realize that?

Even if "???" triggers ten times over, it can't erase all of the negative emotions I got from the repayment. With the interest added, there's more to erase than it ever took from me to begin with!

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

At this rate, I'll get slapped with another "Repayment," and the added interest will only make the negative emotions balloon even more. It's counter-

productive. Do you not even understand that much?

Ahh, arghh... Aughhhh! In other words...

In other words, “???” is defective.

I’m gonna get Repayment-ed all over again!

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

【THE FOLLOWING SKILL HAS BEEN ACTIVATED: ???】

Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.

+1.00 to Confusion.

It’s no use.

If that massive hurricane of negative emotions gets any larger, I won’t be able to bear it.

I’m toast.

“Spellcast: Deprived Martyr! Spellcast: Demystifier’s Retuning!”

Palinchron’s voice pushed my “???” skill back into its box. And a small—and I did mean *small*—light shone dimly on the bottom of the sludgy darkness.

“Kanami, buddy! There’s still hope! If you die on us, that’s putting us in a

bind!”

The man I loathed the most in all the world was shouting at me not to despair. By spending a vast amount of magic energy, he was crafting a spell to save my crumbling psyche. For the first time, I witnessed Palinchron being less aloof.

“Don’t despair! It’s not over for you yet! Stay awake so you can listen to what I’ve got to say!”

His spell tethered my consciousness to the outside world. The frighteningly strong magic energy streamed into my body. But that wasn’t a bad thing; it was washing away the negative emotions that were eating away at me. I got the sense that through the flow of his magic energy, the pain all throughout my body was abating. My anxiety dissipated, my heart returned to normal, and I stopped sweating profusely.

It gave me the space to start thinking again, albeit only to a small extent.

“Ah, ahhh...” My mind recovered in the nick of time.

“Hff... hfff... The Vigesimal Trial is yet to come. Did I give him a bit too much of a scare?”

I opened my eyes slightly and was greeted by the sight of Palinchron panting hard. He didn’t hide how flustered he was as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Mr. Rayle was likewise perturbed.

“Palinchron...can we execute the plan with the boy in such a state?”

A pause. “We’ve got no choice but to adjust things to go softer on him than we’d planned. Unless we give him all the hope he could want, the lad’s mind might just go necrotic on us.”

I heard the words “execute the plan” and “adjust things,” but I didn’t have the wherewithal to analyze what they were saying. I may have evaded death, but my body wouldn’t budge an inch. It seemed as though it was as utterly worn out as my heart.

The magic energy that had stabilized my mental state was now rushing every which way in order to tamper with it. This energy wasn’t the kind that had kept

me alive. It was more unpleasant than that, and therefore much more Palinchron.

“Urgh...”

Even if it spared my life, having my mind tampered with by the guy was hard to accept. I tried fighting it with all my might, but there was no way out of it, and not just because of my restraints. The repeated use of “???” had left both mind and body on the verge of collapse.

Seeing me trying to muster some strength, Palinchron’s expression turned distressed. “Kanami, ol’ chum, please just take it lying down... If you do, I’ll spare little miss Maria. I promise you she’ll be safe.”

Though my mind was at death’s door, I talked back to him. “Ah, agh...like...like I can believe you...”

“I’m no liar. I keep my promises. As I let slip earlier, if you die on us, we’re the ones in a fix, and that’s the honest truth. If you commit suicide by resisting, we’ll be extremely badly off. So I’m telling you that in exchange for you not committing suicide, I’ll spare the little lady.”

Palinchron was speaking not in his usual mocking tone but earnestly instead. It appeared that my “???” skill running wild like that had changed his line of thinking more than I’d anticipated.

“You expect me to believe that?” I replied. “But I...”

He could change his attitude all he wanted—there was no way I’d take him at his word. Yet given my current predicament, I was forced to accede to his sweet talk.

“But I haven’t got a choice.”

I had half a mind to die just to spite him, but now that he’d thrown Maria into the equation, I couldn’t. I had a duty to do whatever was in my power for her. So I used the last of my strength to threaten him.

“L-Listen to me, Palinchron! If you break your promise, I’m gonna kill you! I swear I’m gonna kill you! No matter what! You’re dead!!!”

“The fact that’s the extent of what you’d do to me just proves what a kind

soul you are,” he said with a nonchalant expression. “For real, though...”

If anything, he seemed relieved to hear my threats. Then, having lost the last of my strength, I became unable to even keep my eyes open.

“Don’t worry your head so much over her. I made a promise to little miss Alty as well... Granted, she won’t be saved in the way you might prefer.”

My consciousness was fading. I knew that in all likelihood, Palinchron’s mental magic would be invading me down to my very flesh and blood. I’d be affected the same way Lastiara and Mr. Hine had been.

“You’re gonna tinker with my heart, right?” I asked quietly as it all grew hazy.

“You don’t gotta lose sleep over it. I ain’t gonna touch the core of Aikawa Kanami. It’s too precious to me. I’m just gonna nudge you in a bit of a different direction and have you thinking some stuff that’s not strictly true.”

Oh, spare me. “Not strictly true” my ass. It’s because of little misunderstandings that everybody and their mom had to get hurt...

“Am I gonna end up like Mr. Hine?”

“No, your case is a mite different from his. If I had to compare it, it’ll be more in the realm of what I did to Alty or Maria. Only stronger, as I’ll be doing it with the power of the Thief of Darkness’s Essence added on top.”

“Why you—”

I could’ve never imagined he would lay out so many of his misdeeds right then and there. He’d even put his filthy mitts on Alty! I was shocked and incensed. But I didn’t have the strength to fight.

Palinchron’s magic energy, and his energy alone, expanded and flowed into me. “Right then, let’s get started. First up is your skills. They’re too pesky and they’ve got to go.”

The energy permeated my body, and my free will flaked to pieces. Without the permission of the supposed owner of my body, Palinchron’s tentacles of malice clutched my very soul. That power had merged with the power of the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, which made it even stronger than the spells Tida had once cast on me.

It felt like it took forever and only a second at the same time. And then I saw the text on the back of my eyelids.

【??? HAS BEEN SEALED AWAY】

【??? HAS BEEN SEALED AWAY】

I'd wanted to hold fast to consciousness for as long as possible, but now I was at my limit. I could hear a voice, but I couldn't tell if it was near or far.

"Phew... guess I managed to do something about those dodgy unique skills of his, huh? I figure he really must've been despairing, since my magic coursed through him nice and smooth. Gotta say, though, the price I had to pay still smarts."

The notifications, his voice, they reached my brain, but I was in no state to process what they meant. I was so sleepy, as if I hadn't slept in days and days...

"Now then, all that's left is..."

My consciousness fell to the bottom of the sandlands of slumber and was sinking deeper still. Resistance was beyond me. All I could do was check my menu one last time as I sank.

【STATUS】

Confusion: 7.29

Memory Alteration: 2.00

Mind Taint: 2.00

Recognition Inhibitor: 2.00

Sealed: 4.00

Overdoing it much?

Looking at my Condition menu, I was aghast at the pains Palinchron had taken to cage me in.

And with that as my last conscious thought, I relinquished the waking world.

And that was how my fight in this alien world came to an end. My struggle lasted two weeks. I'd managed to get up to Floor 24 of the Dungeon. On the fourteenth day, the Day of the Blessed Birth, I'd lost to the Thief of Darkness's Essence, my body taken captive by Palinchron Regacy.

In the end, I had used "???" more than ten times, and all the negative emotions it had erased came back with a vengeance. My ally Maria was captured as well, and Lastiara's and Dia's fates remained unspecified.

This was how all the proverbial debt I'd accrued had been squared. This was the result of a mere high schooler like me getting lost in another world and fighting his hardest.

I snorted at how pathetic my other world report card was as I fell farther and farther down into darkness.

Augh...what could I have done better, I wonder?

I wasn't asking anyone in particular. I wasn't expecting a response. I was just talking to myself.

And yet, I could have sworn I heard a voice reply back from amid the black void:

"____, _____. _____!"

I couldn't tell whose voice it was. But it felt familiar somehow.

I got the feeling this voice was very important to me...



I didn't know what time it was anymore. Nor did I know where I was.

Within that cavity of total darkness, I looked inward.

Boy, did I mess up.

Where exactly did I go wrong?

I don't think there were any issues in the battle department. And there shouldn't have been any issues with my Dungeon diving either.

...

I know where I went wrong...

It was my rapport with other people.

I never opened up to anyone. While I did try to use them to my own ends, I never asked for their help. And that's because I never felt the need to crawl out of my shell and become vulnerable.

But thanks to that policy, I'd lost my inner calm so many times. I'd gotten it into my head that I was the strongest thing around just because I could see the numbers in people's menus, and that had steered me wrong. I'd thought I was the only one who could do anything. It never occurred to me to rely on anybody else for anything. I looked down on Maria, naturally, but I also looked down on even Dia and Lastiara as "weaker than me." I saved them, I helped them, but I never thought I would need saving *by* them.

And now, I understand.

I should have consulted with someone. I should have been okay with crying on their shoulder. I should have been more real about how I was feeling. The ideal expression of that, I guess, was Mr. Krowe or the manager of the pub. If I'd just confided in an adult who had their head on their shoulders, things would surely have concluded differently. But I only ever truly interacted with other young people brimming with talent and ability, and I took on more than I could chew, which was another underlying cause.

I got the sense that the more talented somebody was, the more they suffered from some emotional defect. I should have looked for somebody more reliable and dependable, even if their abilities were average.

Instead, I'd spent my days never opening up to my comrades, and as a result, I'd let all the debt incurred aggregate to a critical mass on the Day of the Blessed Birth. The moment I started running at a deficit, I could only have saved either Lastiara or Maria on that day. Put simply, I was already in checkmate by that point. I tried to go beyond my limits saving the second of the girls who needed saving, and Palinchron pounced on the opening that that provided.

End of the line. I lose.

.....

.....

.....

But if I'm ever back...

If I get another chance, I won't make that mistake again. Not on your life.

I'll open up my heart, believe in people, and tell the truth.

I'll live my life as Aikawa Kanami.

I won't hide behind a pretend name like Siegfried Vizzita.

I swear it.

Next time, I won't walk the wrong path! No way, no how!

Never again! Mark my words!

Mark my words...

But my vow faded into the darkness. And if I did get a second chance, it wasn't as though I'd remember I made it. Yet all the same, I swore it to myself. I couldn't bear it otherwise. For the sake of the sister who was waiting for me, the sake of the allies I'd failed to save, and my own sake, I continued swearing oaths to myself in the black abyss.

And so long as I had that vow, the story would not come to an end. The wheel of fate was still turning.

Until I could realize my desire, the sound of that ever-rolling wheel wouldn't cease. And of course it wouldn't. I had yet to reach the deepest level. I had yet to reach the truth.

Why did the Dungeon exist? What were the mechanisms underpinning this world? What was the source of my power? What were the memories of the distant past? I didn't know a single one of those answers. And as such, the story must continue.

Siegfried Vizzita was going to start over as Aikawa Kanami. The setting was changing to Laoravia, and I was going to forget about my own dearest wish, imprisoned in the cage of this trial. Thus would the story press forward.

My Dungeon diving wasn't over just yet.

Afterword

I'm sorry.

Tarisa Warinai here, an author who's always aiming for a happy ending.

The main story has finally reached a stopping point in a variety of ways. Incidentally, the finale of volume 3 may have seemed like the end of the world for Kanami, but the story does continue. This story's got legs. Or maybe I should say that I just want it to continue up to the point where the deepest level is reached. It's *that* kind of story, but please let me keep it going (and I mean that sincerely). By your good graces do I keep writing...

I think many of you fine folks might be thinking, "If they're going to start this afterword by apologizing, they should've never crafted a plot like this to begin with." But despite that, this is the kind of story I wanted to write. I wanted to write the portal fantasy tale of an overpowered protagonist who experiences joy and sorrow in equal measure alongside cute girls (the girls part is important). He wins some and loses some. Some things go well, and some things go poorly. That was the type of story I wished to pen.

Now to change tack—it's time to make this afterword a cheery one. Volume 4 will mark a new saga in the series, featuring a new setting for our hero, who's reborn to the world as Aikawa Kanami. Please look forward to his exploits! (That's the feel I'm going for now.)

As you gleaned from the ending of this volume, the next country where the story will unfold is neither Vart nor Whoseyards, but the nation of Laoravia. I thought it would be a shame to set the story in a fantasy world and not get to tour it, so here we are. I'm going to have our hero complete the tour of all five nations in the Dungeon Alliance eventually. And of course, I'll have him flirt with cute girls in every locale as we go. You can thank me later, Kanami.

Needless to say, volume 4 will bring with it a new girl in the heroine role and a new protector figure, so please look forward to that too. The new heroine was voted number one in the web version reader poll. I understand the protector

figure's popularity, but the new heroine's popularity is still an enigma to me. Perhaps she'll be the one on the cover of volume 4? If she is, then unlike Maria before her, I can't even guess what sort of expression she'll have.

Speaking of which, the cover of this volume: I'd wanted Maria to be smiling while crying tears of blood, but I got yelled at for that idea. Instead, we got a more wonderful cover than that idea would have yielded. It has a lot of aspects that are pregnant with meaning, which is the sort of thing I like. I can't even begin to thank Ukai-san, who illustrated this gorgeous cover, enough. A red-cheeked Maria throwing flowers into a fire while our hero sits in a chair behind her. The fact that he's so listless on the cover is me being self-indulgent. I can't thank Ukai-san enough for including that detail too. I'm sure that I'm not the only one who's satisfied with this cover—Maria would be too, I think. And that's because this cover is the representation of her vision of happiness. For those of you who have the what-if story where Maria wins, this is exactly that. You can thank me later, Maria.

Thanks to Maria and her cover, this afterword got to end on a cheerier note. If the volume publication progresses smoothly, there may come a day when I get to say, "You can thank me later, Dia," or "You can thank me later, Lastiara," or "You can thank me later, Palinchron." And that's a thing of beauty.

I've received the illustrations my heart's desired over the course of these past three volumes, and my appetite for more is insatiable. Nothing has changed since the afterword in the last volume. *Ahh, I wanna see an illustration of that scene between Lastiara and Kanami in the print version...* I crave them so much I can hardly bear it. And while I'm at it, I'd like to be able to say, "You can thank me later, Snow" too. Such is my current state of being.

The promotional catchphrase I have in order to keep the print version volumes coming is: "The overpowered protagonist summoned to another world goes on a thrilling adventure with cute girls who are full of charm. Now let's dive down to the deepest level of the enormous Dungeon and grant our hero's wish to return to the world he calls home! Volumes 1, 2, and 3 now on sale!" Or something like that. Maybe. I don't know; marketing's hard.

Before I knew it, this afterword's turned into nothing but a bundle of all my wants. My apologies.

Forgive me for being like this; I sincerely hope you'll keep supporting me. The only reason I've made it to volume 3 like I always wanted is because of all of you who picked this book up and all of the lovely people who sent me support and advice and the like through the web version. Every time I take an already-published volume in hand, my body trembles with gratitude.

A huge thank you to all of you. I pray that we can meet again in volume 4.

I'VE EVEN FORGOTTEN
MASTER'S NAME NOW.
BUT I DON'T MIND.

AFTER ALL, I'M SURE THIS LOVE
WILL LAST FOREVER AND EVER.

I'M JUST GOING TO BE HERE,
KEEPING MY WORLD WARM BY
STOKING THE FLAMES OF MY
TRAGIC LOVE.





Bonus Short Stories

Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 3

How quaint that I should be surprised by the immensity of Eltraliew Academy's dining hall, when there was a bevy of other such startlers. The classrooms, for one. You'd expect to see classrooms in an academy, of course, but these had so much that was odd about them. Not only were they just plain huge, their numbers, varieties, and facilities were also beyond the ordinary. The academy had spent their funds so lavishly that the place looked a lot more like a research lab than it did any educational institution.

Plus, while the fact that the instructor was at the head of the room waving their pointer thing around was no different from how lessons worked in my world, the sides and rear section of the room were very weird indeed. Assistant teachers were standing in two lines, as were the servants of the nobles among the students. There were even more people than in those days back in my world where parents had stood in on a class.

Seated at a long table at the center of the classroom, I'd been nothing but distracted by how packed the room was and all the eyes everywhere. However, the (for lack of a better word) "friends" who were sitting through the lesson beside me looked pretty nonchalant and unruffled, making me, outworlder that I was, the odd one out. The boy who'd become friends with me just the other day, Liner Hellvilleshine, saw the object by my hands and praised me like he always did.

"You really are great at this, senpai. Maybe this sort of thing's your forte?"

He was the only one in this academy who called me "senpai." The day I had set my sights on him in that dining hall, I'd proposed that we rig a match between us. I'd practically gone down on my knees; I'd begged and begged and begged. As a result of that painfully pathetic pleading, I'd earned a strange measure of trust from him, and before I knew it, we'd become friends, picking

the same electives when the times matched. I couldn't put my finger on why, but we got along swimmingly. So much so, in fact, that perhaps we'd enjoyed a deep bond in a different life. Crazy thought, I know.

"Hmm, my forte, huh? I dunno. It might be because I learned similar material someplace else," I said, keeping it vague from a lack of confidence.

The lesson we were currently taking was on the creation of magical tools. To further clarify, it was a lesson under the broader subject of alchemy. For an outworlder like me, the lessons at this academy were all gobbledygook (and I didn't have the money to buy textbooks to begin with), so picking this course might have been a stroke of luck for me, since what we were doing was fairly akin to normal craft-making. In addition, the magic formulas we wrote into the magic tools were slightly reminiscent of mathematical equations. In any case, I had an affinity for the subject matter. Maybe Liner was right. Maybe it was okay for me to take pride in this and call it my forte after all.

"Your workmanship is way different from mine. I think it's a safe bet you'll get a good grade for it."

"Then how about we swap? I'll give you this guy, and in exchange, you throw our duel?"

"I'm sorry. I'm too scared of my sister." Liner averted his eyes.

This was what he'd been like the whole time. While it sucked big time that I couldn't earn any money through a duel, I didn't want to lose my precious friend, so I didn't force the issue.

Having no other choice, I approached the girl sitting next to me, opposite Liner, with the same idea. She herself was staring at the magic tool.

"Annius, you're not the best at this kinda thing, right? I'll give you mine, so—"

"I'll pass. This lesson isn't a required subject or anything. And if I find myself in a pinch, I can just make do using my clan's influence. You do know how loaded I am, don't you?"

"Dammit," I whispered. "What point is there being friends with you people?"

Annius's sharp hearing picked up on what I said, and she smirked. "Oh, honey,

I don't know if you can get away with saying such things. Who was it who treated you to some food when you were on the brink of starvation, hmm, Kanami? I *can* stop feeding you, you know?"

As I was currently being given the cold shoulder by all of my social betters, I couldn't so much as set up a duel. And given how penniless I was, if she left me to the wolves, I was screwed.

"You treated me, Lady Annius, ma'am. I'm sorry I was being sassy."

"Apology accepted. I'll grace you with some white bread later."

"Urgh. Thank you ever so kindly..."

"Heh heh, that's what I like to hear!"

Jeez, talk about frustrating!

"I really do feel a kinship with you, senpai..."

Annus had made me look so uncool before my kohai to boot. *One of these days, I'll make this girl regret crossing me!*

While Annus was treating me as her plaything, poking me on the cheek, the lesson on magic tools drew to a close. When the main teacher saw my submission, he said, "I see. I guess this makes the Headmaster backing you make sense. Tch."

And then, for some reason, he rated Liner's and Annus's submissions higher than mine, even though theirs were the worst in the whole class.

This academy blows chunks. I can't.

Our morning lesson now behind us, we spent our afternoon ambling aimlessly around. Then my daily search for somebody who'd take up a duel began.

"Let's start with safe choices today too. There's a variety of people, so eventually, it'll happen for you."

Using Annus's and Liner's connections, I made the acquaintance of select students one by one. Naturally, I wasn't able to get friendly responses from them. That was because they perceived me as the kid who, immediately after transferring, got cocky and beat students whose families were of stupidly high

standing despite being so low level. As such, much of the student body figured that if they dueled me, the well-to-do ones would zero in on them. Nor were there any who seemed to want to be friends with me.

“Dammit. Another day with nothing to show for it.”

“Even a kid like me with special circumstances can’t get you any yeses. I had a feeling...”

“Something wrong, Liner?”

“There’s a possibility that somebody is poisoning the well. Like, for example, a student from a leading noble house who doesn’t think highly of relative lowborns like us. Ah!”

Liner spotted some girls walking toward us from the other side of the hall and he slipped off to the side. I turned to find Annus had too. In fact, every one of the students was looking at them now. I followed suit, yet—

“How do you do? You’re still searching for a partner to duel with, isn’t that right, Monsieur Aikawa?” said an extremely self-important-looking girl. “I must say, however, do you feel no shame, looking for somebody who will throw the duel for you?”

Her facial features looked dignified, and her hair was long and a light crimson in color. The Name section of her menu told me she was Karamia Arrace. If I remembered correctly, the Arrace Clan was one of the foremost noble houses in all the Dungeon Alliance.

“She’s the granddaughter of the current Blademaster,” whispered Liner.

As a descendant of such a big name, this “Blademaster” person, she was considered a “heroine,” and she had a glittering future set before her on a platter. Her Level had reached 20, which placed her firmly outside the mold of a mere student. She was one reason they called it “the year of miracles.” She was so, so beyond my reach.

And now, someone of her stature was picking a fight with me...not knowing that the bad blood between us would be the cause of endless remorse to come.

Where Good Sir Hine Did Fight

In the end, this fight had been taken to the highest echelon.

“Sehr Wind!!!” I shouted, the cathedral at my back.

The last of the magic rings on my fingers shattered to pieces, unleashing a full-energy blast of wind magic.

My magic teacher, Vice-Head Monet, countered my spell all too breezily.
“Sehr Wynd.”

“Urgh!”

The wind scattered, the magic energy erased. In the wake of the now-nonexistent spell, stalwart knights pressed in on me. They came at me like a tempest; from the right, the black-armored Head Knight Pelsiona Quaygar, and from the left, the extensible magic blade of Ragne Kyquora.

I didn’t possess a means by which to defend against a simultaneous attack from both people. By continually retreating in large leaps, I was able to somehow avoid sustaining a fatal wound.

As we battled, the Head Knight kept shouting at me. They spoke for all the other knights as they swung their sword. “Why, Hine?! I saw so much promise in you! I thought you would be the knight to stand with all of Whoseyards on your shoulders!!!”

“I’m sorry. That’s something I cannot do,” I murmured even as I struggled.

At that, the ferocity of the Head Knight’s offensive only intensified. So much so that even Ragne, who was attacking me alongside them, was taken aback.

“You’re the one who told me that one day, as the firstborn son of the Hellvilleshines, you’d become a worthy knight of Whoseyards, aren’t you?! That’s the reason I—”

“I’m sorry. That was a lie,” I said matter-of-factly as I swung my own sword. I no longer felt any need to lie to myself like that. But while that in and of itself was refreshing, confessing to betraying the solicitude of the senior knight I held in such esteem did pain my heart. Their blade didn’t reach me; what was truly gashing me was this sense of guilt.

Their onslaught pushed me all the way back to the gate that was the cathedral's entrance. Having nowhere to run against five of the Seven Celestial Knights wasn't a great spot to be in. As such, I addressed the youngest among them in my vain struggle.

"Ragne, you at least understand where I'm coming from, don't you?"

"Wait, huh? I, err..." Shaken, she stopped in her tracks.

"And you, Sera," I continued. "It looks like it goes without saying for you."

Sera was the one who was at the very rear of the five, and the one who was grimacing the most. She was currently in significant distress, not knowing what was the right choice to make. She was torn, and that manifested as an incensed expression on her face. Much like how I had looked moments ago.

"Eyes on *me*, Hine!" fumed the Head Knight. "You talk to *me* first!"

They put their whole body into their next attack, forcing me inside the cathedral in order to evade it. The vestibule was quiet. The vestiges of magic energy lingering in the cathedral clued me into Palinchron's intervention.

Meanwhile, the knights' savage assault was unrelenting. Leading the pack was the Head Knight, with Ragne and Mr. Hopes backing them up. Behind those three, Mr. Monet was constantly ready with the spellcasting, so this fight was tough enough to have me on the urge of spewing bile. My body and magic energy were both past their limits, and I could faint at any moment. But that was fine by me. That was good and proper.

"You're being ridiculous, Hine!" said the Head Knight. "Do you think nothing of *dying*?!"

I was managing to keep the fight alive by the skin of my teeth. I of course replied without hesitation, as though it were the most obvious thing. "Yes. I'm glad to be able to die this way."

I could hear the black knight grind their teeth from behind the visor of their helm. That same instant, their sword swung my way. With my skills being insufficient to take the sheer dynamism driving their blade, I was pushed back again and again. From the left and the right, from above and from below, the blows rained down. And again and again, I retreated. They chased me across

the hall and past the staircase, cornering me by the shrine room where the ceremony was taking place. The door was at my back, and from the noise leaking out from the other side, I could tell they were right in the midst of it.

“It’s over. Now put away your sword, Hine Hellvilleshine.”

The Head Knight spoke my surname too. They really meant it when they said this was the end. My body shivered. The word spoken by the person I respected the most sparked my recollection of that which I’d forgotten thanks to Palinchron. Hine *Hellvilleshine*. Just hearing that name threatened to stay my hand.

“No,” I replied. “Also, please don’t call me by that name!”

The state no longer concerned me. Nor did my clan, my parents, or anybody else. *I’m me. I’m not “a Hellvilleshine.” I want to believe that.*

“You are a Hellvilleshine knight! You are a knight of Saint Tiara, as you always will be! And I’m gonna remind you of that fact by breaking your arms and legs!!!”

I was scared. My chains were beginning to catch hold of me again. Giving in would spell the end. I’d wind up just as the Head Knight said. That was why I wanted somebody to call my name before that could happen. I wanted somebody to cheer me on by calling me not Hine Hellvilleshine or Celestial Knight, but the knight of one fair maiden. That would be all it would take!

Overpowered by the enemy, my hands were shaking. I was a coward at heart, so my opponents’ total lack of ambivalence had me panicked and frightened. Ultimately, I fled. I ran from those five, barging into the heart of the cathedral.

When I flung open the door in search of salvation, the spectacle that met my eyes was that of a suffering girl and a boy fighting in his own way. Something hot coursed through my body, and my shivering ceased in an instant. Palinchron was also there. For some reason, he had the boy’s back and was actively protecting him.

My first thought was how unfair that was. I was jealous. I went in to cover the boy’s back as well, throwing myself into the chaos and confusion unfolding in the shrine room.

The whole time, the Head Knight continued glaring at me. It was terrifying; damn my boyhood memories for making me so loath to turn traitor against them.

But even so... Even so!

“That’s news to me!” said the boy. “At the very least, the Celestial Knight I know, Hine Hellvilleshine, doesn’t feel that way! He’s not a knight of Saint Tiara! Isn’t that right, Mr. Hine?!”

Ahh, aughh, arghhhhhh!

He had spoken my name. That alone banished all of my fear. So long as the boy believed in me, I could still fight. No—I could fight till the end of time.

Thank you.

“Y-Yes, that’s right! Of course! The one I serve isn’t some figure from ancient history like Saint Tiara! It’s not a dead lady I’ve been wanting to protect with all my heart! It’s the maiden living and breathing here and now! And now I can finally say it with my chin held high! I am milady’s knight!”

That was my answer. The answer of the thing known simply as Sir Hine, a normal knight. And now I was convinced that my life was my own. Even I could tell that I was tearing up slightly.

Thank you, Sieg. I mean it. Or should I say, my other oath-sworn master: Kanami.

With this, I can fight to the ends of the earth. Yes, that’s right, to the very, very, ends of the earth. Even if this body of mine should rot in so doing, I will fight!

The Dia Shower Scene My Editor Bullied Me Into Writing

“Here goes. Flame Arrow!”

Atop my hospital bed, I cast my mainstay spell. What resulted wasn’t that beam of searing light from days past, but the arrow of fire the spell was always supposed to be. It was sitting in the palm of my hand without flying out. That would have been unthinkable for me before now. Back then, firing at full blast

was all I was capable of, so my progress had me so moved, I could just about tear up. And what made me especially pleased was the fact that I could now be of help to the friend I respected and revered.

“Yes! Now I’m not only able to control the firepower. I can even temporarily suspend the spell’s activation!”

And it was all thanks to my teacher, Ms. Alty. I hadn’t known the first thing about any of it, and she’d taught me a whole host of things free of charge. I owed her the world.

“All right, next I’m gonna put a pause on the activation of multiple *Flame Arrows*! Teach told me that if I can make lots of them at once, it’ll become a derivation called *Petalrain*! Heh heh. I bet Sieg’ll be real surprised if I can pull it off!”

“I’ll be the first in line to gape in shock, Miss Dia.”

I damn near jumped out of my skin. Before I knew it, the doctor in charge of my case was there, smiling in the chair by my bed.

“Huh, when’d you get here?”

“I’ve been here the whole time. I figured that if I broke your concentration while you were casting spells, it would end up leaving the room a wreck once again, so I elected to stay quiet and watch.”

I laughed in a feeble attempt to smooth it over. “Ha, ha ha, ha ha ha ha.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Now then, I suppose we’ll be having to place magic locks on you as early as tomorrow. And please don’t worry. I’ll do my due diligence and obtain permission from Mr. Sieg first.”

I knelt down in apology atop my soft bed. “I... I’m sorry! Whatever you do, Doc, don’t do that! Anything but that!!!”

I’d be okay with anything *but* Sieg finding out. I didn’t want to inconvenience him, and it was kind of embarrassing!

“If you’re going to apologize, then please don’t do it to begin with. Look at how much you’re sweating. If you get too cold, you’ll fall ill with something else,” he said, turning his gaze in the direction of the bathroom.

“Right, yes, sir. Err, I’ll go wash up right away.”

I guess that answer was satisfactory, because after a simple medical evaluation, he made to exit the room, though not before saying, “Ms. Dia, I trust there will be no next time.”

All I could do was bow my head. “No, sir.”

And just like that, I was once again alone in the room with nothing whatsoever to do. I heaved a sigh and dragged myself to the door in the corner. Behind it lay an excessively luxurious bathroom. As for why I was now able to use a room that could be called a culmination of magic gem technology, the money Sieg had raked by selling off Tida’s magic gem had paid for my medical expenses and then some. But the number one reason was...

“So they found me, huh?”

After flinging off my hospital clothes, the disgusting wings on my back were laid bare. They were the symbol that I wasn’t who I was. The proof that labeled me “Apostlekin.”

Now that I was naked, I started using the shower to wash my sticky-with-sweat body. The water was hot, but it felt nice, and it traveled down my skin, rinsing off all my perspiration.

“I *was* going pretty hard back there. Guess it can’t be helped...”

At long last, those priests of the Church of Levahn who were in Whoseyards had discovered me here. It seemed that because the web of affiliations between them and the religious faction in my hometown were slightly different, it had taken them some time to verify it, but there was no doubt that they’d take strong measures soon enough. At the moment, they were aiding my convalescence, choosing to station themselves near the hospital and merely monitor me.

“I... I’d hate to bother him.”

The first face to float into my mind was my friend’s. The black-haired, black-eyed Sieg. The moment I thought about him, a slight flush lit up my cheeks.

“Huh?”

The other day, Teach had asked me what Sieg was to me, and ever since then, I'd been weirdly *conscious* of it for some reason. I'd replied immediately that he was a friend and comrade, but the more I recalled that exchange, the more a different term began to emerge.

He was a comrade, an ally...and also a friend...and I respected him and depended on him...and he was a swordfighter who made it look cool—more so than I could. And also...

"This water's hot."

That was it. It was the shower's fault.

I'm not a "Miss." I'm a boy. I can't be a "Miss."

The moment I denied it, my head started hurting. Ever since I'd leveled up, I'd been getting chronic, throbbing headaches. And with every headache came the same scene in my mind's eye. The sight of a blonde woman fighting. And her face looked familiar. The first time I'd seen it, I'd thought, *A grownup me fighting a grownup Sieg?*

But then I shook my head. "No, it can't be..."

The woman's enemy was hiding his face with a mask, and he had long black hair. There was no proof that it was Sieg, and there was no proof the woman was me either. She may have looked a little like me, sure, but there were also differences between her and the me I currently was. For example, the biggest point of difference between us...was our breast size.

"As if mine would ever get that big."

I looked at my chest. I had a feeling my breasts were a bit red and swollen, perhaps because as of late, I'd taken to wrapping a long white cloth around my chest and upper back. What was there wasn't the big bosom of the adult in my vision. My breasts were small. There was no comparison.

My breasts were small.

My breasts.....

"That's enough showering."

I'm me. That was what I muttered to myself inwardly. I wasted no time

quashing my misgivings. I had things to do: I had to shake off my pursuers, these migraines, and the scene that kept playing in my head. I was going to explore the Dungeon alongside Sieg, and that was all I should be thinking about. And in order to do that, my task for the time being was...

“All righty, time to train some more, and this time I’ll make sure the staff don’t catch on!”

To make *Flame Arrow* mine to command, I changed into a fresh set of hospital clothes and exited the bathroom, moving at a brisk pace as I murmured to myself—a brisk pace so that I could hide the redder-than-usual flush in my cheeks...

At the Pub (Part 2)

“What?! The newbie’s on the wanted list?!” shouted the pub manager, staring at the wanted poster that had been thrust into his face.

In fact, the great majority of the pub-goers were wide-eyed with shock. “Wait, huh? Our Sieg? But why?”

The establishment’s resident pretty waitress, Lyeen, had been setting a table; she nearly dropped her tray.

“Siegfried Vizzita is currently at large, having kidnapped the Saint of the Church of Levahn and Her Grace the Apostle. As such, we kindly ask for your permission to search the premises.”

The knight clad in silvery steel spoke politely, but their stern countenance brooked no refusal. And that was to be expected, seeing as this pub had been the suspect’s workplace.

“Levahn? Ya mean that church the folks over in Whoseyards believe in? You’re sayin’ he kidnapped the saint and the apostle of that there church? *Our* newbie?”

“That’s correct. On the morning of the Day of the Blessed Birth, he stole into the Whoseyards shrine room, cravenly took the foreign guests of honor as hostages, and abducted them while they were unable to move as they were in the middle of the ceremony.”

Mouths remained agape. The manager, Lyeen, and customers who’d all been listening from nearby were all frozen in place, baffled. The knight’s watchful eyes took note of that, as their job was also to ascertain the reaction of the people at the pub that public enemy Siegfried had once worked at. They promptly concluded that the pub was not a party to this crime. One look at the poster girl and they could tell. She had barely managed to keep from dropping her tray, and that reaction was impossible to fake.

“I heard that this is Siegfried Vizzita’s place of employment. But I also heard that he hasn’t shown up for work as of late.”

“Ah, er, yeah, he took a sudden leave of absence.”

“Hmm. Perhaps he put his personal affairs in order before getting up to such devilry. My apologies, but please allow me to thoroughly examine this area. It’s closely linked to the case.”

“It’s just about closing time, so I don’t mind, but...”

The knights’ search began once closing time came around. As knights of Whoseyards, their search was nothing wild or violent, but they didn’t hold back either. They checked behind the pub, inside the kitchen, and all of the storehouse, leaving no nook or cranny unexamined.

The manager stood watch over them as he prepared for the next day’s work over in a corner of the establishment. Krowe, one of the pub’s regulars, happened to be there when the place closed for the day, and unlike the other patrons, he’d stayed.

“Boss, are you seriously takin’ ’em at their word? You honestly think Sieg’s the kinda guy who’d do somethin’ that crazy?”

Lyeen, who had been in a daze nearby, echoed Krowe’s feelings, leaning forward to hound her manager. “He... He’s right! There’s no way that sweet kid would *kidnap* anybody! If I so much as raised an eyebrow at him, he’d quiver and get all in a dither. He’s straitlaced and sincere, unlike most kids these days!”

The manager urged her back with the palm of one of his hulking hands before expressing his opinion such that the knights couldn’t overhear. “Calm down, you two! I don’t think he’s some kidnapper either. But defending his honor to them won’t do anybody any good. The wanted poster’s been made and everything, and we’ve got fully armored knights on the hunt for him. Obviously, the only right choice for now is to do what they say.”

“That may be, but still...”

“But sir!”

The two scowled. They knew he was right, and when they realized that there was nothing they could do, a hush fell for several long seconds.

“Besides,” muttered the manager, “hypothetically...it could be the case that

what they're sayin' ain't totally—"

"Is there somethin' you're rememberin', Boss?!" asked Krowe.

The manager looked a bit distressed, but he continued on truthfully. "Well, see...before the newbie took that long leave of absence, an incredible knockout of a girl came to the pub. She'd been hiding her face with a cheap-lookin' hood, but she was a gorgeous girl with long flowin' hair. And to tell ya the truth, I'm thinkin' she might just have been the 'saint' or the 'apostle' in question."

"This is the first I'm hearing of this, sir," said Lyeen, glaring reproachfully.

"Wait, hold on, Boss. Wait up a sec. You're tellin' me that a big shot in the world's largest religion rolled up to a place like this by herself?"

Being the ear-to-the-ground person that he was, Krowe could scarcely believe it. The more one knew about Whoseyards, the stranger the manager's words came across.

"I know it sounds loony. But she made such an impression that I can't think of who else it could have been. She wasn't just beautiful, see. Her sense of presence was outta this world. She exuded enough pressure to shut *me* up."

Of course, the real reason he hadn't argued with her was mostly because he'd caved to a pretty girl's tears, but the manager didn't mention that. He had his pride to safeguard.

Krowe analyzed the fragmented information he'd been given. "I see. So in other words, that super larger-than-life girl must be the 'lady' of that scary knight who visited us before—that Sera Radiant person. And if that's the case, then you're right. Things start clicking into place."

Krowe had arrived at the same conclusion as the manager. There was no clear evidence, but possibilities were starting to come into view.

"Huh?" said Ms. Lyeen. "Wait, so you're saying what that scary knight is claiming is true. Sieg really *did* kidnap that pretty young thing? But then, how on earth could our Sieg have possibly stolen into the most heavily guarded shrine in all the Alliance?"

She was assuming that Sieg was subject to everyday common sense, but just

the other day, Krowe and the manager had discussed how the kid defied common sense.

“Hrmm...” said Krowe. “Honestly, that’s...back me up, Boss?”

“I hear you, Krowe. If the newbie got steadily stronger, it ain’t outta the question.”

“Yeah, ’cause he’s got the talent to be a scout...or really, to be a thief. Man, if I’d known this’d happen, I’d have been pushier about inviting him into my diving party.”

The two battle-hardened warriors didn’t doubt the newcomer’s abilities at all, a fact that threw Ms. Lyeen for a loop.

“Huh? For real? Sieg’s strong enough to be able to kidnap a VIP like that?”

All the two could do was nod. Once again, a hush fell over them, and once again, that silence was broken after some seconds.

“So he ran away with her!” shouted an excited Lyeen, happy for him. “He’s eloped with his true love! Aha! If we’re talking elopement, then I *can* kind of see it being a possibility. He does strike me as the type to devote his all to the girl he fell for! Like, to the level where he had no eyes for anything else!”

Krowe heaved a sigh. It seemed the time to take this seriously was at an end. “Y-Yeah, knowing him, it’s not inconceivable. He seems like the type who can make a right mess o’ things when he gets panicky.”

The two laughed at Sieg’s expense.

“Well,” said the manager, “guess there’s no point in sittin’ here bitin’ our nails over it. If ya really think about it, that newbie’s got *us* beat, if only in the runnin’ away department. Just about the only thing we can do right now is live our normal everyday lives and wait for him to come back.”

“I suppose so,” said Ms. Lyeen.

Mr. Krowe just nodded in reply, a strained smile on his face.

With that, their talk of the new kid came to an end, and the knights’ search concluded at around the same time.



A few days later, the pub was all abuzz with a single rumor.

“He eloped?!”

“You serious?! You really mean that newbie waiter ran away with that rich girl?!”

“He’s done it now!”

“Ah, come to think of it,” said one woman, “back during the festival, I did see the boy walking around with an incredibly pretty girl.”

“So wait, then that broad from the Seven Knights who came here was totally right! He *was* up to somethin’!”

“We gotta suck it up and apologize next time she rolls around! And we’ve gotta ask the guards-knight how she’s holdin’ up now that her lady’s gotten whisked away by some lothario!”

“Ha ha, sounds like a plan!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

They ate up the rumors as they enjoyed their booze, and merry laughter filled the tavern.

“Lyeen...” said the manager to the worker he so trusted.

“I... I’m sorry, sir... I just couldn’t help but want to talk about it.”

The perpetrator behind the rumors’ spread hung her head. The manager was, as always, soft on cute girls, so he couldn’t yell at her about it. He just scratched his head. Yep. It was the same as always—even in the newbie Sieg’s absence, the pub still functioned, for better or worse.

That being said, a few days later, when the ruffians who made up the majority of the place’s clientele started to forget about the rumors, they all remembered the boy once again when the biggest fighting tournament in the Dungeon Alliance commenced.

The location: Laoravia. And that day would reshape the history of the Alliance forevermore. Everyone in the tavern would see the boy and the beautiful rich

girl at the Brawl.

But that was a few days hence. There was still a little while yet before that tale unfolded.

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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 3

by Tarisa Warinai

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