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Illust. Saki Ukai



DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

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Chapter 1: The Dungeon's Reverse Side—Viaysia

“So what you’re saying is that I fell into this place?”

First and foremost I needed to gather information. The situation was so unique that I had no choice but to start there. Until just a few minutes ago, I’d been engaged in a fierce battle at the center of the continent of Varences. My opponent was Palinchron Regacy. He’d gained the power of the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, used the World Restoration Array that had been created a thousand years ago, and was the lowest of the low to ever stand before me.

In every sense of the word, Palinchron had been strong. My comrades had dropped out of the battle one after another, and I, alone, had nearly been defeated one-on-one. However, there were some unexpected reinforcements: Wyss Hylipröpe and Liner Hellvilleshine. Ms. Wyss had sacrificed herself, and then together with Liner, I had finally defeated Palinchron.

Then my memory went blank, and before I knew it, I’d woken up in this room in this unfamiliar castle. As soon as I’d opened my eyes, I’d met the Thief of Wind’s Essence, Lorde Titee, and under the strength of her magic, I’d been forced to follow her up to the observation deck at the top of the castle. The view I had from the height of the observation deck was stranger than strange. Looking up, the sky was covered in thick, dark clouds. Below me stretched the enormous castle and the castle town that encircled it. However, there was nothing surrounding that city. Lorde Titee had called this world, which seemed to just be floating in the dark sky, the “reverse side of floor sixty-six” and a “magic castle.” Even if I wanted to deny it, the sight before me wouldn’t allow it. Besides, the Thief of Wind’s Essence in front of me didn’t seem to be lying.

“Uh-huh. You’re correct in recognizing that you fell from the surface to the depths of the Dungeon. I was surprised when you literally fell from above, Kanamin!” she responded honestly and without hesitation.

We were still on the observation deck as I asked Lorde my questions. It seemed certain that I’d fallen this far because I’d been swallowed up by the

World Restoration Array left behind by Palinchron. Having acknowledged this, I next had to confirm the most important thing.

“Hey, Lorde, did anyone else besides me fall down here?”

“Yes, Liner fell as well.”

“Anyone else? There was another girl there...” The sister that I’d lost had been with us too.

“No, just you two. You can ask Liner later and he’ll confirm it.”

I grimaced. I was happy to be alive, but without Hitaki, my life had no meaning. If what Lorde said was true, then only Hitaki had been left behind on that great disaster of a battlefield. If that was the case, I had to go help her right away. I was driven by a sense of urgency that made my blood boil, but I calmly activated my skill that was made for times like these.

[The following skill has activated: Double Covenantor]

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

+1.00 to Confusion

Knowing that I couldn’t handle this frustration, I decided to put aside my emotions. Naturally, I didn’t take all of them away. It would be easier if I could just empty out the bad feelings, but that would be the wrong thing to do as a human being. I’d done that in the past, and it had hurt me. I removed a measured amount that left a solid sense of frustration but didn’t go out of control like Kanami the Founder had. I let out a breath. Unlike the incomplete version of the skill, I could now control *Double Covenantor* at will. I was neither too rational nor too emotional, and with a suitable amount of feelings, I directed another question to Lorde.

“Where is Liner now?” My first priority would be my friend. It was likely he knew all of the details of the fight that had happened above.

“Umm...Liner’s heading for floor sixty-five and in the middle of a Dungeon

attempt.”

“An attempt? He’s going into the Dungeon alone?”

“Yes. He left this morning, so he should be back in just a little bit.”

“In that case, I’ll wait for him.” Thanks to Ms. Wyss’s mediation, we’d gone from wanting to kill each other to trusting each other enough to work together.

“Really? Well then, why don’t we take a stroll around the castle town and talk while you wait?”

What I honestly wanted was to get away from the Dungeon boss in front of me and gather intel on my own, but the childlike fondness in Lorde’s eyes captured me and wouldn’t let me go. It didn’t seem like she was hiding anything from me, unlike with Alty, the Thief of Fire’s Essence, and Ide, the Thief of Wood’s Essence. If anything, she seemed most like Lorwen, the Thief of Earth’s Essence. The farewell from Alty was still burned into my mind. I didn’t want to repeat that kind of parting, if possible.

It would be good if I could say goodbye to this girl who calls herself Lorde like I did to my best friend, Lorwen, I thought. I didn’t have the luxury of time right now, but that didn’t mean I could throw everything away and think only about my sister. Balance was key. I should think about my sister first but avoid the extreme practice of cutting out everything else.

After thinking it over thoroughly, I accepted Lorde’s proposal. “Yes, let’s do that. Please show me around, Lorde.”

“Okay! Follow me; we’ll go to town!”

Lorde nodded happily and took my hand, then we headed for the castle town. First we descended from the observation deck and walked through the empty castle interior. We went down long corridor after long corridor before emerging in a densely covered but nicely arranged garden.

As she led me, I wasted no time in trying out magic other than *Dimension*. Naturally, I could no longer use ice magic. It was likely because the magic gem of the Thief of Water’s Essence had been pulled out of my body during the fight with Palinchron. I tried *Connection* next, but I didn’t get the sense that I could maintain the door on the other side. Even when I looked at my status, I could

see that my maximum MP had not decreased. It seemed that when I'd gone beyond my limits during the battle, I had unconsciously deactivated it. What hurt the most was the severed bond between Reaper and me. The connection between us, despite being almost like a strong curse, was lost due to my exposure to so many cancellation spells. I couldn't even tell my friends aboveground that I was safe.

With the urgency of the situation reaffirmed in my mind, we walked through the large garden and out of the castle. The castle gate was left open, as there was no one to manage it. Finally, we crossed the giant drawbridge leading away from the gate and into the town.

At that moment, the color of the world changed. Beyond the silent castle was a bustling, colorful city. It was full of a vitality that was on a totally different level than the countries of the Dungeon Alliance, which were covered with gems and ores. There was not a single leyline. Instead, vegetation carefully framed the paths. The soft soil of the road was gentle on my feet.

I felt a sense of peacefulness that was particular to the countryside. The houses lining the road were all old. There were very few brick houses; instead they were made of wood. Most of the houses were low and flat rather than tall, two-story buildings. Unlike the buildings of the Allied Nations, which had probably been created by carving them out of the natural environment, this place was built in harmony with nature. The people on the street were also different. There was not a single person carrying a dangerous weapon. This scene would never have been seen in the Dungeon Alliance.

The peacefulness of this city was also directly reflected in the people's attire. It was a country that was free of war, and even from petty conflicts. But there was one thing odd about it: among the people coming and going in front of the bridge, not a single one was pure human. Surprisingly, everyone had ears, or a tail, or some other animallike characteristic.

"Lorde...this place is a re-creation of a thousand years ago, isn't it?"

"That's right!"

"They're all semifers."

"Yes, that is what you call them now, isn't it? A thousand years ago they were

called sorcerers. Back then, the North was the sorcerer's final paradise."

Lorde said it casually, but if that was true, this was the kingdom of the North from a thousand years ago. I looked around with renewed interest as we walked.

"Right! Let's go get something to eat first, Kanamin! I know a good place to take you!" Lorde disappeared into the streets she was clearly familiar with. However, we could not avoid the attention of the people around us. Many eyes turned toward us, from the comparatively charming rabbit-eared and dog-eared semifers to the scaled lizardfolk. It seemed that I, a plain human being, was in the minority. I was wondering if that was why they thought I was unusual when a girl with cat ears came running up to us.

"Your Highness Lorde! Hello!"

"Hello, Beth. It's nice weather today too, isn't it?"

Nice weather? I thought. *No, it's totally cloudy...*

If this had been a game, the black sky would have meant the place was ruled by a demon king or something. But the cat-eared girl called Beth looked up at the black sky and answered with a smile.

"Yes, it is nice out! But, Your Highness, is this *him*?"

"Yes! This is Kanamin, the Commander of the Queensguard in our magic army."

"Wow! He really is the real thing! From the legend! But he's totally normal! He looks totally like a human!"

"Cast your senses deeper. There's no mistaking it—Kanamin is the strongest sorcerer."

"Wow! You're right! His magic is so powerful!" The girl looked at me with what seemed to be longing in her eyes. The only thing I could offer in response was an insincere smile.

"I'm gonna go tell everyone else that the commander woke up!" The girl ran off like a cat, and other semifers approached, taking her place. Apparently, they had been watching for the right moment to talk to us. The girl's innocent

greeting seemed to have spurred them into action.

“Whoa, is this the Commander of the Queensguard? He looks quite different from the legend...”

“But from what I can see of his spellcraft, I’m pretty sure he’s not human.”

“I’d heard he was a true sorcerer, but he doesn’t look strong at all.”

“He’s not wearing anything, is he? I was told he was a masked knight...”

I was being appraised by semifers of all ages and genders. Some of them looked part monster, so my forced smile hardened even further. Some had wings like birds, others had fins like fish; there really was a wide variety.

Lorde stepped in front of me and chased them away. “This is a peaceful place, so we don’t need a Commander of the Queensguard. Look, don’t stare at him because he’s rare! You can meet him anytime you want!”

The people around us obeyed with strained smiles.

“That is true; knights have nothing to do with us.”

“Right, this world hasn’t had a single battle anyway.”

“Well then, see you later, Mr. Kanami.”

People gave me small little waves as they left. It was unusual, but that’s all they seemed to be able to do as they scattered. I was caught up in the moment and waved back at them. However, my heart was not at peace. I felt as if I had wandered into a fairy tale. Outside the town, it was dark. This was the Northern kingdom of a thousand years ago and it shouldn’t exist. And here, I was Kanami the Founder and Commander of the Queensguard. If I had not been convinced that I was truly me in the battle with Palinchron, I would’ve lost my mind.

“L-Lorde...why does everybody know who I am?”

“Because you were famous in the Northern Kingdom a thousand years ago!”

Just what did I do as the Founder?!

But *when* was the “here” of a thousand years ago in the first place? In the memories that had resurfaced, there was a memory of heading to the North with Apostle Sith. The goal of that trip had been to gather magic. And the result

of gathering that magic was that Hitaki had become a monster. Was “here” during that time?

As I was lost in my thoughts, we reached the biggest building in the town. The sign outside said it was a restaurant. Lorde entered like she was a regular there and led the way straight to the innermost part. The interior of the main dining room looked something like a pub, but the private inner room was luxurious, like it was made for nobility.

“Here’s the VIP room! I am Lorde, after all.” She turned to the girl who came to take our order and said, “Everything on the menu, please! Bring them one after the other! It’s a celebration of his recovery!”

“O-Okay!” The waitress ran out of the room quickly, and I could hear the kitchen growing busy off in the distance.

In the blink of an eye, the table was filled with food. I thought it was an unreasonable order, but the restaurant responded to it admirably. As someone who’d worked in the restaurant industry, I was impressed by the staff’s level of training.

“Today’s my treat, Kanamin, so eat up!”

“Thank you...”

I started eating before things got cold. Then I noticed something unusual. The food and tableware were all too familiar. It wasn’t something I was used to seeing in the taverns of Vart—these were things I was used to having in my original world. Using chopsticks, I popped something resembling Japanese boiled greens into my mouth. The taste of sake and soy sauce filled my mouth. I wondered if rice wine might have been used as well.

“It’s delicious...but how did you know to season it this way?”

“Obviously, because you taught us to.”

“I did?” *What did you get up to, Kanami the Founder?*

I plunged into the nostalgic taste of my home world. Looking closely, I could see that the interior of the restaurant was similar to my world too. The staff were dressed in uniforms, just like back home. This was a culture that didn’t

exist in the Dungeon Alliance. I could see traces of the steady missionary work of the outworlders.

“No, let’s set that topic aside for a moment. There’s something more important to talk about.” I shook my head and got back on track. Now that I was finally sitting down, I had to check all the details.

“Sure, we can talk leisurely.”

“So, before I came here I was aboveground...but at that time, it was Liner and me, and there was a sleeping girl there too. You really don’t know her, Lorde?”

“I really don’t. It was just you and Liner who fell here. I definitely would’ve noticed if a third person had intruded.”

“I see. So Liner woke up before me and that’s why he headed into the Dungeon?”

“Yes, that’s right. You’re guests here so I wanted to have a better welcome, even just a festival for our nation, but Liner refused. Say, Kanamin, do *you* want a festival?”

“No, thanks; I don’t have that kind of time.” My tone had naturally grown harsher. Thanks to my new skills, I was trying to stay calm, but I still wasn’t perfect.

“Hm, is it possible that you’re impatient because this is related to Hitaki?” Lorde asked gently, noticing my irritation. I’d dared not tell her my sister’s name, and yet she mentioned it easily.

“Do you...know about Hitaki?”

“I do. She’s the reason you took revenge on the whole world, right?”

“Do you happen to know what happened after that?”

“After your revenge? That I don’t know. Because before that, you betrayed me and I died.” Just like that, she exposed the cause of her own death. That’s not something I would’ve said with a mouthful of food.

“I...betrayed you? Are you sure?”

“Very, very.”

“Um...so do you have a grudge against me?”

“Oh, I don’t care about that. I was the one who asked you to do it.”

“Huh? You asked for it?”

“You made my wish come true, Kanamin. And you prepared such a nice world for me after death. That’s why I love you!”

“Wait a minute. What sort of relationship did we have? I’m not getting a clear sense at all...”

“Hm, honestly, I don’t want to talk about it because I don’t want to remember. Speaking of which, I’m really jealous that you don’t have all of your memories. Aah, I want to forget!”

“But you’re the only one who can tell me what happened a thousand years ago. At least a little bit...”

Many of the guardians had disappeared, and now only Reaper, Apostle Sith, and Ide knew what had happened back then. If possible, I wanted to gather as much information as possible here. But Lorde shook her head, leaking a vast amount of magic power at the same time.

“The past doesn’t matter anymore. Because both aboveground and the North are irrelevant now. I’ve achieved peace here!” she said with a smile. She looked so happy, but I felt that she was distorted at her core. Distorted just like this world. Behind the brightness, there was a danger particular to the guardians.

I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t know her that well, but she knew too much about me. I decided it would be better not to provoke her and make things worse.

“I...see. The past doesn’t matter to you. You want to live in peace here, and that’s all, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So then it’s good you can live a slow life here. But Liner and I will have to leave soon, I think.”

“Liner said the same thing. Even though I want you to stay and play longer.”

“There are things I need to do aboveground, but I’ll be back. We’ll play together then.”

“Okay! It’s a promise!”

I made that promise just so I could get away from her easily. Lorde didn’t seem to be in any hurry, so I’d be able to settle in and focus on her after I got all of my friends back together.

I spent the rest of the time waiting for Liner, learning more about this place. During that time, the food on the table somehow disappeared quickly. I wasn’t eating much—Lorde was eating it all by herself. As I watched her gluttony and sipped the accompanying soup, I was again met with a taste of home.

“This food is really delicious. Is this miso soup?”

“I spread the recipes you taught me all over town! It’s the best, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but you can calm down a bit...”

Although I knew I didn’t have much time, I was overwhelmed by the killer Japanese cuisine. The hot miso soup settled in my stomach, and I exhaled a warm breath. Squinting, I stared blankly into space. I was certainly in a peaceful state of mind at the moment, but then a sound rattled through the air, destroying the calm. The door to the VIP room was shoved open and a blond boy entered. His clothes were a little different, but there was no mistaking him: it was Liner.

“Sieg! This is no time to be lazing about!” The first thing he did was berate me as I sat there listlessly, then he stomped toward me.



“Oh, Liner! Welcome back!” Lorde greeted her rude guest with a smile.

“Lorde! There was no one in the castle and it freaked me out! You could’ve at least left a note!”

“Oh, now that you say that, I could have. I forgot!” She scratched her head and apologized.

I saw Liner’s exasperated face and spoke up. “Liner, I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Lemme sit.” Seeing there was still food left, he casually sat down in one of the empty seats.

“I’m sorry to spring this on you, but could you tell me what happened after we defeated Palinchron?”

“Sure, I will, because we have to leave soon—” Liner replied as he started piling food onto a plate. He must’ve anticipated my need for information because he started to explain without hesitation. “After we used up all of our energy in that fight, we were drawn into the World Restoration Array. I borrowed power from your sword...well, from Lorwen, and protected us with his crystallization to keep us from dissolving, and then we fell into the depths of the continent. And that’s here, the ‘Dungeon’s reverse side.’”

“Just the two of us? There wasn’t—”

“I’m sorry, it was just the two of us. Your sister was carried off while you were unconscious aboveground. It was Ide who took her away.”

It seemed that he had anticipated my question. Unlike Lorde, Liner cleared up all my doubts. However, Lorde’s hand stopped shoveling food briefly at the mention of Ide’s name. It seemed that the Thief of Wood’s Essence and the Thief of Wind’s Essence weren’t strangers to each other. Aboveground, Ide had boldly declared he was waiting for the sovereign King Lorde.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t able to protect her. At the time, I didn’t know she was your sister.”

“No, why would Ide want Hitaki in the first place?”

“Ide is a teacher by nature and a nation-building fool. I think he’s recruiting people for the founding of a country. He always said that a country needs

power. From what I heard from Lorde, Hitaki is ridiculously strong, isn't she? I bet that's why."

"I suppose so...but Hitaki is sleeping. She was put to sleep by a weird curse. I don't think she'd be much of an asset."

"Well, Ide's true specialty is magic that isn't combat magic. Don't you think there might be a way to wake her up?"

It wouldn't be bad for Hitaki to be woken up. He'd been unsparing with me, but to everyone else he'd been perfectly polite. It wouldn't be wrong to say that he had a teacher's nature, since he was well-liked by the Jewelculi children. Perhaps he was sincere about Hitaki as well. However, I couldn't leave her in someone else's care forever. It was my duty to protect her.

Liner, clearly guessing what I wanted to say based on my grim expression, continued talking. "Yes, so we need to return aboveground quickly and get everything back. I think we're in agreement about that." He finished eating and stood up. Then he went on to say something I had never expected to hear from him. "All right, I have to hurry up and protect a god in human form."

He really looked like a knight at that moment. It seemed like he'd truly found himself.

"Liner, does that mean you're not fighting with Lastiara anymore?"

"Fighting? I think we planned to kill each other...but really, like you said, we're not fighting anymore. From now on, I plan to continue my brother's will and be that woman's knight."

"Good, I'm glad." That basically meant he'd be one of my friends. I'd introduce him to everyone once we returned aboveground. I was sure the women who'd been against him this whole time would accept him when they saw him now.

"Well, we should head out. There're lots of things I need you to do, Sieg. We don't have a lot of time, so we need to hurry to the Dungeon." Liner left, and I tried to get up from my seat to follow him, but my feet got tangled in the process and I almost fell.

"Yeah...let's go. I'm still not back to normal. I think it's because one of the

magic stones was removed.” I was feeling better, but my body was strangely unbalanced. I felt as though it had lost half its vitality, perhaps due to the loss of the great power of the Thief of Water’s Essence.

Liner saw me on the verge of falling over and offered up another reason. “Take it easy, Sieg. After all, you’ve been asleep for like a year.”

“Yeah, that’s right, I’ve been...sleeping...for a long time?” My brain finally caught up with what Liner had said. “Wait, what? A year?”

“Yes, a year. As Lorde is so fond of saying, it’s been close to a year since that battle. So that’s why I always say I don’t have the time to just relax.”

I immediately scarfed down the rest of the food on the table and looked at Lorde. She met my gaze and swallowed her own food before starting her explanation.

“Phew. It took such a long time for me to break apart that crystal. It was because the crystal was so hard, okay? Not because of me, *okay?*”

It seemed like she was telling the truth. I’d thought that only a day or so had passed, but reality was not so easy. Although my life had been saved, I’d had to pay the price for it. I understood Liner’s urgency now.

“We... We gotta go!” I keenly felt that I didn’t have the time to be slurping down miso soup, and I tried to get my tangled feet moving, but Lorde stopped me.

“Ah, wait, wait! I’ll go with you today. I’m all done eating!”

“You’ll come with us?”

“We’re going to fight over there, aren’t we? You’re not a wind mage, Kanamin; you might die.” She suggested the possibility of death in a very lighthearted manner. Was the sixty-sixth floor such a dangerous place?

“I’m a wind knight, so I’ll fly Sieg. You don’t need to come along,” Liner replied with a disgusted look on his face.

“Flying?!” I asked.

The two of them were looking at each other with dangerous gazes.

“Yes, floor sixty-six is totally empty. It’s all sky, no walls or anything,” Lorde replied.

“The dragon in that sky is really troublesome. I’ve fought it several times but haven’t been able to conquer it. That’s why I was waiting for you, Sieg,” added Liner.

“That’s little Elfenreize the wind dragon. Hmm, how nostalgic!”

It seemed there was a dragon in the sky on floor sixty-six, and it was one that had Liner convinced there was no way to take it down.

“Let’s go, Sieg. Let’s hunt the dragon together.” He held out his hand for a handshake.

“A dragon, huh? Leave it to me. I heard I was already being called a dragon slayer anyway.” I grasped his hand, and a message spread across my vision.

[Party]

Liner Hellvilleshine has joined the party.

It was the message displaying the addition of a party member, the kind you often see in video games. It marked the complete truce with Liner that I had longed for, but when I thought about the fact that I was the one who’d dreamed up and created the system, I suddenly felt ashamed of it. I could picture myself silently developing the magic of the menus with a smirk on my face. Kanami the Founder had really liked staging everything like a game. However, there had been plenty of times the menus had saved my life. For example, I could look at the status menus of my friends.

[Status]

NAME: Liner Hellvilleshine

HP: 369/369

MP: 102/246

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 25
STR 12.24
VIT 9.21
DEX 10.56
AGI 15.34
INT 12.00
MAG 9.89
APT 3.87

[SKILLS]

INNATE SKILLS: Wind Magic 2.01

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Holy Magic 1.25 Swordplay 2.34
Bloodknack 1.00 Optimal Moves 1.22 Fortitude 1.02

During the battle with Palinchron, Liner had undergone a true level-up and evolved to a point where his skills were not inferior to those of Lastiara and the others. It was likely thanks to his absorption of Ms. Wyss’s magic and soul that every numerical value had increased dramatically. Finally, I felt like I had a decent companion. His personality was very respectable (compared to the rest of my friends) and best of all, he was a guy too, so I could depend on him.

We left the restaurant, with the Guardian behind us making a great fuss about joining the group. We walked across to the edge of town, where we’d be entering the Dungeon. I followed Liner and checked my own status on the way.

[Status]

NAME: Aikawa Kanami
HP: 293/293
MP: 945/945
CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 22

STR 12.55

VIT 14.11

DEX 18.57

AGI 22.96

INT 18.67

MAG 38.34

APT 6.21

[SKILLS]

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.79

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56 Dimension Magic
5.27+0.10 Responsiveness 3.56 Knitting 1.07 Swindling 1.34
Magical Combat 0.73 Smithing 0.69 Sewing 0.68

The text in my status that had been corrupted during the fight with Palinchron had gone back to normal. It seemed my menu display had been able to catch up once the battle ended and I’d finally calmed down. However, the values of my skills had changed dramatically. First, my Aptitude skill, which shouldn’t ever change, had gone down a bit, and my Magic skill had decreased along with it. On the other hand, my level had gone up.

Along the way, I asked Liner about it, and he told me that he had finished leveling up as part of his treatment while I was sleeping. While I was checking my current situation, we arrived at our destination, and I was stunned by the extremely unrealistic landscape. The edge of the city—the edge of this whole land—ended suddenly in a sheer cliff. It was frightening from a distance, but it was even more terrifying up close. The only thing below was an endless darkness.

A stone fell from the cliff, but it was absorbed by the darkness and disappeared without a sound. Not even a single echo returned. A chill ran down my spine as I realized that this was a valley without a bottom. Right at the very

edge of that cliff stood a single *Connection* door. Its level of perfection was unusual. The density was different from that of the doors I made. There wasn't the slightest hint of fragility as if it would vanish at a touch, but rather a sense of security like a towering mountain. It seemed to be a higher-level *Connection* superimposed on higher-level dimensional magic. This entire space must have been fixed by some kind of special power.

"Okay, let's go, Sieg."

Liner headed for the door. A flat plain spread out before us on the other side of the door. Wind blew and the short grass swayed, even though we were in the middle of the Dungeon. The ceiling was unusually high, though dimly lit, and there was such a sense of openness in this layer that it could be mistaken for being completely aboveground.

I didn't think there was a single thing blocking my view of the entire floor, but I was wrong. There was a narrow spiral staircase, like a tower, right in the middle of the grassy field. It was a very sorry excuse for a staircase, like it was the bare minimum the Dungeon could create.

"So, this is floor sixty-six... There's really nothing here."

"There's nothing here, but there is a problem. If you look up, you'll understand."

I followed Liner's suggestion and looked up. I knew in an instant what I should be looking at. It was almost too much to take in, and it took me a good minute to grasp the whole picture. The olive-green color that I had thought belonged to the ceiling moved, like a living creature.

"Um, is that..."

"Yes, that's the dragon blocking our way to the sixty-fifth floor: Elfenreize."

The giant creature, bigger even than clouds, flew leisurely. It was so large that even if I wrenched my neck around, I couldn't see its wings. It took my breath away. A little while ago, I'd killed a Dhruv Dragon. It had been a close call, even with Snow, Lorwen, Reaper, and me in perfect battle formation. This dragon was on a completely different level.

[MONSTER] Elfenreize: RANK 67

Its rank was nearly double what the Dhruv Dragon's had been, and it was certainly double—no, quintuple its size. Unlike the Dhruv Dragon, which was pretty reasonable to take down, I couldn't even imagine the moment of defeating this wind dragon. It was like dealing with a natural disaster like a storm or an earthquake.

"As you can see, its body is too powerful, and so is its magic. It uses wind magic, and its speed and perception are also top class. It is highly intelligent and understands the tactics of battle. This is the kind of monster guarding the stairs to the sixty-fifth floor."

"I see..."

It was a boss room. Nobody had said the Guardians were the only bosses in the Dungeon. So, these kinds of floors were mixed in as well.

"Let me gather some information first. *Dimension*."

First and foremost I used my magic to get a picture of the whole floor. It filled the space quickly, and I got a pretty good idea of what we were working with. It was a grassy plain twenty kilometers in diameter, surrounded by stone walls and a stone ceiling about a kilometer above us. The length of the spiral staircase would be about the same. There were holes leading to each floor above and below the central staircase. The only entrances and exits to this closed space were the two holes and the *Connection* door behind us.

"We can go to floor sixty-seven from here?"

"Yes, nothing's stopping us from going down. But the only things below us are two even larger dragons."

"O-Oh..." There were no merits to going down right now, so we had to aim for the highest level of the Dungeon this time. "Hmm, shall we try to get closer?"

"Be careful. It will attack us as we go upward." Liner was looking at me expectantly. Did he honestly think I could beat that thing single-handedly?

We continued under the sky, which seemed to be rumbling because of the

dragon, and reached the lackluster stone staircase. As we started our ascent, I had my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword out, while Liner held both Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, and Rukh Bringer, ready for whatever came our way. Lorde was empty-handed.

After we'd climbed a fair number of stairs, Liner let out a shout. "Sieg, it's coming our way!"

Dimension told me the dragon was coming too. The huge body twisted in the air, and his head turned in our direction. We were reflected in the two huge pupils, which were big enough to be mistaken for suns. At the same time, I could feel that the dragon was preparing a mighty spell. However, even though I could sense it with *Dimension*, I wasn't able to *Counterspell*, because I was no longer able to use the ice magic that was necessary to cast it.

First, the wind dragon slowly beat his wings, which was enough to whip up a magical storm. Unable to do anything to stop it, we were engulfed by the *Dragon's Gale*, making it difficult to move. This was followed shortly thereafter by the main attack. With a mighty roar, the enormous dragon rushed us at a terrifying speed. It was a simple ramming attack, one that even monsters on the upper levels would use, but the scale of it here on the sixty-sixth floor was totally different. It was usually pretty ineffective when used by lower-level monsters, but since our opponent was literally bigger than a mountain, it was a different story altogether. That alone made it a merciless attack that no human could ever resist.

Not even a moment later, the dragon's huge body was ramming into the spiral staircase. Of course, the *Dragon's Gale* continued as well. The explosive wind swept over us, demolishing the staircase like it was made of candy. The ground beneath our feet disappeared, and we were thrown into the air.

This would be the moment right before death for any normal person, but the three of us remained calm as we moved to our next action. Liner found a foothold on one of the collapsing tiles that had stuck to some rubble. Lorde had spread her wings and was flying normally. After confirming that my two allies were safe, I went on the offensive. As long as I had *Dimension: Calculash*, I would never lose my footing or make a misstep. I ran through the sky as if I were on the ground and approached the dragon. When I finally reached the

dragon's back, I carelessly plunged my sword into its skin.

"Huh?"

My sword didn't pierce it. A high-pitched noise rang out. My full-body thrust couldn't penetrate the wind dragon's scales. Instead, I was the one who took damage. My hand was numb from the impact of the deflected blow.

However, I continued to fight. I found Liner among the falling debris and called out to him. "Liner! Trade swords with me!"

"Okay!" As if he'd predicted this could happen, he readily tossed Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, at me. I threw the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword back to him, and our exchange of equipment was completed in midair.

I repeated the same move again, trying to pierce the dragon's scales. But this didn't work either. Like a movie that had been rewound, the hard scales deflected my sword with another terrible noise.

"It's too hard! Time out! Let's retreat for a moment!" I'd reached the limits of what kind of attacks I could do. My only two options were attacking with my sword or attacking with ice magic. Compared to my friends, my options were the most limited, since dimension magic didn't have any direct attacks. On top of that, I couldn't use ice magic right now, so if I couldn't cut it with Lorwen, retreat was my only option.

However, the dragon unleashed more wind magic as we retreated, shooting spheres of wind at us from his mouth. It was probably one of the foundational spells of wind magic, and ordinarily the spheres were probably about basketball sized. In this case, though, wind spheres the size of meteorites rained down on us.

"*Wynd Wing!*" Liner cast in response. He stopped hanging on to the rubble and cloaked himself in magic before launching himself into the air. Unlike the name suggested, he didn't grow wings, but his cloak of wind began to ignore gravity. It wasn't really flying, but more like the magic was capitalizing on his jumping power. Liner floated over to me, grabbed my hand, and then kicked off a piece of rubble, propelling us forward. He headed for the ground as he avoided all of the wind spheres in the way. As we landed on the ground at

about the same time as the falling rubble, Lorde, who'd been flying in the safe zone, returned to us.

"Based on his rank I thought he'd be strong but...there's no chance of winning this..." My face paled as I looked up into the sky. The dragon continued swooping easily through the air. Apparently he only attacked things that got too close in the air and didn't care about anything on the ground.

"Hey, Sieg, couldn't you bring him down with your ice magic?" It seemed like Liner still had high expectations of me. I could certainly see how a giant snake of ice could be effective against a flying enemy. I would've certainly tried it if I could have.

"Um...well...I'm not really sure how to say this..."

"What's the matter? Can't you use the ice magic you hammered Palinchron with to bring this dragon down?"

"I can't cast it," I confessed, since there was no reason to keep hiding it.

"Huh?"

"My sister was the one who held the ice magic. I can only use dimension magic now."

"You can only use dimension magic? So...what can you do right now?"

"I can sense things and move things?" Right now the spells I could use with confidence were *Dimension*, *Form*, and *Connection*. Frankly, my offensive strength was zero. Liner's expression changed from hopeful to hopeless when he heard that.

"That's just your usual information gathering..."

"I'm sorry... Without my sister's soul gem, I only have these peaceful abilities..." I knew I was becoming exclusively a support mage. Or maybe I'd become a noncombatant in charge of production. If I hadn't developed my swordplay skill with Lorwen, I really would have been just a scout. But if I thought about it, there was an obvious answer. Each individual's inborn talents often reflected their personality. If it was just me, with a single soul gem, I could understand why I didn't have any skills for combat, and it was also quite

understandable why Hitaki had a talent for offensive magic.

“Oh...I see. I thought for sure you’d be able to do something, Sieg...” Liner wasn’t blaming me, but he wasn’t concealing his disappointment either.

“Hey, hold up! I said I couldn’t take the dragon down, not that I couldn’t get past it! Even like this I can cause a distraction! If we just need to get past it, you can leave it to me!” I desperately tried to convince him of my usefulness.

“No, that dragon is incredibly difficult even to just ‘get past.’ I’m confident in my own speed, but I don’t see a way to do it. He can perceive everything the wind touches, and with such a huge body, his flight speed is faster than me.”

“He’s faster than *you*?!”

“He really wasn’t trying very hard earlier. It was like he was brushing a fly off.” Liner didn’t seem to be lying. The dragon definitely had enough power to make me believe it. After all, I couldn’t so much as scratch it with my sword. I had no choice but to recognize we were at a total loss at the moment.

“It’s certainly too much for us to handle right now...but we’re supposed to be able to take it down at some point.” Even if it was a powerful enemy, we’d be able to defeat it some day. I knew that was how the Dungeon operated—after all, I was the one who’d made it.

Liner’s expression remained grim despite my optimism.

“No, Sieg, it’s not his strength that’s the problem. It’s that we can’t train up in order to defeat him. The only things on floor sixty-six and sixty-seven are the wind dragons. There’s not a single other monster. And we can’t go to another floor to level up.”

The Dungeon was made to lead challengers to its deepest level. However, that was only the case when it came to going from the top down. There was no precedent for people like us who were aiming to go *up*. It was precisely because I understood this that I could quickly comprehend what Liner meant. Right now, Elfenreize was imprisoning us on floor sixty-six. However, there was also no way for us to increase our level in order to change our situation. My expression, like Liner’s, grew darker.

Lorde, on the other hand, was beaming. “Hee hee hee, well, I guess you can

take it easy! We'll throw a big welcome for you as permanent residents!"

It was like we'd entered a dungeon in an RPG where we couldn't leave and the only thing we could do was make a save file. No, it was like having been thrown into the final dungeon upon starting the game. In either case, it was clear that we wouldn't be able to leave.



Having understood the situation, we'd withdrawn from the Dungeon. We were now talking about what was next as we walked through the downtown area of the town.

"Hey, Lorde, since you're the Thief of Wind's Essence, isn't there something *you* can do about that dragon?"

"It's not that I can't do anything, but if I help you here, you'll just be in trouble on other floors, won't you? If you get to floor sixty-five and it's the same situation, you'll just get stuck again."

"I'll give you anything you want if you act as our guard all the way up. So can I ask you to do that?" I bowed my head sincerely to go along with my words.

"I'm sorry, Kanamin. When it comes right down to it, I'd be much happier if you stayed here for a really long time. So I won't be helping you. Besides, back then and now, you and I negotiated on equal footing." In the battle earlier, Lorde hadn't gotten involved at all, staying in a position where she'd be able to help out at any moment. That was probably her same stance here. Even though she was favorable toward us, she wasn't cooperative. I knew that, but I pressed her on it anyway.

"In that case, can you offer us some advice? I'd like guidance from your perspective as the Thief of Wind's Essence."

"Hm... Advice...should be okay."

Just as I'd thought, she would offer indirect but not direct help. I slowly began to see the boundaries she'd drawn for herself.

"Well, a frontal attack won't work unless you level up, so you need to work on training your skills and magic first," she said, lifting her index finger. A small

whirlwind formed on the end of her finger, and from the technique I could sense her considerable ability and control. I could tell immediately she was a better mage than Dia or Maria. “Speaking of which, this is the path that Liner chose! He’s in the middle of taking classes from me and learning wind magic.”

I looked over at Liner and he nodded to confirm that was true. He’d clearly understood his limits quicker than I had and was already taking steps to overcome them.

“Second, save up money here and hire someone. While there’s no one else who could slay the dragon, there are plenty who could help you beat it.”

Hire someone. I hadn’t even thought of that. But there was no way anyone would be able to keep up with us.

Liner, as if reading my thoughts, added, “It’s okay, Sieg. This town is from a thousand years ago. There’re many more powerful people here than there are aboveground.”

I was glad to hear it. In that case, the rest of our preparations depended on getting money. “We’d probably be able to manage with a lot of people.”

“Third, and this is the one I think is most important, you need to gather stronger equipment!” Lorde recommended this as if it were the only way to succeed, but for me it was the most unlikely.

“Huh, aren’t we okay on that front already? There’s no sword stronger than Lorwen.”

“I’m not talking about your sword. This is dependent on money as well, but wouldn’t it go better if you had anti-dragon armaments?” In other words, she wanted me to collect meta items to counter the wind dragon. For example, if the fire-resistant Red Talisman that I wore around my neck resisted wind instead of fire, the fight would go a lot easier. Those were the kinds of items Lorde was suggesting we gather.

“You two are just aiming to get aboveground, right? So leaving aside the dragon, you should just gather magic items that will help you get there. I can introduce you to a great blacksmith!”

“Gathering magic items does seem like it would go quickly. Please, Lorde, can

you introduce us?”

“Okay! Let’s go get you introduced to the best blacksmith in town!” Lorde laughed as she led us off.

We exchanged greetings with the people we passed as we traversed the town that was overflowing with green. After a few minutes we arrived at a shaded villa. Ivy and moss grew thickly over its roof. In the garden, four children were playing with a ball. One of them noticed us approaching and ran over. It was the cat-eared girl from this morning.

“Oh! King Lorde! And your two guests!”

“We meet again, Beth. Is your grandfather around?”

“Yeah, he’s here! He’s in his usual spot, moaning and groaning.”

“Thanks. Don’t mind us!” Lorde walked freely into the house after thanking the girl. As I followed, I noticed Beth waving at me. I hadn’t really talked to her, but it felt like she’d become fond of me nonetheless. I wasn’t really sure, but it seemed like the position of Commander of the Queensguard was important to her. I waved back at her before I entered the house.

We passed through the entrance, then a well lived-in living room, and then down a long hallway before finally opening a heavy door. Beyond it spread a wide-open space that didn’t suit the otherwise standard house. There wasn’t a single normal table; instead, there were two strange-looking workbenches in a row. Beyond that was a huge kettle and hearth, and the walls surrounding it were completely covered in specialized tools. I could tell immediately this was a workshop. While the scale was completely different, it did resemble the workshop of the Epic Seeker guild I’d belonged to back in Laoravia. But it was much prettier. As the fire in the hearth wasn’t lit, it wasn’t difficult to breathe either.

An old man sat next to the workbenches in the center of the room. His face was wrinkled, but his eyes were sharp and full of spirit. I could tell with a single glance that he was a difficult person to please. This must have been Beth’s grandfather. He had cat ears as well, but they seemed more like those of a wild cat than a domestic one. The old man was using what looked like a pair of reading glasses to peer at a shining, prismatic gem.

“Mr. Reynand! I brought customers!” Lorde called out to him enthusiastically.

At her voice, Mr. Reynand slid his gaze from the jewel to look at me. When our eyes met, I immediately used *Analyze* on him because of the pressure I felt.

[STATUS]

NAME: Reynand Vohlz

HP: 589/589

MP: 123/123

CLASS: Blacksmith

LEVEL 31

STR 13.78

VIT 12.23

DEX 10.23

AGI 5.12

INT 5.11

MAG 5.66

APT 1.44

[SKILLS]

INNATE SKILLS: Axes 1.22 Fire Magic 1.34 Earth Magic 1.44

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Smithing 3.12 Holy Iron Smithing 1.26
Craftsmanship 1.55 Wrought Iron 1.98

His high level was unprecedented, and he had an abundance of skills. I even saw numbers here and there that surpassed mine and Liner’s. Aboveground, this man would’ve been a hero. Liner was even more shocked than I was. His eyes were open as wide as they could go.



Lorde began speaking, ignoring our surprise. “Let me introduce you, grandfather! This is Kanamin and Liner.”

“Hmm...I never expected you to bring him here.” Mr. Reynand hid his discomposure faster than I could as he responded.

“Yes, I was surprised too, but they really need your help, so can you at least hear me out?”

“Very well, speak then.”

I carefully introduced myself. “It’s nice to meet you. My name is Aikawa Kanami. I came to ask if you could make something for me, Mr. Reynand. We want to get aboveground, but an incredibly strong dragon stands in our way. Might I ask you to make a magic tool to help us defeat him?”

Mr. Reynand snorted meaningfully. “You’re so polite this time, laddie.”

“‘This time’? You mean—” I tried to ask him what he meant by that, but he interrupted me.

“A wind dragon, you say? Must be Elfenreize, then. I can’t say for sure, but there are probably magic tools that would be effective against him.”

I could tell from the way he was speaking that he didn’t want to talk about “this time.” I wasn’t going to press him on it, since I was the one asking for a favor.

“Thank you very much. May I have one of those, please?”

“It’s expensive.”

“It’s okay; I have money.” As usual, I pretended to take the money from the pouch at my waist as I pulled it out of my Inventory. However, Mr. Reynand’s eyebrows furrowed as I placed the gold coins on the workbench.

“Oof. Hey, laddie...are you trying to pull something here?”

“Um, what do you mean?”

Mr. Reynand picked up one of the gold coins and shook his head. “Sorry, but this money is no good. You can’t use this currency here.”

“Huh? Is the currency...different here?” I looked over at Lorde, but she was

just standing there with a radiant smile stuck on her face. From her expression, I gathered that I really couldn't use this currency here, so I looked at Liner next and pleaded for help with my eyes.

He'd broken out in a cold sweat just like I had. "Sieg...why don't you try selling the magic gems you have?"

"Magic gems, huh?" said the old man. "Show me. If you want to exchange them for money, I can take a look, since I also do appraisals."

I immediately took out the gems I'd acquired during my explorations up to floor forty. Mr. Reynand's expression didn't change when he saw them. His face remained unreadable.

"These are no good. All of these are scrap gems. They're worthless," Mr. Reynand stated coldly in the face of gems that were more than enough to live on comfortably aboveground.

I'd heard before that the quality of magic gems had declined over the past thousand years, and I'd seen firsthand that armaments from that time performed better than modern ones. As times changed, the values of such things clearly changed as well.

Seeing my surprise, Mr. Reynand began speaking like he pitied me. "There's no demand for anything less than medium-grade magic gems here."

"Then this ray crystal..." I picked up one of the magic gems that I felt good about.

"Here it's just a low-grade gem."

He easily cut me off. I'd lived in the lap of luxury aboveground, but I'd gone through a complete reversal of fates down here and was now incredibly poor. Just as I was about to faint from shock, Mr. Reynand spoke again.

"I'm not going to make anything if I don't get paid for it. This one's cheap, but what are you going to do with it? Even if you keep it, I think this is the only place that will exchange it for money."

"Um...then I'd like to convert it, please..." Keeping the ray crystal and other gems that I might use again aboveground, I turned over all my others. I also

took anything out of my Inventory that might possibly be converted into money. The conversion itself was quick, but after that, our business abruptly ended.

“Get out if you’re not going to order anything. I don’t have time for this.”

“Oh...of course.” I couldn’t order the equipment I had originally intended, so all I could do was nod. Ultimately, we were kicked out of the blacksmith shop. Stunned, I was seen off by Beth and the others in the garden and left at my wits’ end in the city.

Lorde remained relaxed the whole time. She began muttering happily as we walked down the street. “That’s right Kanamin, I guess you have no money.” She giggled as she confirmed again and again that we had no money, as if it was an unexpected boon.

“I have a few copper and silver coins... Would this do?” I jingled a few coins in my hand. It was different from the money used in the countries of the Dungeon Alliance. The pattern was different, as was the minting method. And, oddly enough, the money in my possession was about the same as on my first day of Dungeon diving in this world. After staying at an inn and eating and drinking for a little while, I would be completely broke. Up above, if I just went a little deeper into the Dungeon, I wouldn’t have to worry about such things, but this time, I couldn’t even do that much.

“Ah ha ha, dungeon diving sure is dangerous, huh?” The boss monster Lorde gave me the cold, hard truth with a gleeful smile on her face.

“How have you been making ends meet?” I asked Liner.

“I sold the ornaments I was wearing, but I’m running out of money.”

“Same as me, then...”

“But I didn’t know magic stones were this cheap. You were keeping quiet about that, huh, Lorde?” Liner glared at her, but she continued smiling serenely.

“Because you didn’t ask! Oh, that’s right! If you want to stay in a room in the castle, that’ll be ten copper pieces a day! From here on out, I’m operating the Demon Queen’s Castle as an inn!”

“Hey! You definitely *just* thought of that!” Liner shouted and stormed over at her sudden maliciousness.

“Yup, I just thought of it! Because it’ll be a lot more fun if it takes you a long time!”

“You! I’m gonna knock you out and sell you as a magic stone! Right, Sieg? It’ll definitely be faster that way.” Liner looked like he was ready to slash at her at any moment.

As if she’d been waiting for that, Lorde smiled wryly. I knew it was a bad idea to fight a high-ranking Guardian here, so I stepped in between them.

“Liner, calm down! Don’t lose your temper. Listen, Lorde, we’re really in a hurry. I’m not asking you to let us use the castle for free, but can’t you give us a discount? If possible, please don’t be so mean.”

“Hmm, I’m not being that mean. Ten copper a night is really cheap, and I’m giving you good advice. What more could you ask of me?” Lorde didn’t change her offer. She probably thought that even if things got rough, she could still win in a fight hands down. No matter how high-spirited we were, she was always doing things her own way.

My intervention had cooled Liner down a bit, and he proceeded to talk constructively about the situation. “Ugh. What should we do, Sieg? Do you want to sleep outside for a while?”

“Oh. If you sleep outside, be careful because you may be caught in some places. Or rather, be careful because I will catch you. In case you’re wondering, I also serve on the neighborhood watch.” Obviously, Lorde was winding Liner up on purpose. And it worked, as a vein bulged on his forehead.

“Hey, Lorde, so where exactly is it okay to sleep, then?”

“Any place that would inconvenience the townsfolk is out.”

“Doesn’t that just depend on your interpretation?!”

“By the way, if you’re caught, you will be detained for three days! That’s the law that I’ve just decided on, because I’m the king!”

“Don’t make laws that target us with such pinpoint accuracy! I knew I’d take

you down here!” Although he’d leveled up, Liner still grew hotheaded really quickly. I had no choice but to intervene once more, and I accepted Lorde’s proposal without bargaining.

“Okay, Lorde, we’ll pay your lodging fee.”

“But, Sieg!”

Liner tried to interrupt, but I cut him off again. “Lorde, you don’t mind if we work in town, do you?”

“Of course not! Or rather, I think I want you to do that! I think I want you two to be permanent residents here!”

After receiving that confirmation, I threw my copper coins to her. “First, we’ll only rent one room. We’ll start work tomorrow to pay for the rest.”

“Huh...”

She was clearly suspicious that I’d paid the fee without complaint. I responded with a poker face. It was sad to say, but thanks to the past few weeks of living in a different world, I’d become a master of deception. Even now, I could see my deception skill at work.

“Okay, I’ve received your payment. Welcome to the Demon Queen’s Castle Inn! I, the very Demon Queen herself, will show you to your room shortly!”

“Yes, please.”

Lorde was joking around, trying to get a read on what I was thinking. Despite her beaming face, her eyes were as sharp as blades. It was a look befitting a ruler who bore the burden of an entire country on her shoulders. At the same time, I could tell she was enjoying this game of deception.

After a brief nostalgic smile, Lorde turned away and began walking toward the castle. We followed, and on the way back, I asked her about what kind of job I could do starting the next day. She questioned me about our needs in response, probing me a little.

“I know you’re going to be based at the castle, but where are you going to work? Honestly, I’m sure the two of you would be sought after anywhere, wouldn’t you?”

“If possible, I’d like to work at the blacksmith’s shop. Could I help Mr. Reynand out?”

“Huh? Where we were earlier? That old man is incredibly strict.”

“I’d like to learn a little blacksmithing while I save money. If I can smith on my own, it won’t cost me much, will it?”

“Well, I was the one who suggested that, after all... Yes, that’s fine. Gramps there is the only one who repairs things for the whole town, so I think they’ll be happy to have you helping and speeding up the process, Kanamin. I’ll talk to the old man for you tomorrow.” She gave her consent without any suspicions about my motives. Apparently, this option was within the range of her expectations. Then she turned her attention to Liner.

“What should I do? If possible, I’d like something that’s lucrative in a short amount of time,” Liner said.

“Would you like to help me?”

“You mean with your job on the neighborhood watch? But aren’t you also the king? I haven’t seen anything stately about you...”

Lorde’s expression changed slightly in response to Liner’s questions. It was only for the briefest of moments, but I could tell she was upset.

“I do fulfill the role of King, but my job is actually being a gardener. My side hustle is acting as part of the neighborhood watch. I’ll pay you handsomely if you help me with both.”

“Gardener and neighborhood watch... I’m used to harder, more dangerous jobs.” Liner wasn’t really on board. He said something masochistic so naturally.

However, Lorde’s proposal was the most ideal plan at the moment, so I couldn’t help but speak up. “Looking for hard and dangerous jobs isn’t healthy, Liner. Why don’t you just see how it goes?” I made eye contact with him from an angle that only he could see. He nodded in agreement, sensing I had a plan up my sleeve.

“Yeah, okay, that’s right. If Sieg says I should, I’ll try it out.”

“Okay! So Kanamin will be at Beth’s house, and you’ll be with me!” Lorde

began skipping happily, as all the arrangements for us to live here fell into place. There seemed to be some secret meaning behind everything she said, but there was nothing hidden behind the fact that she was happy to have more friends to live with. Our faces were grim as we followed her to the castle.

Lorde led us to a smaller room where we would be living in close quarters. There were plenty of large rooms available that could easily accommodate a single family, so the fact that she had gone to the trouble of choosing this room seemed like harassment to me, but according to Lorde, “the size of the room depends on the number of copper coins you pay!” That seemed like a natural view to have for an innkeeper.

Liner and I began preparing for life in the smaller room without any complaints. After a quick cleaning, we sat down on the chairs and began to discuss our plans. I had already confirmed with *Dimension* that Lorde had gone into town while we were cleaning. It seemed she was going to report to the townsfolk that we would be working here. In the meantime, I started outlining our escape plan.

“Liner, I want you to keep an eye on Lorde.”

“Keep an eye on her? Oh, so that’s why you said I should take the job with her. But what’s the point? We’ll never get out of the Dungeon just by watching that idiot...”

“Don’t worry about it. Actually, I’ve already come up with a way to get past the dragon.”

“Really? Just what I’d expect from you!”

“During the battle with Palinchron, I saw three of Kanami the Founder’s spells from a thousand years ago. If I can use those, I can beat Elfenreize.” I was sure that those spells, the most powerful ones, had been created by Kanami the Founder specifically for Aikawa Kanami.

“The spells were *Torsion*, *Dimension: Faultline*, and *Distance Mute*. The effects were ‘attack magic that cannot be blocked,’ ‘spatial magic that cannot be negated,’ and ‘instant death magic that cannot be resisted,’ so learning any one of those would be more than enough.”

“Spells from Kanami the Founder, huh? Even just hearing about them makes them sound terrifying. I’d heard that you were the founder of the Church of Levahn but...I guess I still didn’t believe it. It’s a weird feeling...” Liner took a deep breath as he learned about the effects of the spells. At the same time, he laughed a little at the fact that I was the founder of his religion. He could no longer worship me as a god, so he had no choice but to laugh at me.

“Please don’t worry about that too much. My memories of being Kanami the Founder are filled with holes, so just keep treating me like normal.”

“Yeah, I will. God or no god, it doesn’t make much difference to me. So, which spell are you planning on using?” he asked, returning to our escape plan.

“I was thinking of trying the ‘instant death magic that cannot be defended against,’ *Distance Mute*. I think I could take Elfenreize down in one shot with it.”

“One shot? Even with his hard scales?”

“It’s a spell that inserts a part of itself into an opponent’s body and removes their soul. So defensive abilities don’t matter.”

“Really? I suppose that’s what I would expect of spells by Kanami the Founder. It stinks of foul play.”

“It seemed like the spell was created with Tiara, the other founder.” *Distance Mute* was clearly a spell that had been developed with her help. The magic gem extraction technique that was present throughout the entire Dungeon had been incorporated into dimension magic and then sublimated into a spell that could disable any enemy without question.

“So, will you be able to use this *Distance Mute* immediately?”

“Unfortunately not...but with a little time, I think I’ll be able to cast it. That’s why I wanted a space where I could concentrate on developing my magic.” I was confident that I would be able to re-create that spell. I could tell that the battle with Palinchron had deepened my understanding of dimensional magic. The most important thing was that I was now a genuine dimension mage after the removal of the Thief of Water’s Essence soul gem. There was nothing more important if I wanted to develop new dimensional magic.

“So that’s why you agreed to rent this place. I’ll leave Elfenreize to you, then.

What should I be watching for?”

“I want you to keep Lorde’s attention away from me as much as possible. Just learn magic from her and work with her.”

“Do you really want to go that far to hide that spell from her?”

“Yes, because I think it will be the trump card when it comes to fighting her as well.”

“I’m surprised! You’re a natural softy, so I thought you’d trust her more.”

“Just what sort of image do you have of me?”

“It’s how I’ve imagined you since the Brawl.”

“Ugh, it’s all that emcee’s fault!” I grimaced and cursed at the source of the slander as I remembered all of the comments from the Brawl.

“Moving on, do you think we *will* have to fight her, Sieg?”

I really didn’t want to leave it at that, but I had no choice but to go back to our actual conversation. “I’m certain she’ll become a problem for us at a critical moment. Maybe that’s what being a Guardian of the Dungeon is all about. No doubt about it, there’s something off about Lorde...and it’s something I won’t be able to avoid.” That was an irrational prediction with no guarantees, but I was convinced, based on my experience to date, so there was no doubt in my mind that’s how it would play out.

“I understand. If that’s what you say, then I’ll believe you. After all, if it’s being said by the hero who’s already defeated three Guardians, then it must be true.”

“Liner, I’m naturally talented, but stop with that stuff about being a hero.”

“I won’t. My brother and Ms. Wyss approved of you. You’re a hero.”

“O-Okay...” Liner would never back down when it came to his brother, so I gave up trying to persuade him. “I’ll get right down to it and focus on creating the spell here in this room.”

“And in the meantime, I’ll keep an eye on Lorde. She’s in town right now, so while I’m at it I’ll get us something to eat. Let’s do our best to save money by eating out as little as possible. Is there anything in particular you’d like? I can

make most things.”

“You can cook?”

Liner was a spoiled rich kid, and I’d arbitrarily decided there was no way he could do such things.

“I had to learn, since I’m Fran’s brother...”

“Oh, yeah...right...” I grimaced, remembering the arrogant, blonde, pigtailed girl who really believed in “my way or the highway.”

Liner quickly spoke up again. “But no more! She’s not here! No more tea every hour, no more begging for homemade sweets, no more teasing at every turn! And no more sadistic twins, needlessly reckless leaders with the fortitude of tissue paper, or perverted Guardians who gleefully try to put handcuffs on you! This is such an easy party! I’ll at least prepare a full course meal for dinner!”

His vigorous shouting clearly showed everything he’d been through up to this point. I knew that feeling painfully well, and I was currently feeling the same way. If it was just Liner and me in the party, I didn’t have to fear death every hour, or eavesdropping, or the intense gazes, or the magic filling every available space around me.

Yes, how easy... My heart and stomach lining are healing, I thought. “You’ve put up with a lot, Liner, good job.”

“A lot has happened, but I’m glad to have made it this far. Thank you, Sieg.”

After a firm handshake, we began our Dungeon escape plan. Liner went outside to monitor Lorde, and I sat in my room in a meditative pose and began to knead the magic.

I imagined the spells of Kanami the Founder. Not only had I seen the spells, but I’d been on the receiving end of them too. It was easy to recall their composition. Above all, the fact that it was magic I had created initially gave me an advantage in re-creating it. In order to replenish my offensive options, reduced from the loss of ice magic, I focused my consciousness on the magic power within me. I would continue to develop this spell as the Thief of Dimension’s Essence.



I continued working on the spell from that night all the way into the next morning. I alternated between full-power spell crafting sessions and short bouts of sleep, and continued with my process of trial and error even when I couldn't move. My MP was totally depleted as a result. Weariness flooded my whole body, and there was a dull ache in my head. However, thanks to my efforts, something new had appeared in my stats.

[MAGIC]

DIMENSION MAGIC: Dimension 1.69 Connection 1.03 Form 1.07
Dimension: Faultline 1.00

The only magic that had reached a level of perfection recognized by my menu was *Dimension: Faultline*. Its effect was to create a fault line in a dimension. Once, when I had fought against Lorwen, the Thief of Earth's Essence, I had strengthened *Form* and thrown his sense of distance into disarray. Increasing the perfection of that improvised magic had made more letters float into my menu. Of course, its effect and magic consumption was incomparably higher than that of *Form*. The remaining two techniques were far from being at a workable level, but the night of intense development had enabled me to handle the magic that would serve as a template for them. *Torsion* could build dimensional flowers, but its magical killing power was low, and I was facing difficulty with *Distance Mute* when it came to making it stick to inorganic objects.

However, there was no doubt that I could develop magic at a rate that wouldn't be possible under normal circumstances. To begin with, according to common knowledge, it was impossible to create new magic. Incidentally, I'd also tried some ice magic, but never succeeded with it. This was despite the fact that dimensional magic was more difficult to construct. Perhaps it was because of the magical attribute that came from my body. I had lost the magic gem from Thief of Water's Essence and now I only had dimension magic left. I wanted to somehow find a way to use ice magic with dimension magic again, but I would have to master dimension magic first.

“I’d like to at least be able to use *Wintermension* again...” There was nothing that could surpass that winter magic in terms of versatility. Come to think of it, I’d tended to default to that spell all the time. “No, I can’t ask for things I don’t have. I have to fight with what I *do* have.”

The first thing I had to do was raise my head and avoid looking backward. After all, I had to start working in the city today. There was no time to be depressed.

I immediately went to wake up Liner, who was sleeping in the same room. I shook his shoulder, and he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and stood up. He looked tired, probably because he’d been scrambling to keep Lorde away from me all day yesterday. Lorde had been busy outside the city but seemed to be trying to check on me every once in a while while I was holed up in the castle.

Liner woke up and quietly began to get ready for work without a word of complaint. I could see that he was determined not to miss work, no matter his physical condition. It might have been his nature, but more than that it was his obsession to save money.

We did have very little coin between the two of us. We needed to save up quickly to get some rations to eat in the Dungeon. The journey up from the sixty-sixth floor would probably take at least a day. Basically, it took several hours just to conquer one floor. Even if you knew the way, it still took about an hour. Simple calculations showed that it would take sixty-six hours, or about three days, to get all the way up to the surface. We would be consuming water and food throughout that time. To be on the safe side, I wanted a week’s worth of food in my Inventory. In other words, we couldn’t leave without earning money not only for living expenses but also for a week’s worth of rations.

Liner and I, feeling motivated, went out into the castle’s garden. Lorde was standing there waiting for us. It looked like she was fixing her hair as we approached her. We were struck dumb for just a moment at the sight. Beneath the overgrown, dark green trees, Lorde’s hair shone in the dappled sunlight and faintly emitted a light of its own. Her green hair, which was practically emerald, and the dim green magic light that spilled from her body were so fantastically beautiful. Yes, fantastic. The word “illusory” came to mind as I looked at her. Her hair was down, and her appearance had totally changed from when she’d

had it up in a ponytail. She was not a lively young girl; she had such a womanly allure that one could mistake her for a princess who'd been kept hidden from society. Her eyes were a deeper color than usual, and the act of tying up her hair gave her a sense of elegance. What surprised me the most was that Lorde looked more put-together than usual. In her natural state, she looked like the young princess of a powerful country.

But that image soon vanished. Lorde noticed our approach and slackened her lips. Then, with her hair tied up and waving like a tail, she rushed toward us in a way that lacked even a hint of ladylike grace.

"Oh, you're awake! Good morning, you two!"

We were bewildered by this sudden change, but managed to return the greeting.

"Now then, shall we start our first day of work? First, Kanamin will go to Grandfather Reynand's place. I talked to him yesterday and it's all fine. And Liner, you'll be with me! You said you wanted to train in magic right after work ended... Are you sure you'll be okay? You won't be tired?" Lorde asked cheerfully as she tilted her head to the side. She was back to her regular self. There wasn't the slightest sense of a regal young lady left.

"Yeah... Yes, I'm ready. Since Sieg doesn't have any offensive magic now, I have to learn as much as I can. I want to be learning from you at all times," Liner responded, having composed himself. In order to draw her attention away from me, he appealed to her using his own desire to clear the Dungeon.

"Uh-huh, that's a good idea. I wasn't called the 'Queen of Magic' for no reason, so leave it to me! But, Kanamin, are you sure you'll be okay? I can advise you on Dimension magic if you want!"

"No, I'm okay... I still don't feel great since losing the other magic gem. I'll work to earn money but otherwise plan on taking it easy in the castle."

"You don't feel well? Did you catch a cold?" Concerned, Lorde put her hand to my head. It didn't seem to be in bad faith or self-interest at all, and I believed she truly was worried about me. However, I hardened my heart against her and kept using my swindling skill. I'd seen plenty of times how genuine kindness and true madness could live together in a Guardian. I couldn't lose focus. I wouldn't

go so far as to treat her like a monster and avoid her as I'd done with Alty, but I would refrain from interacting with her as much as possible until I was back aboveground.

"No, I don't think it's a cold. I just feel a little sluggish, so please don't worry about me."

"Really? Well, tell me if anything happens. I certainly wouldn't be mean to you when you're sick."

"Oh, so you're aware that you're mean to me..."

"Ah, forget it. Don't worry about it, I'm always a nice girl!" Lorde insisted childishly, realizing she'd said something she hadn't meant to let slip.

We smiled grimly in response and headed into town. Locals waved at us as we passed, and it seemed like Lorde had spread the word about us at some point yesterday. The townspeople welcomed us as new neighbors, and many of them kindly offered to help us if we had any problems or concerns.

Under their warm auspices, I arrived at Mr. Reynand's house. The first thing I saw was the cat-eared girl playing in the yard again. She saw me as well, and just like yesterday, she came up to me, her tail twitching.

"You really came! Good morning, everyone! Grandpa's inside again, Your Majesty."

"Mornin'! But I'll be leaving soon. I just came to drop off Kanamin today."

"Huh? The Commander of the Queensguard is going to be working here?"

"That's right! He'll be your employee—no, your butler! So put him to good use."

"Yay!" Beth's eyes grew rounder and became difficult to meet, since Lorde was promising her wild things.

I stepped forward to introduce myself and correct the misunderstanding. "It's nice to meet you, Beth. I'm Aikawa Kanami. I'll be helping with the smithing."

"Oh, well, okay... It's nice to meet you Sir Commander of the Queensguard..." She blushed and hung her head. The cheerfulness she'd shown to Lorde disappeared, and she curled in on herself in embarrassment.

“You don’t have to address me so formally; you can just call me by my name.”

“No way! I can’t ever do that! You’re Sir Commander of the Queensguard!”
For some reason, Beth shook her head stubbornly.

“Isn’t calling me ‘Sir Commander of the Queensguard’ kind of a pain?”

“It’s not even a little bit of a problem! I don’t know what to say, but when I see you, you’re the only thing I can think about! My heart goes *squee* and I can’t call you anything other than Sir Commander of the Queensguard!” She clasped both her hands to her chest as she said something difficult for me to comprehend.

From her shy demeanor, I wondered if she admired older men. But there was an unsettling feeling that told me that wasn’t true. It felt like I was looking at myself in the past, like something that wasn’t really me was being mixed into me. In an effort to find out who Beth truly was, I took a step closer to her, but Lorde cut me off.

“Hee hee hee, as usual, Kanamin is such a sinful man! To bewitch the heart of such a tender little girl!”

“Wait, that’s a weird thing to say. I’m going to be working with her grandfather...”

“But it seems like you can’t come up with anything else to say! C’mon, say something cooler, just like old times!”

“Just like old times? What do you mean?”

“Huh? Umm, like someone with a sister complex who’s full of hormones and teenage rebellion!”

“You’ve clearly thought about this a lot to be able to come up with that kind of answer... Just what did Kanami the Founder get up to a thousand years ago?” I was shocked by the completely absurd characterization of the old Kanami.

“Um, ah, um, okay, Sir Commander of the Queensguard! Let me take you to grandfather!” Beth, unable to see me so dispirited, pulled me by the hand toward the house. Lorde and Liner waved me off.

“You take it easy! Liner and I are gonna go to work too!”

“See you, Sieg. I’ll leave the rest to you,” said Liner. He was serious. I could tell he was determined to do his job to the best of his ability. I relaxed a bit, knowing I could trust him to keep an eye on Lorde.

We separated, and Beth pulled me into the house. Ahead of me, her face was bright red, though I didn’t have any memories of her. I reached the workshop having no idea what she was so embarrassed about.

“Okay, Sir Commander of the Queensguard! Please do your best at work today!” Beth practically ran away to get out of there, and I was left alone with Mr. Reynand, who’d been waiting in the workshop.

He glared at me fiercely in the silent workshop. “Did you do something to my granddaughter, laddie?” He seemed to suspect some sort of relationship between Beth and me. It was only natural. If my sister had brought some strange man in like that, I would probably be asking the same thing.

“No, nothing happened, truly. No, *really* truly...” That was the only way I could respond. Even if she had been blushing and looking at me with great interest and had ended up running away from me super quickly, all I’d done was introduce myself.

“Hmph. No need to be that scared, I’m not blaming you for anything. I see...so there’s still a bit left...”

“Huh?”

“How long you gonna stand there for? C’mon to the back.”

I’d steeled myself for the interrogation to continue—that’s what I would’ve done in Mr. Reynand’s shoes—but instead, he invited me into his workshop without pressuring me further. As I entered, I noticed that the workshop looked different from how it had yesterday. First of all, the temperature in the room was completely different. The fire in the furnace against the wall was lit, and there were several full buckets of water next to it. It was a little more similar to the blacksmith shop I’d seen at Epic Seeker.

“You seem like an interesting guy. I never thought you’d want to work here. I couldn’t believe it when Lorde told me yesterday. Blacksmithing is harder than you think, laddie.”

“I know, but I still want to work here.” While I was earning money, I would also gain skills that were directly beneficial to exploring the Dungeon. The more I was able to improve my blacksmithing skill, the more I would be able to make the items I needed for diving on my own. It was really ideal, if I thought about it simply as manual labor that would increase my physical abilities. Also, I’d made my decision partly based on Mr. Reynand’s behavior. There was no way this man was a stranger to me.

“Hmph...” He snorted as I answered without hesitation. Then he reached for a tool that was propped up against the wall and easily picked up a giant hammer that looked like it would be way too heavy for his old body. It was surprising to see, even though I knew it was due to his stats.

“Well then, let’s get to work. Have you ever done any blacksmithing work before, laddie?”

“Um, just a little...”

“Even a little bit is good. I only do simple repairs, anyway. Take a look into that room.” Inside the workshop was a door leading to another room. I opened it as instructed and found a dimly lit space filled with pots, scissors, and other household tools. It seemed to be used for storage.

“These are things townspeople have asked me to fix. I’m going to fix the bent handles and holes now, so bring a few of them over to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Work had begun. I quickly moved into the store room and grabbed a few of the items. I brought them over to him, and he then took them to the furnace.

“That will be the kind of job I’ll have you doing, laddie. Let’s begin.”

I moved, remembering how I’d helped Mr. Alibers before. I didn’t have help from my Dimension magic, but I felt I’d become more discerning than before. I predicted Mr. Reynand’s thoughts, felt the flow of the entire forge, and searched for necessary items in the workshop. First, I put the hammers and tongs of different sizes, which Mr. Reynand would need throughout the smithing process, within easy reach of his hands. He snorted again when he saw that. I was a little scared, since I wasn’t sure if that habit of his meant he was pleased or disappointed.

“Hm, you do seem to know a little bit.”

I thought that was a compliment...maybe.

“If you know that much, I won’t tolerate any mistakes. Let’s go.” Mr. Reynand resumed his work, his movements powerful despite his old age. Although my main goals right now were to recover MP and save money, I didn’t intend to cut corners. I planned to hone my skills here, even if only a little. Therefore, I followed his movements with my eyes, trying not to miss any of his techniques. To be honest, his blacksmithing skills were very different from those of Mr. Alibers of Epic Seeker. That wasn’t really a surprise, seeing as they were from different countries and eras, but the difference in skill level was truly massive. I was sorry to say this about Mr. Alibers, but there was such a thing as the wisdom of old age. It took me only a few seconds to realize that Mr. Reynand was several cuts above the other man.

The first thing that surprised me was that even though he was smithing, he was consuming magic power. Every time Mr. Reynand swung the hammer, I could see with my naked eye a rush of magic power. Looking closely, I noticed a magic formula inscribed on the hammer. It was worthy of being called a magical tool. The moment it struck the iron, magic seeped into the metal. As if to reinforce the iron, the magic formed a net and stuck to the iron, and as soon as it cooled, the magic fixed in place. It was a blacksmithing technique that was beyond special. No, this was a completely different skill altogether.

Smithing was one of my skills. I’d come here with the intention of swinging a hammer with him rather than being a dogsbody, but it seemed that would be impossible. There was too much of a difference in our skills. Above all, he worked too fast. I didn’t have the slightest bit of down time.

“Next! Bring it quick, laddie!”

I couldn’t keep up with the skilled Mr. Reynand. Not only was he lean, but his basic stats were just too high. The two combined into a formidable speed. Within a few minutes, I was sweating profusely. I couldn’t fully prepare what he wanted, and he shouted at me again and again. It was a nostalgic feeling. I hadn’t been reprimanded like this since working at the tavern in Vart. I began smiling unconsciously as I worked. Part of it was simply that I loved my job, but

more than that, I smiled in the face of unexpected good fortune. The more skilled the people around me were, the stronger I would become. I was a mage who specialized in imitation, as Lorwen had described me.

There was nothing more gratifying than conquering the Dungeon. Competitive spirit and greed began welling up in me. I admired Mr. Reynand's skill, my heart beat fast, and I wanted it for myself from the bottom of my heart. It was the same feeling I'd had upon first seeing Ms. Sera's and Lorwen's skills with a sword, so I desperately helped Mr. Reynand with his work. Orange light leaked from the furnace as I kept the dry wood burning so as not to lose heat. Using a bellows to blow air, I raised the temperature as high as I could. Although I wasn't allowed to control the temperature in detail, I stayed focused throughout the entire process. I had been in many heated battles before, and I could understand temperatures in excess of ten thousand degrees down to the last decimal point. It was likely Mr. Reynand had reached that level too. That was why his skill level in smithing was 3.12. I could tell that his senses had surpassed those of a mere expert and crossed into the level of being a national treasure, and that he was acutely aware of the furnace, the iron, and all of the heat in the room.

Mr. Reynand hit with the hammer and then threw water on the hot metal to temper it. As the process was repeated, more and more tools from the warehouse were repaired. At the same time, the inside of the workshop was soon covered in a large amount of slag and dust, which I swept up with a broom every now and then. All the while, I kept my eyes on Mr. Reynand. A little bit of magic was used in the cooling process as well. Not only was there fire and water magic for simple temperature control, but it looked like an earth magic spell was also being used, which affected the strength of the iron. A wide variety of magic was woven together, elevating mere pots and ladles to a higher level of existence. If this were a game, the items would be called "refined" or "+1." I used *Analyze* on the iron pot, thinking it might be called a "Magic Pot" or something like that.

Reynand's Iron Pot

A strong iron pot.

The Blessed Iron Smithing technique has elevated it to a higher level.

It had a description like it was some kind of legendary weapon. I could see a little bit of the lawlike nature of *Analyze*. It seemed that once a certain level of technique had been applied, the name of the person who made the modification would be placed at the front of the item. Despite being a gamer, even I had the good sense to refrain from using words like “refined” or “+1.”

After making sure that the repaired tools had been marked with Reynand’s seal, we took a break.

“Um, don’t you make magic tools and weapons?” I asked, while wiping away my sweat and rehydrating. His blacksmithing skills were tremendous, but I was a little frustrated because all he seemed to make were everyday items.

“I don’t get any orders for them. Even if I did, it would only be for magic tools for everyday use.”

“So you’re saying there’s no demand for weapons in this city?”

“There was. But now there’s no one in the place where the demands were being made.”

Hearing that immediately made me think of the castle I was living in. “Um, do you mean the Demon Queen’s Castle?”

“Yes, Viaysia Castle.”

“Oh, so the official name is Viaysia?”

“They’ve both become official names; you can call it what you like.”

That bit of information was different from what Lorde had told me. “Mr. Reynand, do you know why there’s nobody in that castle?” I asked, trying to get more information out of him.

He was quiet for a long moment. “Break’s over, laddie. I’ll decide if I tell you that based on your work.”

“O-Okay.”

He cut our conversion short and went back to his smithing. Since he'd gone back to work, I couldn't continue my self-centered idle talk, so I got up as well. Again, I took out the broken tools from the warehouse, and we repeated the repair process. It was hard work, so hard that if my level had been any lower, I was sure I would've collapsed. In a workshop as hot as a dungeon, an ordinary person wouldn't even be able to remain standing.

Mr. Reynand was relentless in his efforts to work me hard. I couldn't really complain, though, since it gave me the chance to copy his skills. We continued smithing silently until dusk.



I slumped back into a chair, breathing heavily, after we finished our work.

"Hmph, you really kept up." Mr. Reynand seemed impressed as he gazed steadily at me. Working as hard as I could had paid off. But in return, most of my stamina had been drained.

"Are you always this busy?"

He shook his head at my question. "Hmph. If I was this busy every day, I'd wither up."

"I suppose so..." Even I, a man who was getting closer and closer to becoming a monster, couldn't help but heave a sigh at the amount of work he had to do. It seems that today's workload had been unusual after all.

"I thought I'd get you to give up and quit this job quickly, but you kept up with me easily..."

I knew it. After the storage room had been emptied of tools, I'd figured something was wrong when he'd started to reforge the repaired items. Apparently, the whole thing was an attempt to harass me. I could only smile bitterly.

Seeing this, Mr. Reynand also smiled thinly. "You've really changed, laddie. You used to be so short-tempered." His eyes narrowed as he remembered some other me. Perhaps he was thinking of the Kanami the Founder that Apostle Sith and the Guardian Ide had known. "Back then, you would've immediately said, 'This is too much trouble. I quit.' You really have changed...or

no, maybe this is your true self, laddie. You look exactly the same as when I first met you. How nostalgic.” He continued to talk of his own volition. The content was definitely information from a thousand years ago.

“Um, are you going to tell me what happened a thousand years ago?”

Mr. Reynand looked a little troubled, then said with a serious expression, “Find out where Lorde is right now, laddie.”

“Huh? Uh, okay...” I was overcome by his seriousness and cast *Dimension* immediately. I’d only spread the net of magic out a little bit before I immediately found Lorde. She was in the garden of a mansion, snapping away with a pair of scissors. Liner was next to her, helping.

“She’s working in a really impressive mansion. So she really is a gardener.”

“A mansion... I’m sure this distance will be fine, but let’s talk in the store room just to be safe.”

He made us change locations without a single thought for me, settling down on a comfortable table in the storeroom. It seemed like he really didn’t want Lorde to hear what he had to say.

“All right, laddie. You have good instincts to choose my place to work, as I would expect. I am one of the few people left in this place.” He continued to talk, even though my brain really hadn’t caught up. “If you’d been the same degenerate boy this time around, I wouldn’t have told you anything, but since you’ve changed, I can tell you everything—about what happened a thousand years ago and about this place.”

“Please tell me.” I nodded without hesitation. There was no reason to refuse his offer.

“I have something to ask of you in return. Please save Lorde. We are no longer able to do it.” He looked utterly despondent. The look on his face told me that the cheerful Guardian was in a very bad state.

“I thought she seemed to be in a position where she needed help...”

“I tried everything I could here for a thousand years, but it was impossible. She always says, ‘That’s enough, thank you,’ but nothing’s been resolved. She

still has lingering attachments.”

“So you know that she’s a Guardian.” The phrase “lingering attachment” told me he understood how it worked.

“Yes, I know. Or more precisely, everyone in Viaysia knew it. We all knew this was a space made for killing Lorde.”

A space made for killing Lorde. I raised my eyebrows at that disturbing phrasing. Perhaps I was the one who’d created it. I waited for Mr. Reynand’s next words to find out the full extent of it all.

“This is a space that you created for her a thousand years ago. Hence, it has fulfilled all of Lorde’s wishes from that time. If her lingering attachment had been for peace in Viaysia, it would have been perfect. But that wasn’t what kept her tethered here. She realized that in the first hundred years. Then, in the second hundred years, the world began to crumble; in the third hundred years, people’s souls began to break down; and after five hundred years, everything went wrong.”

Mr. Reynand spoke so matter-of-factly that I could not immediately comprehend the tragic words. Nevertheless, his story continued without stopping.

“You might have already noticed that everything in this city was created from the memories of the continent through Recollection Drops. Everything, including the people. But the souls of most of them are so worn out that they no longer retain their original forms. Like my grandchildren outside, they have lost their memories of the past and have become merely reenactors of the peace of Viaysia. Ironically, in a world that was meant to wear away Lorde’s soul, she is the only one who still retains all her memories.”

By comparing that information with what I’d gotten from Lorde, I began to understand Viaysia. A thousand years ago, when the Dungeon had been built, Kanami the Founder had tried to thank Lorde. That was why he’d gone to the trouble of creating a space where all wishes came true, just for her. The result had been the peaceful world of Viaysia. Everyone involved in this, including Kanami the Founder and the people of Viaysia, had thought that Lorde would be able to fulfill her lingering attachment here. But that’s not what had

happened. Only Lorde remained the same as a thousand years ago, as the Thief of Wind's Essence.

I could see the rules of this space that was full of discomfort. But it wasn't helpful to talk about. That was probably why Mr. Reynand wanted me to save Lorde.

"I'm beginning to get the gist of it. But knowing that, does it mean that your soul is safe?"

"No, my memory has almost faded. However, I was more of a monster than most people a thousand years ago, so I have more of myself still left. No, maybe not. Maybe it's because of my own lingering attachment that I can't leave Lorde behind." Mr. Reynand gave a weak smile, but it ended up looking too lurid.

Even though my age supposedly exceeded a thousand years, I hadn't yet lived twenty years in the physical sense. I could imagine the time span of a thousand years, but I couldn't relate to it. I could only vaguely understand that there was tremendous suffering involved.

"Lorde's been telling herself that she'd been saved, been rescued, that she'd been rewarded, that it was all for the best and was all over now for hundreds of years, over and over again. There's no way she's not broken. So please help her. I know it's not right to ask you to do that, but please..." Mr. Reynand's head, which I thought could never be lowered to anyone, bowed very deeply.

"I thought you didn't like Lorde."

"I hate her. I hate both of you. Because of you two, everyone in Viaysia is dead. Even my grandchild, who is playing outside now. Yes, everyone is dead, and Lorde won't leave because she feels guilty."

"Because of us? I'm sorry, can you elaborate on that?"

"Very well, since you ought to know. We in the North were at war with those in the South. Our sovereign, Queen Lorde, united all of the monarchs of the Northern kingdoms. Then, just as they were about to win the war, Queen Lorde and Commander Kanami of the Queensguard, fled the battlefield together. They left all their soldiers to die, abandoned the people who had protected them, and disappeared."

“That’s something worth holding a grudge over...” It was easy to imagine what would happen to a country that lost its chief executive during wartime. Countless people must have died as a result of that one act.

“But enough about that. It’s over. Everyone here has had enough of it. This space functioned properly only with regard to the grudge from a thousand years ago. Everyone was able to forgive everyone. Except Lorde didn’t end there. Perhaps because she is bound by her lingering attachment, her existence has not diminished at all over time.”

“Even though she’s been forgiven? Do you happen to know what’s keeping her here?”

“I’m at a loss because I don’t know. But what she wanted to achieve, even if she had to give up everything, was something that she could not do in her position as queen. That much I do understand. Do you know what it could be, laddie?”

To be honest, I couldn’t think of a single thing. Without the memories of that time, it would be absolutely impossible to figure it out.

“No, I have no idea.”

“I see. After all, it must hurt to have lost your memories...”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry too. It was unreasonable to ask. But I think the reason you’re here now is for her sake, laddie.”

I knew that Mr. Reynand was expecting me to do this, but I wasn’t sure I could live up to his expectations. What I was most worried about right now was what was happening aboveground. That’s why I was trying to trick him and get up there as quickly as possible. It was the exact opposite of what he was asking me to do.

Here or there. I had already given the answer as to which should be my priority, so I could only reply with vague words. “I’ll try my best...”

“That’s all I ask. Just think about it. I’m the one who’s asking for the impossible, after all.” Mr. Reynand seemed mollified. He knew that my mind

was more focused on what was happening above than on Lorde, but he said it was okay.

After our conversation ended, we cleaned up the workshop in silence, and that ended our day's work. I collected my wages and left the house to return to the castle.

"Oh! Oh, wait, Sir Commander of the Queensguard!"

Beth stopped me at the entranceway. Her face was flushed, just like it had been this morning. With a flurry of footsteps, she rushed to my side and handed me a cookie on a beautiful peach-colored handkerchief.

"I baked some sweets! Please try them!" From her trembling shoulders, I could tell that she was trying to summon up all the courage of her small body to say that.

"Thank you, I'll try one." Unable to let her courage go unnoticed, I nodded with a smile and popped a cookie into my mouth. The rare sugar content of the sweets soaked into my tired body. Even I, a picky eater, could say that they were delicious. To be more precise, they were close to the sweets of my old world, although maybe that wasn't quite accurate either. The taste was so nostalgic that I could only assume I had taught her how to make them.

"Yeah, it's really good. You're great at making sweets." I suppressed the trembling in my shoulders as Beth had and thanked her.

"I-I'm glad! I'll make it again! Please look forward to having them tomorrow too!" she answered bashfully, bouncing a little on the spot.

From her behavior and expression, I recognized that she really liked me a lot. Perhaps a thousand years ago, she had really admired Kanami the Founder. I could only assume so. And yet, it seemed that he left everything, including this child, to die. I think it was his resentment for Apostle Sith that made him do it, but even so, it wasn't something I could easily accept. I managed to smile back at her while being blamed for a mistake I couldn't remember.

"Sure...I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Sir Commander of the Queensguard!" Beth waved me off as I wandered into the thousand-year-old city enveloped in dark clouds.

That was how my first day of work ended. The blacksmithing with Mr. Reynand was more rewarding than the copper coins that had accumulated in my Inventory or the growth of my skills. I'd learned about what Lorde and I had done in the past. I'd learned the beginning of that story. Even though I could say I was only standing at the entrance to this place, I couldn't have felt more depressed.



My MP had recovered by about half during the day. Although my physical stamina was greatly depleted instead, I would have no trouble developing spells. In my room, I resumed my trial-and-error work on Dimension magic. I had already mastered *Dimension: Faultline*, so the next step was to concentrate on *Distance Mute*. I concentrated magic into my hands and touched desks and chairs as if I were putting my hands into my Inventory. Then, as if touching a 3D hologram, my fingertips slipped through them. However, they only passed through and couldn't interfere with the contents of the object.

I realized that the magic I'd been using up till now and *Distance Mute* were two different things. If I had to find a similarity, it would be *Dimension: Calculash—Realize*. That was magic that increased the number of dimensions I could see by one. And I think this *Distance Mute* was a spell that increased the dimensions I could touch by one. Like the magic of *Future Sight*, I didn't think I could acquire that feeling unless I shortened my own life for it. However, I honestly didn't like the idea of whittling away at my own life force during the spell development stage. In normal times, I was the kind of person who wanted to play it safe. However, even while I was saying that, the situation aboveground might have become very serious.

I was left worrying alone in my room. In the middle of all this, I heard a noise in the distance. Immediately I stopped my spell work and sent *Dimension* flying out. There shouldn't have been anyone in the castle. If there was someone here, it would be...

"It's me! I'm back! Let me join in!"

With a bang, the window of my room opened and Lorde came in. An apologetic Liner was right behind her. Clearly she'd broken free of his attempts

to keep her occupied.

“From what I heard, you two are going to eat something delicious together at night! I mean, why didn’t you call me yesterday?!”

Apparently, she couldn’t tolerate us eating dinner on our own. Lorde laughed, her canine teeth peeking out, as she approached me with a large burlap sack on her back. I supposed the bag contained a large amount of food. My heart ached at the sight of her, as she looked no older than a child. She looked innocent, but perhaps inside she was so damaged that she couldn’t even manage it. She was crumbling, broken, and even insane, as Mr. Reynand had put it. I couldn’t bear to kick her out of the room, thinking that her smile now was a survival technique of a girl who had lived for a thousand years. So I answered as best I could, as if I were a close friend.

“We’re cooking our own meals with the money we earned. Why would I call for you?”

“Because we’re friends! And because inviting me would be a sign of respect for your landlord!”

“No, I don’t really think of you as a friend, or respect you as a landlord...”

“Whaaat?! That’s just plain mean!”

“I don’t mind if you eat if you pay for it. But it’s three silver per meal.”

“Meanie! B-But I get it... I’ll give you a discount on the rent...”

“You should have said so from the beginning! We don’t have any money to spare, so we’re on a tight budget. In that case, you’re more than welcome.”

“Even though I was the one who suggested it, it feels too stingy...”

“Oh, yes, yes. If you pay the friend fee, we’ll be friends from today on. Or you can send us aboveground and we’ll be best friends.”

“You can’t make friends on the basis of that kind of deal!”

“Look, just tell me how much less the rent will be. That amount will determine how much of Liner’s cooking you can eat.”

“Ummm, umm...half off?”

“Okay then, you can have half a serving.”

“What’s with that math?!”

“I’m joking. Anyway, Liner, you should get started on dinner. I’m pretty hungry too.”

I could tell by the look in Liner’s eyes that he was asking if it was really okay that Lorde was here, and I nodded to him.

“All right, I’m headed to the kitchen. I’ll be back soon.”

“Oh, I think we should all make these things together! It will help us get to know each other better as friends!”

Lorde might have been doing it unconsciously, but the damage to my heart compounded, so I would’ve like for her to exercise a little more self-restraint. Knowing what was going on, it was too sad to see how desperate she was. When I thought about the fact that she’d spent hundreds of years saying goodbye to the people of this city and now lived with those who were merely shadows of their former selves, the word “friend” weighed heavy on my mind.

“I suppose... Would it be faster if all three of us did it together?” Naturally, I grew kinder toward her.

“Okay! I’ll take care of chopping vegetables and stuff! Rather, don’t leave anything *but* chopping to me!”

“I know you can’t cook. Regardless, you’d better be well-behaved.”

“Yes! I’m watching you!”

We left the room and walked through the quiet, empty castle. After living here alone for a thousand years, I could understand why she’d be excited to see new tenants. So we cooked dinner together, the three of us, while Lorde chatted with us about all sorts of nonsense.

On the table was a selection of meat dishes and bread. Lorde had boldly said that she would cut the vegetables, but because she was as picky as a child, the meat dishes ended up being the main course. There was steak with plenty of spices—a Viaysian specialty—chicken and seaweed soup, and steamed wild boar meat wrapped in greens. Our casual cooking, combined with her tastes,

had resulted in a terrible nutritional balance.

Lorde dug in with relish and didn't stop talking the entire time. In the middle of the conversation, I interrupted her to talk about magic.

"Lorde, you're teaching Liner some magic, right? Did you teach him any new wind spells?"

"No, Liner really has no sense for it. He's only learned two." Lorde laughed at her miserable pupil.

"It's not that I don't have any sense, it's that you're too weird!" Liner countered. "Don't compare me to a legendary queen from a thousand years ago. It's an incredible feat to learn two magic spells in just a few days."

"You're so naive, Liner! Don't be satisfied with the status quo! There are a lot of ridiculously strong monsters in the world, so there's nothing wrong with being diligent! Like Kanamin there! Or the knights of the South!"

"Like Sieg and Lorwen, huh? I do want to surpass them someday..."

"Hm? How do you know Arrace's name, Liner? Is he famous even a thousand years later? He's still the same, huh? Even after death..."

"No, Lorwen was the Trigesimal Guardian. I met him aboveground."

"Whoa, so he's up there now, huh?" Lorde was naturally under the impression that Lorwen was still alive.

"No, he's not anymore." Liner shook his head. "Sieg defeated him."

"What?" Lorde looked as if she'd just seen the sun rise from the west. Her expression didn't change for a long moment, so I followed up on Liner's words.

"Yeah, I defeated Lorwen."

"You did? Really?"

"Really."

"What? What? You tricked him?"

"I killed him in a duel."

"Was it like one of those duels in a foreign country where you shoot at each

other from a distance?”

“I faced him in the arena, where there were spectators, and I beat him in a duel.”

“You faced him? Oh, in other words, you took him hostage?”

“No, there’s no riddle to it. I’m telling you that I really beat him in a one-on-one fight.”

“Really? I don’t know if I believe that... Looking at Kanamin right now, I don’t think you could win.”

“Well, maybe it’s understandable that you don’t believe me.” I honestly believed that the victory over Lorwen had been the result of a combination of multiple coincidences. The most important thing was that the monstrous Thief of Earth’s Essence had been stopped only because of Reaper’s help. I couldn’t truthfully say that I was stronger than him.

For some reason, Liner started arguing loudly with Lorde. “Hey, we’re not lying. Sieg is a better swordsman than Mr. Lorwen without a doubt. And to prove it, Sieg inherited his sword.” Liner begged me with his eyes, so I had no choice but to pull Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan out of my Inventory.

“This magic... Is that really Lorwen Arrace?”

“Yes, it’s Lorwen’s magic gem. He became a sword after fulfilling his lingering attachments. And the Arrace clan’s style of swordplay has been passed down to Liner and me.”

“Huh, so that’s what happens when you die properly...” Lorde gazed intently at the crystal sword on the table, but she didn’t touch it or pick it up. “So what was your duel with him like? I’m really interested. He was a monster that couldn’t be defeated even through a mass campaign by the countries of the North. I can’t imagine him losing.”

“That’s true. Thinking about it now, the duel started from the very first moment that I met him. How could I understand his swordplay? That was the real battle.”

“Mm-hmm, and then?”

I told them everything from how I’d met Lorwen to how we’d parted, for both Lorde and Liner, who didn’t know all of it.

“So I entered the Brawl in order to get my memories back.”

“I’m surprised to hear Tida harassed you even though he’d been defeated. It seems his tenacity didn’t improve when being reincarnated. Maybe it was because we didn’t treat him nicely before...”

In order to explain my memories, I’d also explained about Palinchron and the other Guardians. When I’d mentioned Tida and Alty, Lorde had rolled her eyes, which showed that she knew them.

“I’m sure Liner knows more about what happened to Lorwen during the Brawl than I do. I’d like to know too, so could you tell us?”

“Of course. I’m sure Mr. Lorwen would like that too.” Liner then spoke as politely as I had. Lorwen had fought against the strongest, Mr. Glenn. He’d been driven into a corner by his contact with the nobles. Finally, he’d met Fenrir Arrace, the modern-day master swordsman, and found his answer within himself. And then, Lorwen and I had met in the finals and the Brawl had come to an end.

“I see. It was really the Guardian way of going out, huh?” Hearing about Lorwen’s end, Lorde looked envious from the bottom of her heart.

“Yeah...”

However, her expression changed quickly and she laughed. “But really, it’s also a story about Arrace being weakened and weakened again and again. And in the end, it’s pretty cowardly that you defeated him two-on-one using a technique that you stole from him. That kind of thing isn’t a duel, Kanamin.”

“Between us, it was more of a duel than anything else could have been!”

But now that she’d said it, that is what it looked like. However, since we’d believed ourselves to be able to compete head-to-head, we’d called it a victory by duel.

Lorde sat up with a refreshed look on her face, perhaps satisfied with

Lorwen's defeat. We'd cleared eighty percent of the dinner on the table while we'd been talking.

"All right, I'm going to aim for a real Guardian's ending too! So just as Arrace left his sword skills to the two of you, I'll have you two inherit my magic!"

It seemed that now we'd finished eating, it was time for magic training.

Since I was having problems with learning new Dimension magic at the moment, I was kind of interested in her abilities. Liner stood up and greeted Lorde as his teacher.

"Yes, I look forward to your lesson today. Fortunately, we're working with the same affinity, so the lessons are easy to understand."

"Okay, Liner, let's begin."

"Are we going to be training in here?"

"Yeah, that was the plan."

Liner glanced at me, and the look in his eyes was asking if that was okay. I responded with a small nod, giving him my permission.

"Okay, what will I be learning today?" he asked.

"Here you go. Levitate this spoon until I tell you to stop. If it wobbles even a little bit, I'll tickle you!" Lorde handed him a wooden spoon and then wiggled her fingers at him threateningly.

"If you're going to do that, I'd rather you just hit me..."

"Hmm? Why do you want to be punched so badly? That just makes me wonder about you... We should be having fun with training!"

"I don't like the idea of training without pain."

"Really?" She seemed surprised that he was such a twisted guy, but they both began casting a wind spell, with Lorde providing an example for Liner to copy.

The spoons in the palms of their hands levitated a few centimeters. Lorde's remained motionless, while Liner's trembled in the air.

"Okay, keep it like this."

“Damn...”

The training might have looked simple, but I could tell from the look of concentration on Liner’s face that it was very intense. Wind is something that’s supposed to blow freely and without restraint. To control it completely and bring it to a standstill was like trying to produce ice that wasn’t cold. The degree of difficulty was probably even greater than that of handling advanced magic.

Lorde remained cool, but Liner was sweating and struggling to keep his spoon in the air. The lesson was more serious than I had expected, and I couldn’t help but interject.

“I’m surprised. You don’t look like someone who would care so much about the basics, Lorde.”

“Well, of course. If you know the basics, you can apply them to anything you want, right?”

“I guess that’s true,” I admitted, since it was a reasonable line of thought.

“I can’t say I see how that works... Psh, geniuses...” Liner spat out as sweat poured off his body. It seemed like he wanted to complain more, but he was too focused on the wind to raise his voice.

Now that I thought about it, the two of us were the literal founder of magic and the legendary demon queen from a thousand years ago. There was likely no one who could surpass our talents and magic.

After a few minutes, Liner’s control over the wind completely dissolved, and the training ended as Lorde followed through on her threat and tickled him in the side.



“Hey...is there any training for normal people that’s not based on genius levels of ability? I want to get strong as fast as I can!” Liner was breathing heavily as he appealed for a change in training method.

“Hm, I suppose there are a few. You could use an incantation as part of the compensation for casting.”

“An incantation? That sounds like it could work. Please teach me that.”

“In that case, Kanamin was the master of compensation—or rather, the master of spellcrafting. Have you forgotten all about it?”

Lorde turned to me. Apparently I was the more appropriate teacher for incantations, but I had no memory of the technique.

“Unfortunately, I don’t really use spellcrafting, and I don’t know much about it.”

“Well, then I guess I’ll have to explain it to you. The act of incanting is, strictly speaking, the same thing as spellcrafting. In other words, the act of boosting your magic with spellcrafting was called ‘incanting’ to make it sound better.”

This was news to me. I’d had no idea that incanting, which was used so casually, had such deep lore to it.

“The basis of spellcrafting is sacrificing something to turn it into raw power. The level-up spell that you consider Holy magic is really just spellcrafting. That’s because it sacrifices magicbane and turns it into power.”

I had thought that spellcrafting was a type of magic, but it seemed like that was not actually the case. “Huh, so all it was was a change in the wording, and spellcrafting is actually present in all of our magic.”

“Yes. I think everyone uses the basics unconsciously. All we have to work on now is teaching you spellcrafting formulas instead of magic formulas.”

“Simple, huh? Even better, it suits me,” Liner said, smiling fervently at her explanation.

He seemed to be into it, but I had the complete opposite reaction. In the past, when I’d imitated Alty’s incantation, it had felt like I’d lost something precious to me. I guessed that was the compensation Lorde was talking about. I hadn’t

used fire magic incantations since that battle with Alty because I was afraid of the cost.

“Hey, Lorde...I’m sure some incantations have an irrevocable price, right? If so, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t teach Liner those, okay?”

“Sure, those exist. But if you don’t know them, you’ll regret it when you’re about to die. Any price is better than dying, right?”

“I guess so...” I said, but honestly I thought there were some incantations where dying was the better option.

“I think it’s good to know about them as a last resort.” Lorde clearly understood my concern, but came from the position of teaching them to use as a trump card. Liner was almost certainly the type who would use them without batting an eye. That’s why I’d been uncomfortable since this conversation had started. However, there were times when knowing incantations could save one from certain death. There were pros and cons.

While I was wondering which side had more weight to it, Liner was happy to begin questioning Lorde about the process. “It’s good to have a lot of cards in your hand. Please teach me, Lorde.”

“Okay, I’ll teach you a wind magic incantation. Basically, you have to use one that aligns with the magic’s element. The price you pay will also depend on the type of magic you’re trying to cast.”

“You kept saying ‘price’ and ‘compensation.’ What, exactly, will I be losing?”

“In general, the price is to simply lose the time you’re taking to cast the incantation. From there, the danger level increases. You could lose the magic you were going to use for recovery tomorrow, or even your physical strength. And then there’re the serious ones...” Lorde’s magic swelled in the middle of her explanation. It was the same huge, vicious magic that I’d felt when I first met her. Magic befitting of a Guardian.

“I will not choose the path I walk. I am the wind. I will continue to walk the entire world. I remember wishing so! Wynd!” Lorde incanted.

Wind began blowing along with her incantation. *Wynd*, which was supposed to be just a basic spell, turned into something else. The air around us condensed

into a ball of wind that she held between her hands. The air in the room instantly felt thinner.

I broke out in a cold sweat at the strength of that ball of wind. It felt like there was enough in it to fill an entire sky, like I had a ticking time bomb next to me. Even though Lorde had no malicious intent, it was still terrifying.

She laughed and dispersed the wind as she saw Liner and I take a step away from her. “That’s one thing you can do!” She laughed blithely. “There are a lot of wind incantations that lift my spirits. It feels like I’ve emptied an entire cask of wine!” It seemed like wind incantations could break through the high-energy emotional state that Lorde was often in.

“Jeez, and that’s the price even for serious people?” Liner took a deep breath.

“And that energy will never come back.”

“Never?”

“Nope, never. You’ll be just like me!”

“I-I’ll keep it in mind as a trump card...” Liner’s face twitched at the heavy price, and he took another step back from Lorde.

She didn’t seem to mind and continued to explain with a drunken look on her face. “One of the bad ones would be fire incantations. They burn your heart, and water incantations make your heart cold.”

Unexpectedly, I received an explanation about my experience with fire incantations. Apparently, the sensation of loss I’d felt was the burning away of something precious inside me.

“All right, Liner, why don’t we work on some easy incantations? Hm, I think it was *The path leading from the sky. The path leading to the heavens*. It’s another one that will raise your emotional state, but this one will go back to normal, so don’t worry.”

Liner nodded in agreement at Lorde’s proposed incantation. I figured that since I was here, I might as well practice it as well. There was no harm in learning it if it was one of the easier ones.

“The path leading from the sky. The path leading to the heavens.”

“The path leading from the sky. The path leading to the heavens.”

The image of using magic power to manipulate the flow of air came to mind. Then, as the incantation suggested, I tried making a path out of the air. However, only Dimension magic flowed from the palm of my hand. I couldn't manipulate wind magic. Liner, on the other hand, was skillfully manipulating a gentle breeze into a spiral shape.

“Yes, yes! It seems like you've already got it, Liner.”

“I'm feeling a little flustered. Is that the price? The magic does seem a bit more effective.”

“Kanamin on the other hand...”

I was desperately trying to create wind with my magic, but the air around me didn't even twitch. It was the moment when I rightfully understood the difficulty of learning magic in this world.

“You really don't have any talent for Wind magic, huh? Or is it because you're too specialized in Dimension magic?”

“Mmm...” It was making me a bit frustrated because I was confident in my magic. I held back my desire to get mad and try to learn wind magic for real, and gave up on the incantation. It wasn't a good time to be wasting power. “I'm going to give it up and just focus on mastering Dimension magic.”

“I think that would be more efficient for you. Before, you used Dimension magic to create the same effects as other kinds of magic, so I don't think there's a reason to learn a lot of different types.”

“So I can learn to imitate Wind magic with Dimension magic? If possible, I'd like you to teach me how to do that.”

“Well, I don't know how! You were super secretive about it!”

Higher-level Dimension spells seemed to be something that even Lorde, with all her skill, couldn't teach me. I realized that the only one who *would* be able to teach me was Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago, so I had no choice but to give up and find another approach.

“I see. Well, do you have any books on Dimension magic? A castle this big

should have a library.”

“Hmm, I think there might have been some in the library. Reading a grimoire from a thousand years ago would probably be the best thing for you to do right now. Okay, ten copper coins for the library, please!”

“I won’t let you eat here anymore...”

“Ugh, here’s the key to the library...”

“All right, I’ll go take a look.” After extorting the key from her, I asked her for directions to the library and headed out. I would leave managing the Demon Queen to Liner. I had to take a lesson from the Founder.

“Please don’t enter any of the other rooms, okay?” Lorde shouted after me.

I nodded over my shoulder and headed down the hallway. The only sounds were my footsteps echoing down the long corridor. A lot of time had passed while we were practicing magic. I’d probably call it a day after doing some research. I passed by the empty dining room and the main hall, walked down another long corridor, and finally reached the library.

Set into the wall was a thick iron door with a heavy padlock. I unlocked it with the key Lorde gave me and pushed it open. The rusty door let out a screech and released a cloud of dust. It was obvious that the library hadn’t been used in a long time.

I stepped through the doorway and took a look at the dismal state of everything inside. I didn’t mind the crowded bookshelves that filled the room. The problem was that it looked like an earthquake had struck, and most of the books were on the floor. It was about as far from organized as it could be.

It was a large library that suited the grand castle, so big that I couldn’t see the walls in the dark and would probably take a whole day just to look around. It was good I was an expert at finding things. I spread *Dimension* out over the room and looked for books that might have to do with magic. I also did a little bit of organizing while I was at it. I didn’t put them back in any particular order, but I at least tried to make it look a little more like a library. I found many interesting books in the process.

First, I found illustrated books of the animals and plants of this world, then

world maps from a thousand years ago, and even books about military tactics. Who knew what else might be hiding in here. The books that caught my attention the most were the history texts and heroic tales.

There was a history book and a heroic epic about this country—meaning there would likely be stuff about Viaysia's Sovereign Queen Lorde too. Thinking about the girl in my room who was probably laughing merrily at something at this moment, I forgot my original purpose in coming here and began flipping through the pages. The history book was incomplete. Even a brief glance at the chronological timeline showed it was full of holes. It was a far cry from my world history textbooks back home.

The first thing in the timeline was *A queen arrived in Viaysia and united the nations of the North.*

On the next page, Lorde was described in detail. Her great deeds were listed, showing how great a person she was. If this was a history book about her own country, a little exaggeration was inevitable. As I skimmed through the book, I found a mention of the war with the South.

Just as we were about to perish, the Sovereign Queen Lorde appeared. Thanks to her, the nations of the North united under one banner and became the Northern Alliance. We pushed back the invasion of the South and had peace for a few years. But soon, the southern countries, having regained their strength, transformed themselves into the Southern Alliance and attacked again.

This was likely the great war of a thousand years ago. From that point onward, it was just a chronology of the war. It went on and on about where and when the battles had taken place, which generals had been involved, and how the battles had been settled. Within those descriptions, I found a General Reynand Vohlz. He really was famous in Viaysia after all. He'd won a number of victories on the battlefield.

What was strangest was the date associated with this place. According to the text, Viaysia had always been at war. There would never be another peaceful Viaysia like this place. If that was true, then perhaps this was a re-creation of the peace that had existed in the years between the wars. But if that was true, then Mr. Reynand's age didn't make sense. Perhaps this place, then, had been

made by cutting out only the good parts of Viaysia. It wouldn't be impossible if care was taken regarding the way that Recollection Drops functioned.

Having skimmed the book, I turned my attention to the heroic epic of the Sovereign Queen Lorde. However, when I opened it, I noticed something unusual. Some of the pages had been torn out. I picked up the ones that had fallen around me and began to follow Lorde's life. I only looked for the main plot points in her journey, which was so long it had become a heroic epic.

Our heroine Lorde was a foundling. Born in a remote area of the northern continent, she was abandoned by her parents, and her story began when she was found by an elderly couple who had gone into hiding. Lorde grew up with the old couple. However, they died due to persecution by heartless Southerners. From that point on, Lorde began to show her talent as a hero. Despite her young age, she truly had the beginnings of a heroine as she used her wits to drive back the invading Southerners. Having lost her guardians, she later entered an orphanage in the Northern capital, where she met her future generals. One of the orphans there was named Ide. Apparently, the two had been friends since childhood. Lorde, who had developed a bond with her future generals at the orphanage, went to work as a castle gardener.

The story accelerated rapidly from there.

War had nearly destroyed the countries of the North, and the castle where Lorde worked was on the verge of falling. She rose to the occasion. She showed her friends, with whom she had bonded at the orphanage, how to take back the castle, which had been conquered by Southerners. After that, Lorde began to call herself not a gardener but "the Queen" in place of the dead royalty of the castle. With her exceptional magical talents and queenly qualities, she won victories in various parts of the North, and the battlefield tilted in their favor. As the people began to gossip that she was the only one who could save the Northern countries, a new truth was discovered: Lorde was actually the oldest and most powerful queen in the North. It turned out that she had the blood of the oldest royal family. Everyone welcomed the return of the fabled bloodline. This was the moment when the Queen among Queens, the Sovereign Queen Lorde, was born to rule over the kings of the North. Thus began the long battle of the Sovereign Queen Lorde to save her oppressed people.

Although it was just a rough summary, it was the beginning of her story. It was truly the tale of a righteous upstart. A fairy tale of good circumstances. A common heroic tale. There was nothing unnatural about the book. However, what I wanted to know most was what came after that last sentence. I was curious about the rest of the story. After all, I had not yet found my name, Kanami the Founder. I had no doubt there was more to the story. I searched the surrounding books with *Dimension* to find out the rest, and after consuming a fair bit of MP, I found what appeared to be a journal of a scholar who had lived in this castle. It seems that the man was writing down the story I wanted to know in order to leave the book for posterity.

“Finally, Kanami the Founder will show up.” I skipped through a few years and looked at descriptions of the great war.

As the war between the Northern Alliance and the Southern Alliance was raging, and the two sides were engaged in a back-and-forth battle, a knight by the name of Kanami appeared on the scene. He betrayed the Southern Alliance and switched sides. The Sovereign Queen Lorde gladly welcomed the legendary knight, who was also called the Founder, as a vassal. The power of Kanami the Founder changed the course of the war, and the Northern Alliance won victory after victory. In just a little while, the war will be over...

The handwriting became harder to read.

The Sovereign Queen Lorde and Commander Kanami of the Queensguard have disappeared. They have abandoned the people of the Northern Alliance and disappeared into the Southern Alliance. That man has betrayed us this time.

That was all that was written. The memoir ended there. If what Mr. Reynand had said was true, that betrayal would have destroyed Viaysia.

“So that’s it...but why did Lorde abandon the North? I was...probably chasing Apostle Sith around, so I can understand that a bit at least.” The reason Kanami the Founder had changed sides was because the Southern Alliance had Apostle Sith. And I knew that depending on Sith’s movements, I would’ve easily abandoned the North. But I couldn’t guess at the reason for Lorde’s departure.

“I wonder if there are more journals like this one.” If I could collect the real testimonies of people who had lived in the castle, then I might be able to figure

out what was going on in Lorde's mind now.

I was about to apply another layer of *Dimension* to continue my search when I found a door at the end of the library. Thinking that since it was next to the library, it might be the place where special books were kept, I put my hand on the door. However, this one was also locked. I hesitated a little. Lorde told me not to go into any other rooms. That would mean that there was something in the other rooms that she didn't want me to see. Something from that past that she was silently screaming she didn't want to remember. Using up all of the magic that had naturally regenerated today, I pointed a finger at the door and cast a spell.

"Distance Mute." Even though I knew I was taking a risk, I didn't want to put off whatever consequences there were. The purple magic wrapped around me, making only my index finger out of phase with the world. This was the best I could do at the moment, but it would be enough when dealing with a small, inorganic object.

I used *Dimension* to understand the structure of the lock and then stuck my finger into it. I touched only what I wanted to touch by manipulating the magic of its dimensional attributes, and the lock clicked open.

"Nice! That worked. I might be able to lock the door like this too when I leave..."

I didn't want Lorde to know I'd been in here, if at all possible. I opened the door slowly so as not to make any noise.

"Huh?!" I gasped when I saw what was inside, even more shocked than I'd been over the library.

The room was filled with countless paintings. Of course, that wasn't all. It was messed up like the library had been, but this time it felt like there was a definite maliciousness to the way things had been scattered around. Every painting was damaged. Most of the canvases had been torn and smashed. Some of them had been cut up with something knifelike. There was no doubt that the paintings had been destroyed by someone's hand, and as if to show the passion of the culprit, the paintings were scattered everywhere. It looked like sheer madness.

I put pieces of the paintings back together like a puzzle, using *Dimension* and

my own cognitive abilities. Then I looked over the completed painting.

“Lorde?”

The paintings were indeed depicting Lorde, but she looked different from the way she did now. She wore a luxurious dress and her long hair was down. She was so beautiful that she could have been mistaken for an emerald jewel. If I had not seen Lorde with her hair down this morning, I wouldn't have recognized her. The eyes of the Lorde in the painting didn't have the same charm they did now. They were completely cold, just like the eyes of a princess who wouldn't lift an eyebrow at any kind of sacrifice. The paintings that had been destroyed were all of this majestic figure of the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

“So this was the vault for paintings?” I muttered as I looked over the destruction. Then, on the far wall of the room, I found a few intact ones. They really stood out in the sea of broken canvases and were very low quality compared to the others. While the queen's heroic figure had likely been painted by a court painter, these looked like the scribblings of a child. They were housed in the most expensive looking frames, though.

The first painting depicted a couple. An old semifer man and woman were laughing in a house surrounded by a meadow. I immediately recognized them as Lorde's family. Next to them, I also found a picture of a little girl who looked just like the Lorde I knew. Unlike in her paintings as queen, she was innocent and jovial in this one. Next to her was another house in the meadow, only this time it was a bit bigger. From the sequence of events, I guessed that this was the orphanage mentioned in the history book. Then there was one of the children standing in front of the orphanage. She looked exactly like the Lorde I knew there. Next to her was a slender boy, holding on to her sleeve. His face was familiar. Or, more precisely, I had a feeling about that face. It was the Guardian Ide. But he was depicted there as a figure at least two sizes smaller. The paintings on display were in keeping with the heroic tale I had just read. Next to the orphanage painting was one of Lorde working at the castle as a gardener. Wearing a straw hat, she was pruning trees in the castle garden, accompanied by a slightly older Ide. He was smiling.

The gardener Lorde was smiling in a way that wasn't present anywhere in the torn-up paintings of Lorde as queen. It was a smile that was different from that

of both the current Lorde and Queen Lorde. The story of the paintings in that row ended with the gardener of the castle.

Perhaps that is where Lorde's smile ended, I thought for some reason.

"Did Lorde destroy these paintings? Or was it like this..."

The storage rooms might have been in this state since the castle was built. It would only be natural for the paintings of the traitorous queen to be torn up. Or perhaps Lorde herself had been at the end of her rope and destroyed them all. Either option could be the case.

There was nothing else of note in the room. I left, leaving it in disarray like I'd found it. Then, using *Distance Mute* again, I closed the lock like I was reverse picking it.

"I came here to find out about magic, but I found more than I expected to about Lorde..." I'd gotten a general idea of her life, if only in writing. There might be nothing more to gain in fighting her as a Guardian.

There was nothing else to see in the library either. I picked up a few magic books I had collected beforehand and returned to my room. My pace down the hallway slowed a little bit. I'd told Liner that I was going to trick Lorde into going aboveground, but after listening to Mr. Reynand's story and reading the books in the library, I was wavering.

I understood her. She was like Lorwen Arrace in that way: innately good-natured, a pacifist who easily got riled up. And I hated to admit it, but we'd become friends. I wanted to help her if I could, then go back to the surface. But I didn't know if that was a good idea. I didn't even have any idea how to save her.

I walked around the castle, worrying, and arrived at my room without any answers. I saw Liner lying on the floor as I entered. Even though I had only been away for about an hour, his MP was empty.

"Lorde...what did you do to him?"

"Just a bit of training! That's all. His magic'll be restored tomorrow. Don't worry!"

“I hope so...”

Liner was on the floor, but he was breathing gently. He didn't seem dead, at least.

“Say, Kanamin, you found the castle grimoires! How did you manage it in that disaster?”

“It was a bit of pain. Was it always that bad?”

“No, that happened when I was doing my research. I'm never doing research again!” She laughed like a naughty child. She didn't even remotely resemble the dignified Sovereign Queen Lorde in the paintings.

“So, Liner is down for the count, and you found the books you were looking for. I think it's time I left.”

“Speaking of, where do you sleep?”

“I'm in all sorts of trouble at lots of people's places. So I'll probably sleep somewhere in the castle garden.”

Lorde certainly had a room in the castle. The monarch always had a room. But that wasn't where she chose to stay. Hearing her seemingly free but reticent response, I was convinced there was something deeper going on.

“I see...” Maybe that was why I called after her as she was leaving. Even though I knew it was pointless, I needed to ask. “Is there anything you want me to do for you? What lingering attachments are keeping you here?”

Her ponytail swung, and she smiled at me like a child. The girl who must have been so lost in this place answered without any hesitation, “I suppose I'd be happy if you lived here with me, because my lingering attachment is to live here in peace.”

That's not true. Peace has been achieved here and yet you're still trapped, I thought. That's why this place hasn't moved on. But I couldn't tell her that. She must have realized that a long time ago. She knew, but she was still smiling. So I could only reply with a few simple words.

“I don't know if I can do that. I have to go back to the surface. But if there's something else you want, I'd like to make it happen. That's the truth, Lorde.”

“What’s going on? Why are you suddenly... You’re freaking me out.” Lorde became a little suspicious at my sudden seriousness. However, when she realized I was speaking from the bottom of my heart, she smiled. “Thank you. That’s the second time you’ve said that to me, but it makes me happy.” Then she spread her wings and flew out of the window.

The second time... I wasn’t sure when the first time had been. Those words were proof that there was a gulf between us. It was frustrating.

I watched Lorde fly off and set the book in my hands on the table. After all, there was only one thing I could do now. I suppressed my frustration, opened the book, and began to research Dimension magic. I would gather up all the knowledge I needed from a thousand years ago and leave Lorde behind and head back to the surface.

I continued reading until night fell and morning came.

The following morning I was able to formulate a Dimension magic spell that was different from the ones I’d been using before. The grimoires from a thousand years ago were truly spectacular, and reading them had helped me deepen my understanding of my magic. While Dimension was a minor magic these days, in the past it had been one of the major types, so I had no problem finding materials. Unlike the other general magic elements, Dimension’s position was special. According to one of the books, supposedly everyone had the ability to use Dimension magic.

With the other kinds of magic, if you didn’t have the ability for it, you wouldn’t be able to use it, but the book made bold claims that Dimension magic could be used by any living being. Apparently, everyone had their own personal realm within themselves, which was directly related to being able to cast Dimension magic. People, beasts, stones, clouds, it seemed like everyone and everything, without exception, had a personal realm within. For example, even the world had its own “personal realm.” Dimension magic worked on those realms, which is why anyone could use it.

I wasn’t that surprised to see it written about in such a casual manner. It was an abstract explanation that didn’t make sense, but I understood it as if it were something I had come up with. It was enough to make me check the author’s

name, but it wasn't my own. As I continued to read through the book, feeling a little strange the whole time, the next section explained the concept of dimensions. Unlike books aboveground, this one went into great detail. It was very helpful. It began with the basic premise that the visible world consists of one to three dimensions. Next, the book contained an original interpretation of the fourth and fifth dimensions, and so on. It was more like knowledge of my home world than knowledge of magic.

It even suggested the existence of parallel worlds and other worlds, so it seemed certain that Outworlders like me had been involved in the writing. As I read through the messy interpretations of dimensional magic, little by little I became better and better at working with it. It was as if something I had been missing for a long time was finally being filled in. It was similar to the feeling of remembering something that I had forgotten. The mental image of dimensional magic, which I had been struggling with, solidified as the knowledge I had acquired firsthand was backed up by the books. The idea of manipulating dimensions became less and less confusing.

I'd had the talent from the very start—all I'd lacked was the confidence.

"Distance Mute." The magic that I had only been able to activate in the tips of my fingers yesterday was now applied to my entire arm, which emitted a pale purple glow as I moved it toward the table. And then my body and the table overlapped without touching; the spell had worked. However, just that brief second of use consumed a huge amount of MP. My brain screamed as it tried to process all of the information it had received. I had to activate the true power of this magic as soon as possible.

I rummaged through the table, searching for the core of its existence. Not in the three dimensions visible to the eye, nor even the fourth dimension, but in the realm that everyone possessed that was unique to them. It was a magical dimension that couldn't be expressed with a number. A world where only magic existed, unbound by common sense. The realm that the table had only for itself.

I grabbed the isolated core that existed there. The moment I felt something like a stone drop into my hand, I pulled my hand out and ended the spell. Sitting in my hand was a magic gem with a dull glow. The table that I'd taken the gem from turned into light and disappeared. It was exactly the same as what

happened with monsters that were defeated in the Dungeon.

“Okay! I did it! Now I can challenge floor sixty-six!” After a night of study and practice, I had successfully completed *Distance Mute*. I wouldn’t be able to try it out for real tonight because I didn’t have much MP left, but tomorrow I’d be able to test it out against Elfenreize the Wind Dragon. The spell was probably even on the same level as what Kanami the Founder had cast. Of course, it would be much more difficult when casting it on a living creature instead of an inorganic object, but that problem was easily overcome by using more MP. As long as the spell was well constructed, it could be used on anything; it just depended on the amount of magic power that was poured into it. *Distance Mute* was an instant death spell that left no room for argument.

I put the magic gem away into my Inventory and looked at my arm. The feeling of having been transported into a different dimension still lingered. At the same time, the sensation of the *Distance Mute* spell was still there too. It took everything I had just to cover my arm in the spell right now, but its true value wasn’t limited to that. It was likely that the spell’s final form would be able to cover my whole body. At least, that was my prediction after having succeeded at this. I could still become stronger.

At that point, Liner walked in, having finished cooking our meal. It looked like my practice time was up. I needed to eat quickly and get to work.

After finishing breakfast and giving him a progress update, I headed into the town. Today’s schedule was the same as yesterday: I was going to work with Mr. Reynand, and Liner would keep an eye on Lorde.

When I arrived at the workshop, I found Mr. Reynand with his brow furrowed. I was prepared for him to say we had a lot of work again today.

“There’s nothing to do. We fixed too many things,” he said, contrary to my expectations. There were no unrepaired items left in the storeroom. We’d worked at such an ungodly pace yesterday that we’d completed them all.

“Huh? Nothing at all?”

“Yeah, we fixed everything that needed fixing. The stuff in that storeroom was supposed to take about a week to finish, but because of you, laddie, it was done in a day.”

In that case, wasn't the source of the problem not because of me, but because you were trying to get me to give up? I thought, smiling bitterly.

"So...does that mean my work is done for the day?"

"No, it's my duty to provide you with work. I'm not going to let you leave like that. I'll find something urgent to work on and teach you real blacksmithing. It's been a long time since I've reviewed my own skills."

I was glad to hear that and agreed without complaint.

"Do you have anything on you to practice on? Pull out everything you have in your pocket of Dimension magic."

"Uh, sure."

He acted like having an Inventory was a normal thing. Feeling like I had nothing to hide, I took out all of the weapons and armor that I owned. Starting with Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, I spread out everything I had on the table, from broken swords to baskets.

"A magnificent amount of stuff. Hmm...some of them are better than others. One thing stands out as being much better than the others," Mr. Reynand said, his eyes catching on Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan.

"Well, it's a sword made with the magic gem of one of my friends, a Guardian."

"The gem is good. But what's with all this pointless decoration? If you took it away, it'd be much better. To put it bluntly, it's just a pretty face."

"I suppose so." The decoration on the sword was among some of Mr. Alibers' more mature work, but it didn't mean that all of the frivolities typical of his style were gone. Thinking of functionality alone, there were many things that could be removed.

Mr. Reynand, favoring function over form, muttered about removing different things as he touched the area around the hilt. As he said that, the sword began emitting a dull glow. It also looked as if it were shuddering from fright. My *Responsiveness* skill activated of its own accord and drew in the feelings of the dead Guardian.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Reynand, it seems like the sword himself doesn’t like that, so could you please stop?”

“The sword himself? Can you hear the voices of swords, laddie?” He didn’t doubt the truth of my almost cryptic comment. Rather, he seemed curious.

“No, just this sword...I think.”

“Hmph. Boring.”

I didn’t know what the future held, but I knew that the magic gem was a soul. Depending on how I used Dimension magic, it might have been possible for me to hear voices from other weapons or armor that had magic gems in them.

“Hmph. If this sword is out of the question, then what about these?” He pointed at one of the cursed items I had picked up in the Dungeon. They were things I’d found when treasure hunting with Lastiara around floor thirty-three. The menus had said they were polluted with Mind Taint, so I’d destroyed them all. “These broken pieces are a sight to behold.”

I supposed so. The fact that I’d found them in the Dungeon meant that they’d been created a thousand years ago. No wonder they were worthy of his attention.

“Can you fix them?” My excitement rose as I looked at the Coal Outerwear, Arlecon Face, and Bloodsword that I hadn’t used because of the Mind Taint.

“I won’t know until I try. Basically, it’s impossible to repair a sword with a broken blade, but some things can be fixed depending on how it’s done. All right, let’s work on these today, shall we?” Mr. Reynand pulled out tools from a shelf in the corner that were different from the tools we’d used yesterday. I’d seen such tools earlier in Mr. Alibers’s workshop.

“Those are a little different from what you used yesterday, huh?”

“Your gear is made with magic gems. Some of them are woven with magic formulas. If you want to fix them properly, you’ll need this tool.”

“I see.” It seemed like it would be very different from repairing iron products. However, I was pleased to be able to practice making magic tools in an unexpected way.

“Can you write magic formulas, laddie?”

“I usually can, if I go slowly.” Thanks to practicing with Mr. Alibers, I was able to write some basic ones. I was confident that if I worked at it, I’d be able to write more complex ones as well.

“All right, do you want to do it, then? These are the tools we use to write our magic formulas. Be careful, because many of them are very special. For example, this is the one that polishes scratches...”

Mr. Reynand explained each tool to me in great detail. The way he handled them was a far cry from how he’d handled the ones yesterday. Thanks to his easy-to-understand explanations, I quickly understood the procedure for repairing magic tools.

Once I’d consolidated my knowledge, all I had to do was put it into practice. I took my broken gear and set about repairing it. I figured I would fail at first, but it was all broken to begin with. I’d let it all add to the growth of my Smithing skill.

“Okay, I’ll try it.” With Reynand by my side, I started swinging the hammer. I had already finished copying the movements and connected the broken pieces of the Bloodsword, as well as fixed the holes in the light helmet Arlecon Face.

The only aspects that were fixed immediately were the shapes. It wasn’t enough for them to regain their strength. Put simply, it was difficult to repair gear when it had been used up completely. But this was a different world. The next step was to solve the problem of strength by engraving magic formulas into the repaired gear. This work required superhuman precision. However, with my current status, it wasn’t too difficult. I could even afford to talk. Naturally, Mr. Reynand also had time to chat, and we began to discuss our common interest, Lorde.

“Hmm...although you don’t have all of your memories, do you know what happened in the castle’s library a thousand years ago?”

“Yes, although I can’t picture what Lorde was like as queen. Frankly, I find it a little hard to believe.”

“I don’t blame you. She was nothing like she is now.” Then Mr. Reynand

added, "Just like you, laddie."

I knew I used to be a bit of a wastrel, but right now our topic was Lorde. I started on my pile of questions. "Did she really unite a lot of countries?"

"There's no doubt about it. In those days, she was the most queenly queen anyone had ever seen. She was almost divine. People would be struck dumb just by her standing there."

The exact opposite was true now. The woman I knew had the dignity of a child. She was the kind of cheerful woman who made people exasperated just by standing there.

"Do you know what she was doing before she became queen? A book said she was in an orphanage..."

"I believe she worked as a gardener. But I don't know anything about the time before that. The only one who would know would be the Chancellor. I believe he also came from the orphanage. They're not blood related, but I heard they were like brother and sister."

"The Chancellor... Do you mean Ide?" When I heard the title, I thought of Ide, the Thief of Earth's Essence, whom I'd met aboveground. The title seemed to fit his image. I was, however, surprised to find out they were siblings.

"Yes, Mr. Ide, that's right. He continued to support the North alone after you and Lorde disappeared. He was a truly loyal subject who continued to believe in the return of the queen and fought until the very end."

So Ide had remained by Lorde's side as a vassal, despite being her brother. He would know more about her than anyone else.

"If I talk to him once I get back aboveground, do you think he'd know what the unfinished business keeping her here is?"

"Hm? Mr. Ide is aboveground right now?" Mr. Reynand asked, his face lighting up. His expression was totally different from when he was dealing with me or Lorde. Ide must have been a truly virtuous person to cause that reaction.

"Yes, he's called a Guardian of the Dungeon. It seems like he's trying to build a new nation up there."

“I’m glad to hear it. If you’re able to find Mr. Ide, you may be able to find out what Lorde’s lingering attachments are, since he was always close to her. After all, they are siblings, and family is something special.”

“Family is special...I agree. Somehow it seems easier than I thought it would be. Perhaps just bringing Ide and Lorde together again will solve both of their lingering attachments.”

“I doubt it will be that easy, laddie, but inviting Mr. Ide is a good place to start. If it’s okay, I’d like you to bring him here from aboveground.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I have my own business with him, so this will work well.” After I got Hitaki back from him, I’d just tie him up and bring him here.

“Good, then it would be ideal if you could head up there soon. It’s just the wind dragon preventing you from progressing, right?”

“That’s right. That’s why I’m working here, to make my own anti-dragon items.”

“Mm-hmm. Since your repair work is complete, let’s make one little magic tool to help you deal with that wind dragon.”

“Okay...but I don’t have the money to pay for a magic item.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just pay me back someday. But don’t mention it to Lorde.”

“Thank you very much!” I bowed my head in appreciation at Mr. Reynand’s cooperation. It felt like my plan to deal with the Dungeon had been shortened by a number of steps. Then, before starting on the magical tool that would help me deal with the wind dragon, I laid out my repair work from the day on the table. Not everything was perfect; some repairs had failed, leaving the items unusable.

I did a final review of the gear in my Inventory. Two pieces, the Coal Outerwear and Arlecon Face, had been repaired successfully, and the Mind Taint was gone. Unfortunately, the Bloodsword had been damaged. Repairing a broken sword was more difficult than repairing armor. Last but not least...

Twin Blestblades of the Hellvilleshine Clan, Unpaired Offensive Strength 2

Having lost one half, its original power is gone.

This sword couldn't display its original power because its counterpart was missing. After I finished checking the abilities of the weapons I could use, I put them in my Inventory. In the meantime, Mr. Reynand had taken out new tools from a nearby shelf and started getting to work on a magic tool. It seemed that I was still too slow when it came to making things, so he spent an hour or so doing it by himself, creating a necklace of sparkling green magic gems.

He handed it to me. "This Green Talisman will protect you from the wind. Do you know how it works?"

"Thank you very much. I already have a Red Talisman, so I know how to use it." It was clearly better than anything available aboveground.

As I put it on, Mr. Reynand announced the end of work for the day. "All right, now go to your room and recover your magic. If Lorde comes here to check on you, I'll tell her I sent you out shopping. If she finds out what you're up to, she'll interfere just for the fun of it. If necessary, I'll lie to her again tomorrow."

He was even taking responsibility for dealing with Lorde. He also seemed to believe that she would be an obstacle to my ascent through the Dungeon, but his reasons were probably a little different from mine.

"Thank you. I'll head for the surface as soon as I can."

"Well, still go easy. If you die, it's all over. Floor sixty-six might not be the only challenge in your way."

If I could just get past floor sixty-six, the enemies would get weaker. But even so, he advised me to never let my guard down.

"I understand. Along the way, there will be a Guardian I haven't met yet."

"Yes, that will be the biggest obstacle. It's the worst when you get one that just won't listen to you."

With those final words, my work was done and I was ready to leave. "Thank

you, Mr. Reynand.” I bowed my head to him. “And thank you for dealing with Lorde tomorrow.”

“You can leave her to me, and you go challenge the Dungeon, laddie. The most important thing is getting out of here as soon as possible. Who knows how this place will change with the two of you in it.” With a mysterious expression, he emphasized the danger of this place.

“Okay...we’ll hurry,” I replied, then hurried out of the house.

I ran into Beth again in the garden. Apparently, she was waiting for me to finish my work. In her hand was the same sweet as yesterday.

“Oh! S-Sir Commander of the Queensguard! Good work today! Umm...well...”

“Thank you. I see you’ve made a treat again today. But you don’t have to force yourself to make them. Making sweets is pretty hard work, right?” I said as cheerfully as possible as I took the gift from her.

Beth shook her head. “No, it’s not hard work at all! This is something I like to do, so please don’t worry, sir! I’m doing this because I like it! Yeah! I’ve wanted to do this for a really, really long time!”

“I see. That’s fine, then...” Pressured by her forceful tone, I couldn’t really say anything. It was not a child’s fawning, but the enthusiasm of an adult’s conviction. For a moment, Beth looked like a girl about my age.

“So please let me keep making sweets for you! Please, please!”

“Okay...then can I ask you to keep making them for me every day that I’m working here? At least until the day I leave this place.”

“Huh?”

There was no way I could stay forever. I was telling her this earlier than I had intended, and her face darkened. It would be better for her if I told her definitively rather than giving her false hopes. With that in mind, I continued, “I’m sorry, but I have to go aboveground soon.”

“Aboveground? You’re leaving?” Beth’s expression hardened as she repeated my words. But her expression was frozen for only a few seconds. Soon her face returned to its original bright look, and she began nodding repeatedly. “Yes, of

course! The Sir Commander of the Queensguard is a busy man, so it can't be helped! Oh, I made lots of extra sweets today, so be sure to share them with everyone in the castle!"

She seemed to be understanding, but I couldn't shake my feeling of discomfort. I could sense a level of devotion that was not appropriate for her age. I wondered if that was what Mr. Reynand had meant when he'd said there was "still a bit left."

"Thank you. Until that day comes, Beth, I really appreciate it. See you..."

"Bye, Sir Commander of the Queensguard!"

Obviously, I felt bad about leaving her, but I departed Mr. Reynand's house at a rapid pace and headed for the castle. Townsfolk greeted me warmly as I passed.

I've got to get aboveground as soon as possible, I thought, as I responded to them with forced smiles. Otherwise, as Mr. Reynand mentioned, anything could happen here.

I broke into a run, feeling a stronger sense of conviction than ever before.

Chapter 2: The Opposite Way Through the Dungeon

What awaited me as I hurried back to the Demon Queen's castle was a small tea party. For some reason, a white table was set in the middle of the castle garden, covered with an embroidered tablecloth and a tea set that looked like it had seen better days. Lorde was sitting in an expensive-looking white chair and sipping the drink with an air of sophistication. Liner was, of course, serving the tea.

"What are you guys up to today?"

Lorde didn't even bat an eye at my appearance and placed her teacup on the table with an exaggerated feminine flourish. She could probably be perfectly ladylike naturally, so it was likely she was deliberately skimping on her manners at the moment.

"What do you mean, what? This is a picnic! We finished work early today, so we were spending time in the garden while we waited for you."

"No matter how you look at it, it doesn't look like Liner is having a picnic."

"No, I invited him to have a regular picnic with me, but he said he would feel more comfortable if he was serving, so that's why we're doing this."

Liner's workaholic nature seemed to have shaped this picnic. I turned toward the man in question, but he didn't seem to see anything wrong with the situation. Perhaps he'd been serving one person or another his entire life. Feeling pity for him, I sat down at the table and spread out the sweets I'd gotten from Beth.

"Oh! Sweets! Can I have some?"

"Yes, these are from Beth for all of us. Liner, you sit down and have some too. It's common courtesy to sit down at a table to eat these kinds of gifts." Even if I told him to stop directly, he would just keep serving us, so I had to threaten him with a breach of etiquette.

"You're right..." Reluctantly, he ceased his butler act and sat down.

Exploiting that opening, I took the teapot from him and poured three cups of tea.

“Oh...” Seeing that, Liner looked ashamed, as though he thought his work was inadequate.

“You know, Liner, you’re no longer a knight of the nobility or anybody’s squire. You can do whatever you want. Why do you keep making things harder for yourself?” I asked, chastising him a bit for his reaction. It was a good opportunity to try and fix his masochistic nature. I was worried he might collapse from anxiety if I didn’t do something about it.

But he shook his head with a serious look on his face and responded with reasoning I couldn’t quite understand. “Surely you know why. It’s only natural that I do all of the miscellaneous chores as the lowest-ranked one here.”

“The lowest rank? Do you really think that? Lorde and I think of you at least as a friend. We are equal as friends regardless of age or position.”

Next to me, Lorde nodded as she stuffed her face full of cookies.

“Equal friends... Sieg, that’s not true. There is a pecking order to everything in the world. Sieg is the Founder, Lorde is royalty, and I’m a formerly orphaned nobleman. No matter how you look at it, I’m the lowest,” Liner said as if it were a matter of course.

I’d thought we’d become friends through our fight to the death, but I guess I was a little wrong. He looked up to me too much. It felt a little precarious, as if he would give his life for me. I’d been preoccupied with Lorde, but Liner was pretty messed up too.

As I leaned forward to correct that discrepancy, Lorde spoke up. “That’s exactly the problem, Liner. It doesn’t matter if you are the Founder, royalty, an orphan, or anything else! Everyone is equal as a human being! At least, I’ve never looked down on you.”

She’d taken the words right out of my mouth. She was stern, with no sign of joking, which was unusual for her. It seemed that Liner’s argument was unacceptable to her.

“No, you two aren’t familiar with today’s society; that’s why you can say such

things. There is no equality in the world. What you're saying is a naive illusion. If I were to say that I was a friend of the Founder or royalty, I would be in danger when I returned aboveground," he insisted.

Lorde's expression clouded. "That may be true. Liner might be correct. The world a thousand years ago was like that too. Wherever you went, there was class, hierarchy, and discrimination..."

"Right? There will always be classes and hierarchies. They never go away."

But soon Lorde's sad expression faded away and she returned to her usual jovial appearance. "Well, if it's not going away then it's not going away! So let's just skip the 'friends' part and go right to being a family! Then there's nothing wrong with being equal, is there? It's special because you're being such a baby about it!"

"Huh? Why, all of a sudden..."

"I mean, I'm the big sister and you're my little brother!"

"No, wait! Why would you do that? I have a proper family aboveground, so you don't have to do that! I don't want any more sisters! Really! From the bottom of my heart, I'm good!"

"Nope! I say it's okay, so it's okay! The more family you have, the better! And you did say you used to be an orphan. Did you not have any family with you in the orphanage?!"

"Well, I think everyone in the orphanage was family..."

"Well then, this castle will be like an orphanage. Starting today, we're family!"

"What?!" Liner's mouth hung open at this absurd idea.

"See, Liner, your big sister's giving you a cookie!" Lorde seemed to have decided to forcefully spoil Liner. She tried to force the cookie she was holding into his mouth. It was a bit ham-fisted, but not bad.

"Okay, then, as your big brother, I'll give you a cookie too, Liner," I added.

"Why?!"

I put all of the cookies that I had brought in front of him. If he was going to

neglect himself, we were going to pamper him even more. Lorde rubbed his shoulders and whispered that she would buy him whatever he wanted, and I poured tea into his empty cup.

Liner finally managed to speak up despite his bafflement. “No... What? This is totally different from my siblings. This is...”

Of course, we were behaving like a family of commoners, not aristocrats. But we were doing it on purpose. We wanted to heal his shame over being the adopted son of a noble family, even if only a little. But there was one problem—Lorde wasn’t just doing this to Liner, she was being clingy with me too.

“Kanam! Let your big sister take care of you too!”

“Oh man, that means you and I will be family, Lorde.”

“Why such a grim expression?! It’s okay! I’m not saying I’m going to replace your sister or anything! You can just treat me as a *bonus* big sister!”

“Sorry, as much as I want a little brother like Liner, I don’t want a sister like you.”

“I didn’t want to know that! Why? I’m the *ideal* big sister!”

“I can’t imagine having a sister who can’t cook a single thing.”

“Rude! I’ll just do it then if you’re gonna be like that! Leave tonight’s dinner to me!” Lorde stomped off angrily toward the kitchen. She could only cut vegetables, but she seemed genuine about wanting to cook dinner herself.

“Liner, take care of that unreliable sister of yours, will you?”

“Tch, guess I have no choice.” Liner headed toward her, and Lorde met him with a huge smile on her face. It looked like she was happy to be cooking with her younger brother.

As I watched the scene play out, I took a deep breath in relief and sank back into my chair. I couldn’t figure out what was keeping Lorde there, and I didn’t have time to ask about Liner’s past in detail, but I could do this, at least. I would do my best to protect the time that the three of us had to live in harmony together. And, somehow, I felt like I understood Lorde a little bit better. Actually, it might not be bad to have this kind of time continue for a while.

Here, isolated from the rest of the world, we could live happily ever after, no doubt about it.

But there was nothing waiting at the end of it. Lorde couldn't disappear, I couldn't save my friends and family, and Liner's warped way of life couldn't be fixed. Nothing would be resolved. So I would definitely go into the Dungeon tomorrow. I would go to the surface, save everyone who was waiting for me, and then bring Ide back down. That was my vow.

That day, we sat around Lorde's poorly made dinner and talked and laughed until late into the night.



The morning of my third day in this place dawned.

[STATUS]

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 293/293

MP: 945/945

CLASS: Diver

Level 22

STR 12.55

VIT 14.12

DEX 18.57

AGI 22.96

INT 18.67

MAG 38.34

APT 6.21

[SKILLS]

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.79

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56 Dimension Magic 5.27+0.10 Magical Combat 0.73 Responsiveness 3.56 Knitting 1.07 Swindling 1.34 Smithing 0.92 Sewing 0.68 Blessed Iron Smithing 0.44

My smithing skill had gone up with all the work I'd been doing. My physical condition and MP were perfect. Even if I used *Dimension: Faultline* or *Distance Mute*, I wouldn't easily run out of magic. I could attempt the Dungeon as planned.

I woke Liner up from the bed next to mine and told him my goal.

"So soon... You really think you can do it?" he asked, astonished. He'd been pushing me to hurry up this whole time, but I guess he hadn't expected me to finish all of my preparations yesterday.

"I think I can make it. As long as I can use my new spells properly, I think I can kill the dragon in a single blow."

"I would expect nothing less from you, Sieg. Is it okay if I don't go with you?"

"I'm just going to go and get a feel for it today."

"Okay. I'll keep an especially close eye on Lorde."

Liner seemed quite pleased that everything was going so well. We prepared for the day in our room, then he headed down to Lorde as usual. Meanwhile, I made for the Dungeon instead of Mr. Reynand's house. As a precaution, I left one end of *Connection* in the room in case I needed to beat a hasty retreat.

It was early morning as I walked through town, and I reached the door at the edge of the land quickly. I cast *Dimension: Calculash* just to be on the safe side and headed into floor sixty-six.

The expansive sky spread out before me, dominated by a wind dragon that was larger and freer than the clouds. I walked through the meadow and looked up at it. It was a challenge just to comprehend the sheer size of the creature from head to tail. It looked like there was a ceiling of yellowish brown writhing above me. No matter how many different ways I imagined it, I couldn't envision winning in a head-on fight. But today's challenge would involve a bit of rule

breaking. At any rate, as long as I could touch it, I could neutralize it, so the odds were in my favor.

In order to fight the dragon, I went up the spiral staircase at the center. Broken last time, it had since been repaired. The formations in the Dungeon were repaired after a certain amount of time, perhaps by magic working through the process of Re-Collection drops. While climbing up step by step, I simulated the battle in my mind. According to my plan, it would be decided after only two spells.

I gradually approached floor sixty-five as I prepared *Dimension: Faultline*, which I would use first. Just as I was about to reach the area where I'd been attacked before, my gaze met with eyes that were as bright as the sun.

"Let's do this, Elfenreize!"

I called out the name of the wind dragon as though initiating a formal duel. At the same time, the enormous yellowish-brown body filling the sky came down on me with a roar that nearly burst my eardrums. I couldn't hear for a moment, but the attack the dragon chose was the same as last time—a full-body ramming attack. The draco-wind that followed in its wake almost gave the impression that a typhoon was engulfing the area. It truly deserved to be called a calamity.

The huge falling body of the wind dragon made contact with the spiral staircase. My foothold was instantly shattered by the explosion. It was exactly the same situation as in the previous battle. The dragon seemed to understand that its greatest ability was a rush that took advantage of the size difference between us. I lost my foothold and was thrown into the air. Of all the interception plans I had prepared, this was the easiest pattern to follow. If the opponent was going to attack without variation, I would simply use a better attack of my own to repeat. I now had the rule-breaking power to make that possible.

My plan was simple. I would use *Dimension: Faultline* to shorten the spatial distance, and then ride on the back of the wind dragon. Then, without wasting any time, I would pull out the dragon's magic gem with *Distance Mute*. That was all there was to it.

After destroying the spiral staircase, the dragon returned to circling the sky. He spotted me falling in midair and opened his jaws wide, as if to swallow the mountain of debris. He was going to swallow me and every single piece of the shattered staircase, but I wouldn't let that happen. I held my focus on the target until just before I entered his mouth, and then I cast a spell.

"Dimension: Faultline!" I use my newly learned Dimension magic to compress the space above me. The sky was distorted by the magic's erosion, and the concept of distance collapsed. As a result, the space above me shifted upward, taking my body along with it.

I was launched high into the sky in a magic-assisted leap that defied all the laws of physics. There was no extraneous movement. It was a technique similar to instantaneous teleportation. That was the magic of *Dimension: Faultline*. If the dragon had lost sight of me during this move, everything would have been easy. But of course it couldn't go that smoothly. The creature's sunlike eyes only lost me for a brief second.

I felt part of the draco-wind brush my cheek, and then the dragon was lifting his head upward. He looked me in the eyes, opened his jaw, and flew toward me to try and swallow me again.

"Form! Dimension: Calculash! Dimension: Faultline!" I had already thought about what I would do in this scenario. The answer was to generate a thousand dimensional bubbles at high speed and let them burst in the sky. Perhaps the wind dragon was locating me not with his eyes, but with his magic. Perhaps his draco-wind was working in place of his sensory organs like *Dimension* did for me. If that was the case, then I could trick his senses.

Form's bubbles began eroding the world, making the beast's senses go haywire. Furthermore, I'd used *Dimension: Calculash* to capture the movement of his eyes and draco-wind so that I could move to a position beyond his perception. In short, it was an advanced version of the technique I always used: disappearing from view.

The wind dragon released another mighty roar as he lost sight of me, clearly frustrated. Then, in order to find his enemy again, he expanded draco-wind to a wider area. A very wide area. In other words, he was projecting his

consciousness farther away, which meant I could use my magic to fly closer and outwit him.

As originally planned, I succeeded in putting both feet on the dragon's back without being noticed. His defenseless form was within reach. Now it was time to use force, not tricks. I shouted a spell, intending to put all of my magical power into it.

"Distance Mute!" My right arm glowed a light purple and pierced the dragon's back, ignoring its hard scales. According to the grimoire, my personal realm and the dragon's were now connected. Physically, it was like a mosquito bite for the beast, whose body was as large as a cloud. However, from a magical point of view, it was the moment when the evil pathogenic virus, the dimension mage Aikawa Kanami, entered the wind dragon.

The dragon's body, which had been elegantly flying through the air, contorted. At the same time, there was a roar loud enough to make a normal person's ears bleed. In addition, the draco-wind that had been spread across all of floor sixty-six returned to him and blew downward to force me off.

Resolutely, I concentrated all of my magic into my body. Even as I was buffeted by draco-wind and the dragon's roar, I would absolutely not release *Dimension Mute*. It felt like my arm could be torn off at any moment. After all, this was a rank 60 monster. If I had fought normally, I would have been crushed to death simply because my level wasn't high enough. That was why I couldn't let this chance pass me by.

Concentrating my consciousness only on my right arm, I searched for the personal realm of the wind dragon. It didn't matter how big he was. Volume and distance were irrelevant to a dimension mage. This type of magic created a crossroads between realms. This was the final and best magic theorized by Saint Tiara and then perfected by Kanami the Founder. The strength or weakness of my level was beyond being a trivial issue at this point.

"Distance Mute! Get it ouuuttt!!!" I found the wind dragon's magic gem, grabbed it, and plucked it out.

"GRAAAHHH!!!" A shudder rippled across the dragon's skin and filled the sky. It was not a magnificent roar, but the mere scream of a creature that

sensed its death. A monster that had lost its soul gem could only reach one end. The huge body that had covered the sky gradually became transparent and was replaced by light, which rained down onto the meadow below. The death of only one wind dragon gave birth to this weather, the rain of magical power, tiarlay. It was a scene that clearly showed how dense the magical power of a rank 60 monster was.

[TITLE UNLOCKED: Friend of the Sky]

+0.01 to DEX

Having lost my seat on the wind dragon, I fell through the sky as I looked at the display, then quickly cast *Dimension: Faultline* to avoid taking any damage from falling, moving myself down to ground level. Finally, I dodged the pieces of falling spiral staircase as the rain of light washed over me.

“I won...”

In the end, the battle had only lasted a few seconds and was over faster than it took the pieces of the destroyed spiral staircase to fall from the sky. I’d used magic to create an illusion, gotten on his back, and pulled out the magic gem. That seemed to be my new fighting style. No longer would I be defeated by an enemy just because it was strong. This victory convinced me of that, but I still felt a bit empty. I felt a little uncomfortable, as if I was using subterfuge to clear a world of swords and sorcery. However, now was not the time to be obsessed with the gamelike aspects of this world. In order to get aboveground as soon as possible, I had to use every trick I could think of. While offering a silent prayer to the wind dragon that had become a victim of my tricks, I *Analyzed* the magic gem in my hand.

High Sky Beryl

An aggregate of magic power with dominion over the sky.
Drops from the highest-ranking wind monsters.

Analyze praised the gem called a High Sky Beryl. Since this gem had the words “highest rank” in the description, it might even be worth something in Viaysia.

“All that’s left is the experience...”

[Experience: 202,345/135,000]

The experience I had gained was lower than expected. I was a little disappointed because I had dreamed about shooting up ten levels at once. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that I was making progress. I felt much brighter than when I’d thought I’d be stuck there forever.

I looked around as I checked my status after the battle. The spiral staircase in the center of the plain had been broken, and it was impossible to go up to floor sixty-five. It wouldn’t be impossible to get up there if I used *Dimension: Faultline*, but my remaining MP wasn’t enough to manage it since I’d just fought so hard. I was afraid to challenge the unknown of floor sixty-five in this condition.

Today, I would be satisfied with the fact that I now knew I could defeat the wind dragon. From this point onward, I would go with Liner. Between the two of us, we should be able to save more MP for the battles ahead, and I wanted to finish my level-up first anyway.

“Guess I’ll head back. I don’t need to hurry up to the surface quite yet.” I slipped out of the debris surrounding me and made my way to the Connection that led to the city. Thus, I successfully completed my second attempt at dragon slaying.



I went to visit Mr. Reynand’s workshop immediately after returning from the Dungeon, not wasting a single moment to let my MP recover naturally. I had one goal—to get new gear.

“A High Sky Beryl, huh? This is a top-tier gem even here.” Seeing the gem dropped by the wind dragon, Mr. Reynand praised it in the same manner *Analyze* had.

I was so happy to find out it was a gem that was worth real value here that I struck a triumphant pose. I immediately started thinking about using the gem for some gear. According to *Analyze*, its element was wind, the same as Liner. I figured it might be a good idea to make a sword, like I'd done with the Crescent Pectolazri.

"Mr. Reynand, if possible, I want to make this into something that will make my friend stronger."

"The kid who was with you when you came by the first time? Can he use Wind magic?"

"Yes, he only uses Wind magic, so I think it will be perfect."

"Hmm... If you're serious about making a new weapon for him, you'll need to have all of the equipment he's using. You need to maintain balance between all his gear." Perhaps thanks to his promise of full cooperation the other day, Mr. Reynand was willing to do his best as a blacksmith. This detailed instruction was proof that he was serious about it.

I had seen Liner fight with lots of magic tools before, including rings. It was entirely possible that he had different magic tools hidden all over his body. If the effects of what I was about to make and what he had hidden away were the same, the gem would be wasted.

"I'll go ask him about it. I've got some things I want to collect anyway." I recalled that Liner's favorite sword, Rukh Bringer, was still broken. It seemed like it was in one piece thanks to Lorwen's power, but I wanted to repair it as well. Now that I'd repaired other items that were polluted with Mind Taint, that one should be no problem.

"All right, today will be for strengthening your friend. Come back soon." Mr. Reynand hurried me along happily, perhaps because it was directly related to saving Lorde.

I quickly left his house and extended *Dimension* throughout the town. Just like yesterday, the unchanging green of the town spread out around me. It seemed that Viaysia's re-creation of peace was functioning without any problems today.

Dimension's senses were becoming more acute day by day. I soon found

Liner, pruning trees and cutting plants with Lorde. Unlike the stately mansion from yesterday, today they were working on tree branches that were protruding out into the main road.

Viaysia had many pieces of artwork that made use of nature. For example, there was a green tunnel created by a row of four-meter-high trees on either side. The tunnel wasn't solid enough to repel rain, but the sunlight filtering through the trees created a fantastic sight for those passing underneath. Other sights included a house built on top of a large tree and the staircase of thick trunks that led up to it. There weren't any gems, iron, or even stone used here. Everywhere I looked, I saw nothing but greenery. The fact that it didn't feel overwhelming was probably thanks to Lorde's prowess as a gardener. The trees in the city had been pruned in a calculated manner so that you were bathed in sunlight no matter where you walked.

At that moment my eyes caught Lorde cutting the branches off the roadside trees with a pair of long pruning shears. Liner was gathering them up off the ground as they fell.

"Hmm? Oh, hey, Kanamin. What happened at the workshop?" Lorde asked, stopping her efforts as I showed up.

"Oh, we worked too hard and ran out of things to repair, so we took a break," I replied, having prepared my excuse in advance.

"I see. Do you want to work with us, then?" she asked, offering me a pair of shears.

"No, thanks. I'm going to learn smithing from Mr. Reynand in my free time. I want to improve my gear like you suggested."

"Oh, so you're gonna take my advice."

"Liner's gotten stronger and improved by learning magic, so I'm going to make his equipment stronger to match the smithing that I've learned. Isn't that a perfect division of labor? I'm here to take Liner's measurements. I'd also like to borrow your equipment for a little bit."

"Is that so? Well, do it lickety-split, then!"

My proposal had come out of nowhere, but Lorde accepted it without

question, as did Liner.

“Oh, Liner, can I make some modifications to Rukh Bringer?” I asked, knowing it was his favorite sword.

“If you think that’s what’s best. I’ll leave it all up to you.” He did as I asked and took off all the equipment he was wearing, then I took his measurements with *Dimension*. He seemed to trust me completely. I could tell from his expression that he thought that if he left it up to me, everything would be safe. I nodded a big thank-you in response to his trust.

“So you’re on break until the repair work piles up again, Kanamin?”

“Yes, I think I’ll be off tomorrow too.”

“Okay, okay! We’ll take tomorrow off also! Let’s have a picnic, the three of us!” Lorde was very excited about her great idea. Her innocent gaze hurt. She really believed I had the time off and that the three of us were going to enjoy it together. Of course, I couldn’t go along with that. It was also for Lorde’s sake that I had to return aboveground.

“No, today I’m doing preparations for the Dungeon, and I was thinking that tomorrow Liner and I would try our hand at it.”

“Whaaat? You’re having another go at it? Even though you lost so badly last time?”

“I don’t think it went that badly. Sorry, but I want to do what I can today so we can give it our best tomorrow.”

“O-Okay... Well, I do know that your main purpose is defeating the Dungeon anyway... I guess it can’t be helped. You can go with him, Liner. You’ll probably lose to Elfenreize anyway!”

I was inviting Liner with me now because I was already able to defeat Elfenreize. It was really discomfoting to keep Lorde in the dark and always have to be wary of her. But I did it anyway, keeping to my earlier vow that I would help her later.

“So I’ll be all alone tomorrow...” Lorde’s words made my heart ache, even though I doubted she was aware of the effect she was having on me.

“Okay, Liner, I’m gonna borrow your equipment for a bit,” I said as I left, practically running away from Lorde. The realization that I felt like this every time I saw her made my desire to return to the surface even stronger.

I ran back to Mr. Reynand’s workshop quickly so that I could get on with my preparations for our assault on the Dungeon.

“I’m back!” I immediately set out Liner’s equipment on the center table.

The expression on Mr. Reynand’s face was not a good one. “This is terrible...”

But his reaction didn’t seem to be due to inferior equipment. The wrinkles between his eyebrows deepened as he picked them up one by one.

“A ring for magic amplification inside of a ring for explosion magic? And is this one for forced acceleration? Whatever is going on here isn’t good...”

“Is it really that bad?”

“He’s not thinking about coming back. This equipment looks like he intends to die with his enemy.” Mr. Reynand knew a lot about equipment, and together, these looked like tools for suicide.

“Yeah...that’s typical for him...”

“You used the word ‘typical’ there... We need to do something about this as soon as possible.”

I’d gotten used to how Liner did things, so it didn’t faze me, but it seemed to really affect Mr. Reynand, and he seemed invested in changing Liner. Was this also the pride of a blacksmith?

“I’m going to make him such a good weapon that he doesn’t have to rely on these suicide tools anymore. Let’s start with the sword.” Mr. Reynand turned his attention to Liner’s main weapon, Rukh Bringer. It was one of the most heinous items I’d found in the Dungeon. If Snow hadn’t been standing next to me at the time, I might have succumbed to the Mind Taint. But its sharpness matched its nasty ability. It was a thousand-year-old magic sword, after all.

“This one is quite good. Who made it? I should know who can make such a high-quality sword without using Blessed Iron Smithing.” It seemed like Mr. Reynand didn’t know that, in all likelihood, even a thousand years ago, it might

have been a sword that was crafted after his death.

“I don’t know. It’s just something I picked up in the Dungeon.”

“Well, that’s all right. For now I’m going to start with using the High Sky Beryl you brought back to strengthen this blade.”

“Got it. So you can power up equipment with magic gems too...”

For some reason, I suddenly got excited. I wasn’t sure how to describe it. Maybe I had a weakness for once-broken swords being repaired. I could tell that my game-loving side was coming out. Someday, I wanted to have my treasured sword Lorwen broken by a strong enemy and then be able to fix it with my Smithing skill. I wasn’t Lastiara, but I felt like I could become stronger just by going through that event.

“It looks like it’s going to be difficult. Do you need my help?” I asked.

“Well, hmmm... I certainly don’t want to fail to repair it when using such a precious magic gem. Why don’t you leave this one to me. You go ahead and finish up yesterday’s work.”

“I understand.”

After the roles were assigned, each of us set about our smithing. My attempt on the Dungeon had taken less than an hour, so it seemed like we would spend most of today smithing as well.

I decided to use the time it took for my MP to replenish naturally to put the finishing polish on the Twin Blestblades of the Hellvilleshine Clan, Coal Outerwear, and the Arlecon Face that I’d finished yesterday. Each one was directly related to the attempt on the Dungeon that we’d be doing tomorrow. I became absorbed in the swinging of my hammer and forgot about pacing my physical strength. Mr. Reynand worked on Rukh Bringer the whole time without stopping.

“Hmph. I’m done, laddie. The sword is resistant to Wind magic, but it also reduces the burden placed on the body when casting it. There should be nothing better than this to deal with a wind dragon,” he announced as evening settled in.

With sweat pouring down his face, he showed me the sword. The once sinister magic blade had been reborn and glowed with a pale and gentle green light.

[Sylph Rukh Bringer]

Offensive Strength 11

Increases the bearer's Wind magic by +0.11

Reduces the bearer's consumption of MP when using Wind magic by -33%

Increases the bearer's resistance to Wind magic by 40%

Even its name had changed, and it looked like a completely different weapon when I used *Analyze* on it.

"Wow..." In just one day Mr. Reynand had created something that rivaled my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. I was totally in awe of his brilliance and the speed at which he worked.

"The work you did looks perfect as well, laddie. Good. With this, you have a whole set of gear," he said as he checked the items I'd spent all day polishing. Now the equipment was no longer a concern, and my preparations were complete. I'd already established a plan of attack for the dragon this morning. With all that done, we could begin our attempt on the Dungeon in earnest.

"Thank you, Mr. Reynand. We'll go as far as we can tomorrow."

"Good. Be careful."

I was truly indebted to him. It wasn't just about the money or gear; his information had been invaluable. In return, I swore that I would make it aboveground and bring Ide back. Mr. Reynand and I bumped fists, and then, without saying much else, communicated through our eyes and parted ways. I put Sylph Rukh Bringer and the other equipment into my Inventory and made my way quickly back to the Demon Queen's Castle.

I ended up being a little later than I'd been yesterday. Lorde and Liner had

probably already finished their gardening and returned to the castle. I walked down the same streets I'd traveled last time, and the same people greeted me. I arrived at my room in the castle to find my two friends waiting for me, with dinner already cooked and ready to eat.

"Welcome back, Kanamin!"

"You're late today, Sieg."

"I'm back!" I said, smiling at them.

Just like yesterday, I sat down at the table for dinner. Nothing special happened as we were eating dinner. Just like yesterday we chatted pleasantly, did our magic training after dinner, and then Lorde left. After we saw her off, I showed Liner the new gear I'd made and let him know that our preparations were complete. Then, with the experience I'd gained from taking out the dragon, I leveled up. During that process, the bonus point notification appeared.

Obtained 1 bonus point.

Obtained 1 skill point.

This system really did like these things. Of course, thanks to the World Restoration Array, I knew that I was the one who'd made this system in the first place. It was probably a practical application of the level-up magic as a way to splice in the extra magic power wherever it was needed. I understood the idea, but it was definitely a system that demonstrated a personal hobby taken way too far.

Feeling like I was reminiscing about childhood mistakes, I poured my bonus points into magic power and Dimensional magic. After that, I discussed tomorrow's plan with Liner before calling it a day. I told him all the gritty details about the battle with the dragon, and we formulated a plan of attack. There would be no more late-night magic training for me. I had to keep my physical condition at its peak.

I was well prepared. I had more kinds of magic, more armor and gear, and I

was even a higher level. We'd already scouted the sixty-sixth floor, and I'd defeated the wind dragon once already and used its magic gem to power Liner's new sword. Nothing could be more perfect. After much discussion, we decided on a goal of reaching floor sixty for tomorrow, then got to sleep.

Thus, the third day of our underground life passed, and the morning of the fourth day arrived.



We woke up, left one end of *Connection* in our room, and headed out. Barely any people were out on the streets of Viaysia this early in the morning, and before long we arrived at the door leading to floor sixty-six.

"Liner, the minute the door opens, we start putting our plan into action. Don't make any mistakes with the timing."

"I know. My Wind magic is in good shape thanks to the sword you made me," Liner said, pulling out his two swords. In his right hand he held the newly created Sylph Rukh Bringer, and in his left was Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan. Then there was the gear I had fixed with my Blessed Iron Smithing: the Arlecon Face—a light helmet a thousand years old—and the Coal Outerwear, which were truly the strongest pieces of gear at our current level.

Incidentally, my equipment only included the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword and the two talismans. But in our discussion last night, we'd decided it would be best for Liner to be the one who fought the dragon head-on, hence this distribution of gear. My only method of attack was a surprise attack of *Distance Mute*. Honestly, I didn't need offensive or defensive power. Liner was the main diver, and I was the sub, providing magical support. In terms of classes, Liner, a knight, was the vanguard, and I, a scout, was the rear guard. This was an unavoidable arrangement, as I had lost my Ice magic and now had fewer means of attack.

"All right, let's go."

"Yeah, whenever you're ready."

After finishing one final check, I put my hand on the door. At that moment, I felt a slight sense of unease and suddenly looked up at the sky over the streets

of Viaysia. It was the same black sky as usual. However, I felt a difference not in the color, but in something else. The sky seemed to be shaking. It was as if the black sky was moving unnaturally, like turbulent clouds the day before a storm.

“What’s wrong, Sieg?” Liner asked, staring at me as I stood still with my hand on the door.

“Nothing...I just thought the sky looked a little weird...”

“The sky has been weird from the start, though, hasn’t it?” Liner looked up at the sky as well. Unlike me, he didn’t seem to think it was strange at all.

“Yeah, but...” Deciding that I was worrying for no reason, I lowered my gaze and turned back to the door. “Sorry, don’t worry about it. The Dungeon is more important right now.”

“Sieg...are you nervous?”

“Very much so. If we make even one mistake here, our lives are over.” Even though everything was playing out like a game created by someone who was way too into his dungeon-building hobby, there was no reset button. No saving, no reloading. There was no way I *wouldn’t* be anxious.

“Ha, so even *you* get nervous...”

“Even though I used to be the Founder, I’m still just a human being. And a coward, at that,” I said, ending my part of the idle chatter.

“I see...”

“Well, let’s go!”

With a three-two-one countdown, I thrust the door open and we went in. We split up as soon as we entered the open space of floor sixty-six. I began constructing a Dimensional magic spell, while Liner ran full speed ahead as he crafted his own Wind magic.

The dragon above us noticed our presence but didn’t move. His behavior was simple. He would intercept anything that tried to climb up to floor sixty-five. However, we didn’t want to destroy the spiral staircase that led up. If we lost the stairs, we’d end up having to waste MP to get up there. Therefore, we’d made plans to battle a fair distance away from the stairs. If everything went

smoothly, it would only take a single hit to win like it had yesterday.

“The path leading from the sky! The path leading to the heavens!” Liner used the simple incantation he’d learned from Lorde, and the wind around him came under his control.

As his spell built up, the wind on the floor began warping. The sheer density of his magic was completely different than it had been before. He had previously used Wind magic as an aid. The only reason he’d been using a sword to attack was because his magic wasn’t strong enough. But Liner was different now. He had inherited Ms. Wyss’s spirit, he’d leveled up, and his magic power had skyrocketed. He’d learned magic directly from the Guardians Ide and Lorde, mastered the art of incantations, and even acquired a magic sword to augment his Wind magic. All of these factors combined to take his Wind magic to a completely different level.

“Howl and roar, O thousand greatswords!”

Great magic from a thousand years ago was revived. The spell created innumerable giant swords of wind, as large as towers, which lined up across the plain. I had a clear view of a scene that looked as though a forest of swords had suddenly sprung up.

“Tauschaus Wynd!” Liner spoke the name of the spell. All at once the giant swords of wind flew up into the sky, like missiles from a launch pad.

The dragon roared ferociously as he sensed the release of magic and flew to intercept Liner’s attack. With a second roar, he generated a defensive wall of *Dragon’s Gale*. It was magic versus magic. The wall of wind and the giant swords of wind collided, fought against each other, and distorted the sky. However, Liner’s magic was unable to penetrate the wall. His magic *had* become stronger, but even so, rank 67 monsters were something else entirely.

As the great wind swords hit the wind wall and disappeared one after another, we laughed at the fact that we were right on schedule. The wind wall had only been triggered so that the dragon would be looking downward. He was completely focused on Liner. That was his target.

“Dimension: Faultline! Distance Mute!” After I double-checked that their magic had collided, I cast my own spells far away from the dragon, leaped, and

then moved onto the creature's back. Without hesitation, I thrust my glowing, purple arm into the dragon. All that remained was to follow the same steps as before. This time, the attack was completely unexpected. Without giving the dragon any time to resist, I pulled the magic gem right out of it. It let out another mighty roar as it turned into light and disappeared. At the same time, I was thrown into the air, but I wasn't worried.

"Wynd!" From below, Liner made a cushion out of air for me to land on. It was the same principle as levitating the spoon. Thanks to his skillful manipulation of magic, I reached the ground unharmed.

"Thank you, Liner."

"Our plan was a success. I know we had a lot of backup plans, but it really worked out quite easily."

"It's all thanks to the magic, really. I mean, *Distance Mute* and *Tauschaus Wynd* were spells we learned specifically to deal with a wind dragon, so it makes sense they would work well."

We checked in with each other briefly, collected the High Sky Beryl, and then made our way across the plain and began our ascent up the spiral staircase. On the way, I checked to see exactly how much MP we had spent.

This time, we'd cast one each of *Tauschaus Wynd*, *Dimension: Faultline*, and *Distance Mute*. My MP consumption was about two hundred, and Liner's was about fifty. It was good to know that we could get through floor sixty-six with so little magic. With these numbers in mind, I continued climbing before stopping right outside floor sixty-five.

"*Dimension*." I spread my magic out before we entered as a precaution against being attacked by any large monsters like wind dragons the moment we went in. But there didn't seem to be any reason to worry. The structure of this floor was completely different from the last one.

Floor sixty-six had been so empty it could be considered barren, while floor sixty-five was packed with obstacles. It was the same vast space as the floor below, but this time it was filled with staircases like the one we were standing on, although they weren't all spirals. Some were straight, and some were curved. The intricate grouping of stairs created a maze that resembled some

sort of distorted jungle gym. If we walked straight into that three-dimensional maze, we would lose a lot of time. However, since I had the ability to search the whole space via *Dimension*, I would never get lost. If we jumped from staircase to staircase as shortcuts, we could reach the next level in no time. But that would only be true if we could ignore all of the monsters flying around overhead.

“This next floor looks like a 3D maze of stairs. The path itself is straightforward, but all the monsters flying around are scary.”

“What kind are they?”

I used *Analyze* to get the answer.

[MONSTER] Lizard Flier: Rank 61

It was a lizard that freely roamed the sky, moving its fly-like wings so fast that I couldn't even see them. It was only about a meter long, considerably smaller than the wind dragon Elfenreize had been. However, we couldn't be too careful. After all, its rank was still in the sixties, and even with just a brief glance, I could see there were at least ten of them flying around within a square kilometer. No matter where we walked on this level, we'd definitely be spotted.

“It's full of flying lizards. They don't seem to have any special features, but they rank pretty high.”

“I guess you can't measure strength by appearance. Why don't we start by going head-to-head with one of them?”

“Hmm, I guess that's the only way...”

We stepped onto floor sixty-five, ready to do battle. There were no enemies in sight. The floor's structure was full of gaps and spaces, but the stairs were so complex that it was impossible to see very far. I immediately cast *Dimension* to find one of the monsters flying alone, and we moved in to attack.

“In unison, Liner!”

“I know!”

We swung our swords in a pincer movement to capture the fluttering creature. Our swords flashed in the light. I was sure that aboveground, we were as good as any master swordsman. Although we used a different number of swords, we were from the same school of swordplay. Our breaths were perfectly synchronized. No living being could avoid our three longswords—except, apparently, the Lizard Flier, which dodged nimbly out of the way. We were shocked.

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Our enemy’s movements weren’t particularly fast. However, they were natural movements, like a leaf falling from a tree, weaving easily between the three swords. It looked like some down feathers had been pushed to the side by the pressure of the too-fast sword. But that was impossible.

Just looking at the numerical value of our Swordplay skills, Liner and I were basically masters. We could easily cut through falling leaves and feathers. In other words, the Lizard Flier didn’t use the pressure on the leading edge of the blade to avoid the cuts. It saw the three swords with its eyes and then moved its body to avoid them.

“Damn!” I noticed its movements and intuited that this enemy was far superior to us. There was likely a significant difference in our speed stats.

The Lizard Flier didn’t give us any time to think and immediately counterattacked. I was the target, since I was in front. This gentle swaying movement from it was also like a leaf falling from a tree. I tried to drive it away by swinging my sword at it, but once again the bare minimum amount of movement let it sway away again.

“Shit!” I barely had time to curse before the monster was in the space between my sword and my chest, its thin, sharp wings touching my shoulder. If my opponent had been a Guardian, I never would’ve let them touch my body so easily, but it was too late as I was ripped to shreds.

There was no pain. My flesh tore without resistance, as if I’d cut the tip of my finger on a piece of paper. The wound on my shoulder was about two centimeters deep. If the monster had gotten my hand, it would’ve taken off two

whole fingers. Fresh blood gushed from the wound, indicating it had hit an artery. A chill ran down my spine, and I screamed.

“LINER!!! Blow it away right now!” If my reaction had been just a second slower, I would’ve lost my entire arm. It had happened so quickly. Less than the blink of an eye.

Liner must’ve noticed that too. He used a spell that consumed a lot of MP. “*SEHR WYND!*” A gust blasted the monster. Creatures that used wings to fly through the air were always susceptible to a sudden gust of wind. Liner and I were both clearly relieved, believing we would be able to create a decent amount of distance between us.

But that was not to be. There was a sudden buzzing. The Lizard Flier moved its wings and produced a sound. It didn’t speak any words, but we were definitely hearing its voice, and it was incanting a spell. I knew that because *Dimension* had caught it.

A gentle wind blew from the Lizard Flier’s wings, acting to counter Liner’s *Sehr Wynd*, which was easily dispelled. Seeing this, I made an executive decision.

“We can’t win! We have to retreat!”

“Okay!”

We tried to retreat backward quickly to get away from our enemy, but it wouldn’t allow that. It easily followed, keeping pace with us. This time its movements weren’t like those of a falling leaf; instead, it accelerated like a fly. Surprised by its alternating fast and slow movements, I swung my sword at it but missed once again. It easily weaved to the side of my sword arc, almost as if it were laughing at me. Then it attacked me again, trying to rip into my body a second time. It was frightening, because I could only partially perceive it through *Dimension: Calculash*. In just a few seconds, my torso would be cut in half.

“*Sehr Wynd!*” Liner fired off another spell, unable to just stand by and watch. It was haphazardly formulated, but by consuming one of the magic rings he wore, he managed a well-formed gust of wind attack. Once again, the Lizard Flier generated magic from its wings to counteract the spell. The important thing, however, was that for a moment, the monster stood still, likely because it

was using its wings to generate the magic. It appeared that it couldn't move and counterattack with magic at the same time.

"Liner! Keep attacking it with magic! Don't stop! It doesn't have to be a strong spell!"

"Okay! *Wynd! Wynd! Wynd!*"

The wind buffeted the monster, trying to bind its movements. The Lizard Flier fluttered its wings in an attempt to rebuff all of the magic, and it stopped in place. We took advantage of that break in attacks to run away at full speed. We went back all the way to the top of the spiral staircase leading to floor sixty-six, checked to make sure we'd lost the monster, and then sat down hard on the ground.

"Ugh, my shoulder! I could've died!" I said, breathing heavily.

"What's with that thing?! None of our attacks landed!"

The battle had only lasted a few seconds, but we were totally out of breath. Our hearts were thumping in our chests, and cold sweat poured down our bodies.

"You really saved me back there, Liner. I would've died if you hadn't been here."

"No, if I'd been able to react quicker... Its looks deceived us."

After a few minutes, we finally caught our breath and could think of a way to deal with the creatures.

"Do you think it specializes in evasion? Liner, what do you think? Maybe it's just seeing the sword and then avoiding it. Besides the fact that it's super fast, its ability to identify objects in motion is extraordinary. Even after seeing us use our swords as defense, it was able to slip past and injure me."

"Yeah, that's all I could think of. Simple magic is immediately nullified. I think even if we tried to use greater magic it would still cause problems for us. And it's so fast. Even if we succeeded with a more powerful spell, there's a good chance it could just avoid it."

"It's an impenetrable fortress, huh? And we can't underestimate the attack

that hit my shoulder either.”

“Let me heal your wound really quick. *Full Cure*.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

We grew silent as we finished our analysis and healing. It hadn’t been a fruitful expedition. We’d lost simply to specs. It hurt that this time I hadn’t been able to use my *Distance Mute* trick. I hadn’t even been able to touch the monster at all. My expression naturally stiffened in the face of our opponent’s overwhelming strength. Liner wore the same expression I did. We spent a few minutes in silence.

Liner was the first to break it. “Sieg, it’s gonna get bad soon. Boss monsters respawn in the Dungeon after about an hour. We have to move before the wind dragon on floor sixty-six respawns.”

“Let’s make a break for the center of floor sixty-five. If it seems impossible, we’ll prepare and do it over.”

“Got it.”

“Our strategy is simple. I’ll use *Dimension* to figure out the shortest route from here to floor sixty-four. After that, we run. You’ll keep any Lizard Fliers that approach us in check with your wind magic. If something else unexpected happens, we immediately retreat. If we run into any unidentified monsters, we immediately retreat. All right, let’s do this.”

Liner nodded in agreement with my plan to avoid all combat, and I immediately began reciting a spell.

“*Layered Dimension!*” I deployed my Dimension magic with the intention of filling up every part of the Dungeon, all the way up to the upper levels. The Lizard Fliers across the floor began countering the sudden, rude intrusion of my spell. It seemed like they were able to sense strong versions of *Dimension* as well. It was good to know that they could prevent me from comprehending the space. Our means of stopping them had increased by one.

Because of the counter magic, floor sixty-five was dotted with areas around

the Lizard Fliers that I couldn't see. However, I was able to avoid our enemies and spread *Layered Dimension* far out onto the floor. Somehow, I found the staircase that led up to floor sixty-four. Or rather, the large hole that was there. I was quickly able to draw the shortest route to it, but it would still mean we'd encounter a number of Lizard Fliers along the way.

"Okay, I can see the route. Liner, can you run at full speed?"

"I'm still a knight of the wind. I'm confident in my speed."

"Okay, let's go!"

Preparations complete, we began running simultaneously. Well, it wasn't quite a run. We didn't use the stairs as stairs; instead we used them as footholds for jumping, shortening the distance to our goal. Naturally, the monsters around us took notice of our frantic sprint. Their aggro range was much wider than that of the monsters on the upper floors.

"Liner! Two are coming from behind us!"

"Got it!"

If we made a single mistake in our timing, we'd likely get a body part cut off. We started casting our magic, well aware that we weren't facing ordinary foes. The two coming from behind us were easily weaving through the stairs and coming at us fast. Even as their free, three dimensional movement surprised us, we were able to act in sync.

"*Dimension!*"

"*Wynd!*"

I focused my enemy-finding magic on a single point, and Liner gathered his wind magic and released it. Neither were particularly strong spells, but the density of the magic was enough that they couldn't be ignored. We stopped the Lizard Fliers' movements right before they reached us, likely because they could sense the density of our magic. They used their wings not to continue pursuing us, but to deal with our attacks.

"Nice! Let's keep going while they're handling our magic!"

"Got it!"

Our opponents couldn't move, but getting away from them safely was still our only option. We had to focus all our strength on navigating this maze to escape our enemies. Even though we'd managed to leave two monsters behind, there were many more lying in wait on the path ahead. The surprise attacks were far from over.

"Layered Dimension!"

"Wynd! Wynd! Wynd!"

The number of enemies just kept increasing. Our surplus of magic was slowly being depleted. While *Dimension* could sense the timing of the Lizard Fliers' attacks, it was still terrifying to have enemies approaching quickly from all sides. It felt like we were running through a hail of bullets. We stopped each of the enemies, with endless streams of cold sweat pouring down us.

Only a few minutes after we started, the number of Lizard Fliers chasing us had accumulated into the double digits. No matter how much we tried to keep them still, if we stopped binding them with magic, they would come after us again, so it was only natural that their numbers would swell. However, perhaps thanks to our all-out escape, we were almost at the point of reaching floor sixty-four. I checked the upcoming floor with *Dimension* and was relieved to see no monsters waiting for us. We poured our remaining strength into running, with the intention of jumping straight into the hole.

"Sieg, this is it! Together, now! Ix Wynd!"

Wind exploded behind me. I knew how that spell worked. I also knew a number of absurd ways to take advantage of it. We were propelled forward by the wind. It was the best magic to use when we were almost there. Through Liner's skillful selection of magic, we were launched through the hole in the ceiling and into floor sixty-four.

As we crossed between floors, all of the Lizard Fliers that had been chasing us stopped in their tracks. Apparently, the rules that applied to the upper floors also applied down here. I heaved a sigh of relief, thanking myself for making it a rule that monsters couldn't cross into other floors.

Liner and I breathed heavily as we regrouped and exchanged weak high fives.



Floor sixty-four was straightforward compared to the last two floors. Although the ceiling was unusually high, there was a corridor made of regular stone running through it. We were pleased with the solid stone walls as we walked along, trying to catch our breath. If there was one thing that felt a little off it was that it was a little too ventilated. A cool breeze had been blowing for a few minutes, and it was starting to feel chilly.

“Ah, it’s finally become a normal corridor, but even so, my field of vision is pretty limited. I guess I have to keep using *Dimension*. By the way, it seems like there’s some sort of fluffy vaporous monster nearby. Our swords probably won’t work on it.” There were vaporous monsters that glowed a pale green wandering around the floor. They had no legs and floated in the air like ghosts.

[MONSTER] Green Ash Elemental: Rank 65

“Oh, I learned about these at the academy. They’re elementals of the spirit variety. The ones I know about are the fire elementals from around floor fifteen. Have you fought any elementals, Sieg?”

“I don’t think so. If I’d looked for some, I probably could have, but since my focus has been on moving forward, I really haven’t fought a lot of different kinds of monsters.”

Maria and Dia were partly to blame for the number of monsters who’d died before I could fight them. There was no doubt that my combat experience was heavily biased. Perhaps in the past, when I’d built the Dungeon, I had wanted divers to deal with a variety of monsters little by little. But that had all been ruined by the pointed abilities of my companions. Dia’s sniping, Lastiara’s unparalleled strength, and Maria’s fire were mostly to blame.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to learn as we go. If we can, I think we should ignore them. Are the monsters here getting closer to us, Sieg?”

“No, they seem different from the ones on the last level.”

The elementals simply floated through the air and weren’t approaching us. I

figured they didn't have great perception so we would be able to walk safely across the floor. However, we soon regretted our optimism. As we walked along, I continued to check the location of the monsters with *Dimension*. Suddenly, one of them disappeared. Then, without warning, it appeared right next to us. The light-green mist, wriggling and moving beside us, was approaching us as though stretching out its arms.

"What the hell?! *Dimension: Faultline!*" I reacted faster than Liner, using one of my trump cards to deal with the unexpected situation. By manipulating space, I opened the distance between us and the enemy. Then I grabbed Liner, who still hadn't processed the situation, by the collar and immediately tried to run away. But the elemental disappeared again with a little pop, then reappeared with another pop right in front of us. It was using teleportation like Reaper did to ensure that we couldn't escape it.

"This thing can warp?!"

"I'll intercept it!" Liner cried, beginning a spell, having finally grasped what was going on.

"Liner, wait!" I tried to stop his magic, but I was too slow.

"*Jaeger Wynd!*" A gust of wind like an arrow bore down on the elemental. However, the monster inhaled every bit of it. Instead of damaging it, the two types of winds mixed together and made it grow gigantic.

"It swallowed that?!" Liner was astonished that his best new magic had been totally absorbed.

Unlike Liner, I had kind of figured something like that would happen. I had sensed the game's theory that monsters that display their attributes up front like this would have resistance to certain attributes. The elemental had grown larger after absorbing Liner's wind. No matter how I looked at it, I could only think that it had been powered up. However, I did find some hope in this morphological change.

"Liner! That's good! Keep doing that!"

He was still stunned as I gave him this instruction. "Huh? O-Okay!"

If we could, I wanted to retreat. However I didn't want us to turn our backs on

a monster that could teleport.

“*Jaeger Wynd!*” Liner attacked the monster with wind again, but it absorbed that as well. Its body swelled even larger—having incorporated the bountiful wind, it had swollen to nearly ten times its original size. If I let time pass like this, I had no idea what kind of magic was going to come back at us. I immediately used the strongest magic I knew against the monster.

“*Distance Mute!*” I reached out my hand to the elemental that was concentrating on absorbing magic. Since its body had grown like a balloon, it was easy to make contact with it. I focused on my magical senses in order to understand the realm inside the creature.

What helped here was that I had already successfully performed *Distance Mute* on the high-ranking wind dragon. And the fact that their insides were similar. Thanks to that, it took me only a few moments to understand the elemental’s inner realm. But in that short time, the monster had fought back. As expected of a rank-60-plus being, the speed of its reflexes were unmatched. A blade of wind ripped out from its incorporeal body.

“Ow! But this is the end of you!”

Even as blood was dripping from the wound in my right arm, I grabbed the monster’s magic gem and pulled it out. The elemental popped instantly. The undigested wind magic it had absorbed from Liner was released. After exploding like a balloon, it turned into particles of light and disappeared.

“Good...” I said, breathing heavily. *Distance Mute* was a great technique, comparable to the *Blizzardmension* I had used before. I wasn’t completely used to it yet, though, and the sudden usage gave me a headache. I endured the pain, even though it felt like my brain was being pummeled by a fist, and checked on Liner. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. But, Sieg, your arm! Damn it! *Full Cure!*” Looking closely, I could tell that my right arm had become a mangled mess. There were no deep wounds, but most of the skin had been turned inside out and become a reddish black. That so much damage could happen in just an instant implied high magical ability.

Liner’s Holy magic quickly repaired my arm. It looked terrible but healed

quickly.

“It looks like it was just a surface wound. That’s good.”

“No, it’s not! I’m supposed to be the one who does stuff like that! Please don’t do anything else rash, Sieg!” I could tell by the look on his face as he healed me that Liner really was genuinely worried. But I rejected his concern.

“You’re still saying that kind of stuff? That’s not your role, Liner...”

“It’s a question of priorities! I should be your shield, for everyone’s sake!”

“That’s not true,” I replied in a low voice, unable to overlook his words.

I stopped myself from saying out of habit that Liner himself was the higher priority in that case. It would be no good for me to want to protect him simply because I was older or in the position of a big brother. That path was the same as when I had treated Maria like a sister, and I didn’t think it would end well. So I would take a new path.

“I’m not going to talk about which one of us is going to be the victim. We should help each other and find a way to save both of us. I understand your feelings, Liner. Self-sacrifice is an easy path—I love it too. But let’s never do that as we explore the Dungeon. I know it’s difficult...but still, let’s find a way for both of us to survive. No matter when, no matter what happens, no matter how difficult it is, don’t give up on that path until the end. That’s something I’ve learned recently.” I looked him dead in the eye as I said this. It was something I had just learned myself, but as the older one, it was the only thing I could say.

“Together?”

“I used to think that an older brother should give his life for his younger siblings, but apparently that wasn’t very good. Or rather, it was bad. Maria almost burned me to death.”

“But isn’t it the other way around? I was taught that it’s the younger brother who should give his life for his older siblings.”

“Absolutely not. Think about it: I don’t think Mr. Hine or Franrühle would want that. I don’t want that either, and Lorde would definitely agree. Above all, what does Wyss Hylipröpe inside of you say?”

“That’s...” Liner hung his head. I could see from the outside that he was asking himself the same question in his head. After a few seconds, he looked very unhappy. “Well...I’m not totally convinced, but I guess it can’t be helped.” He reluctantly shook his head. It was also the moment when he, having been stubborn and obstinate, finally broke. Perhaps it was because in our relationship we had even killed each other at one point, but I felt a little lighter. It seemed that our relationship was moving forward, albeit at a gradual pace.

However, I couldn’t just bask in the feeling. We were in the middle of the Dungeon. It was such a unique space, and I *was* happy that my voice had reached Liner, but the danger of death still haunted us.

“All right, let’s keep going. While we were talking I was able to get a better idea of how this floor works.”

“How it works?”

I hadn’t been negligent in my surveillance of the surrounding area with *Dimension* as we’d talked. “That monster is called a Green Ash Element. I believe it’s a wind attribute spirit elemental-type monster. Its means of movement is to disassemble its body and assimilate into the wind. Combined with its original speed, it looks like it’s teleporting. And the most important thing is its perception range.”

It had only been one encounter, but I had a pretty good idea of what was going on. Perhaps it was thanks to the fact that I had penetrated it with *Distance Mute*, but I was pretty confident in my assumption. Perhaps it searched for enemies with the same type of scouting magic that I used. Then, as soon as it found them, it moved at warp speed. Fortunately, my search range was wider than theirs, and the enemy showed no signs of trying to find our location by following *Dimension* back to me. As long as we maintained the distance I had just calculated, we should be able to pass through undiscovered.

“I already have a pretty good idea of its range of perception. I’ve also found a path that keeps us away from any more of them, although it is a bit of a roundabout path. Of course, I’m sure there will be other surprises, so let’s not let our guard down.”

“You did that so quickly? That’s impressive.”

The map of floor sixty-four was completed in my mind. With me having been healed, we set out again. Even though I knew we wouldn't be attacked, it wasn't a good idea to stay still for too long. We moved quickly through the corridors. Perhaps because we had chosen our path carefully so as not to fall within the Green Ash Element's search range, there wasn't a single other hostile attack and everything remained quiet. That left us with time to talk.

"Thanks to you, Sieg, it seems like we've cleared floor sixty-four. It went better than I thought it would. If I was alone, I would've been beaten from the start because of their perception."

"I guess I can understand the monster's intentions and techniques because I was the one who created this Dungeon a thousand years ago."

Although my observational abilities as a Dimension magic user might have had something to do with it, my former self's experience was even more significant. From a monster's appearance and name, I was even able to guess its abilities to some extent. And I had never been wrong about that in my Dungeon exploration so far.

"Oh, so in that case you mean that it's not because you use Dimension magic that your understanding is so sharp, but it's because you were the creator of this Dungeon in the first place that your intuition is likely to be correct."

"That's right. And thanks to you being here, there's a wider range of tactics that we can take advantage of as well. Speaking of which, that magic you used earlier, was that one that Lorde taught you? *Jaeger Wynd*, right?"

"Yes, it's one of the ones she taught me. It's not perfect yet, but it's a good spell to use on the spur of the moment."

And so, we trudged through the sixty-fourth floor. It was because this floor worked so well with Dimension that we only had one battle.



Dimension filled the entirety of floor sixty-three the moment we stepped onto it, allowing me to once more see the whole floor. Other than the ceiling being tall, the hallways again had no distinguishing features. If I had to say something about it, I would say the ground was more luminous than usual. Even though

we were in the Dungeon, it was as bright as day. Moreover, it was easy to find the path up to the next floor. However, we wanted to avoid any ambushes, so just as we'd done on floor sixty-five, we decided to fight a single monster first to gather information.

The main monster wandering around this floor was the Pale Griffon. Its upper body was that of a bird, and its lower half was that of a beast. It had compound eyes with which to closely observe its surroundings and a sharp beak. It was able to flap its wings, and its four legs, with sharp claws, were as thick as logs. It was very similar to the fantasy griffons I was familiar with. As usual, Liner and I sandwiched the creature between us and began fighting.

Then, as if it was expecting us, the Pale Griffon intercepted our surprise attack with wind magic. It seemed like the ability to detect magic was common here on floors in the sixties. However, unlike with the enemies we'd faced up to this point, we weren't left flailing. Yes, it was fast, but not hopelessly so. Yes, it was strong, but nothing we couldn't defend against. Yes, it used a lot of different spells, but nothing remarkable. It was well balanced in strength, but that was it. It felt like as we progressed toward the upper levels, the enemies were slowly getting weaker.

Against this new monster, the only thing Liner and I used magic for was support. Otherwise we used our swords and combos to slowly chip away at its health.

"Wynd Flamberge!" Liner covered his sword in wind in order to put a final stop to the Pale Griffon. However, before he could get the final blow in, the monster leaped into the air and began to howl.

Seeing this, I realized what the enemy was capable of and became discouraged. "Ah, I knew it. I was thinking it seemed a little weak..." I knew what was going on without checking *Dimension*. It was the usual thing—an enemy that, when danger came, would run away and call friends for help.

"We're not chasing it?" asked Liner.

"No, let's return to floor sixty-four instead of pursuing it." This kind of situation could usually be avoided by moving between different floors.

Since we had just fought our way up to this floor, it was easy to get back

down. As expected, the Pale Griffon's pursuit was cut short as we crossed between floors. The hordes of monsters that had been gathering also returned to their original positions.

"I know what they're capable of, so let's just ignore them all and move on. We probably won't be able to defeat them."

"Got it."

Giving up on proper combat, Liner and I retried floor sixty-three. It was easy to avoid the Pale Griffons. These monsters didn't have the same wide-range search capabilities that the Green Ash Elementals had.

However, another problem had arisen. It was getting hard to breathe. Liner, with his lower physical stats, was having a much worse time of it. We'd already been walking for close to four hours without a break at this point. On top of that, we'd been having life or death battles the entire time. Even if the loss of HP and MP could be prevented, the physical problems were taking a toll on us. Although effects hadn't surfaced yet, I was sure that our spirits were being drained as well.

We were able to safely pass through floor sixty-three by avoiding the monsters, but safe passage didn't come without a price. Then, after catching our breath between layers, we entered floor sixty-two. The features of this floor were the same as the others, except for one thing. However, that one thing was almost too much. The luminescence of the ground was stronger than before. On top of that, it wasn't only the ground, but also the walls and ceiling that were glowing. It felt like we'd gone from being under a wide open sky to the inside of the sun.

Light from all directions greatly restricted visibility. It wasn't that we couldn't see at all, but we had to squint to get any information about our surroundings. I was fine since I could use *Dimension*, but Liner was having problems.

"Liner, can you fight here?"

"If I use *Wynd* constantly, I think I can get a rough idea of where things are. Of course, it will be hard to fight, and the MP consumption will be ridiculous."

"Okay, then I'll deal with movement, and you can use *Wynd* only when we

have to fight.”

“Thank you, and I’m sorry.”

I guess this was all a matter of the chemistry of the magic one was learning.

I gathered information through *Dimension* as we walked along. There were monsters all over the glowing corridors. They were bird types, well suited to the sunlike floor. We found a lone monster to fight, but just before we attacked, I noticed something that was clearly different. We were only a few meters from the monster. It was a pure white bird that was walking in front of us.

[MONSTER] Pierce Pigeon: Rank 60

The Pierce Pigeon was only walking calmly. It looked at us like we were fish in an aquarium, but it still only walked on.

“Even though it sees us, it’s not going to attack...”

“It seems that way...”

We moved closer so that we were face-to-face with it. Even then, it didn’t show a single ounce of desire to attack us. It just stood there and elegantly cleaned its feathers with its beak. Liner and I exchanged glances; we didn’t want to fight pointless battles and exhaust ourselves further, so we went to find a different monster. The next one we found was a pure-white unicorn.

[MONSTER] Unicorn: Rank 59

I wondered if its white body was meant as camouflage for the floor. Finding it without the help of magic would’ve been very difficult. There was no doubt it would prove to be a dangerous opponent if we rushed it. However, the unicorn didn’t move. It was looking at us, but it didn’t seem to be looking for an opening to attack. It was just looking. It didn’t even look like it planned on attacking at all.

“Maybe it won’t react unless we attack it?” I suggested. “Or maybe since the

visibility here is so poor, if we were unlucky enough to actually run into it, then the fight would start...”

“If that’s the case, we shouldn’t start any pointless battles here. With *Dimension*, we’ll be able to avoid all of them.”

“Of course, that’s what I was planning on doing.” Even so, it was strange. This was way too easy compared to the other floors. It was a world of difference compared to the wind floor we’d just come from. I couldn’t help but think there was something else going on. The white monsters were only staring steadily at me. Not Liner, just *me*. It even seemed like they felt a sense of safety when they looked at me.

“No, it does no good thinking about it. Let’s go, Liner. It seems like we’ll be able to get through here easily.” I took his hand and moved us away from the monsters. After that it was simple. I used *Dimension* to figure out our path forward, and we followed it silently.

A silence that was hard to imagine in the Dungeon enveloped us. In less than an hour, we’d reached the next floor: sixty-one. As expected, a bright light surrounded us again. It became even more intense, and a dazzling glare filled the corridor. The ceiling had become the sun itself. I had to close my eyes tightly, unable to keep them open any longer. Even so, it burned my eyeballs and turned the inside of my eyelids red.

“This bright light... Do you think the Guardian of floor sixty is the Thief of Light’s Essence?”

“Yeah. Now that you mention it, the floors around Ide, the Thief of Wood’s Essence, were full of nature. Then I would expect a Guardian who is similar to appear.”

“It does seem like they have influence over their surroundings. But still...the Thief of Light’s Essence... That probably makes them a specialist in Holy magic, right?”

“No, Sieg. Holy magic and Light magic are totally different things.” Liner seemed well-versed in Holy magic, which made sense given he was a knight of the Church of Levahn, so I believed him when he said there was a high possibility of the next Guardian specializing in Light magic. To be honest, I didn’t

know much about it. I only knew a little bit about the different varieties of magic to begin with. It didn't sound like it was suited to battle. However, like Lorwen and Tida, there were Guardians who were strong even without magic. I wanted to be in perfect condition when I faced this next one, if possible.

With that in mind, I used *Dimension* to avoid the monsters on that floor. Like before, they didn't attack. There was a fluffy white haze floating about, so I used *Analyze* on it, but nothing stood out.

[MONSTER] Holy Element: Rank 62

The wandering spirit had no interest in us. It was so simple, it made me uneasy. For a moment, I thought of following my instincts and retreating. However, there were no abnormalities in our bodies. Rather, we had a surplus now of both HP and MP. We would have to pass through this floor eventually, so it was best to not put it off.

The Holy Elements definitely did notice our presence. We continued traversing the floor under the watchful gaze of an innumerable number of those spirits before finally reaching the stairway. Since we'd gone two full floors without fighting, we weren't in bad shape. On top of that, I successfully placed a *Connection* door right before floor sixty. I thought it would be impossible to do in such bright light, but it was actually easier than I expected. The light was hard on our eyes, but that didn't mean it contained any malicious magic.

We didn't have a reason not to try our hand at floor sixty. It was like the floors of light, sixty-one and sixty-two, were calling to me.

"Sieg, are we going on?"

"Yeah, let's try calling the Guardian out. But I feel a little uneasy..."

"If we don't fight them, we'll never get back aboveground no matter how much time passes."

"I know..." It was just like Liner said. We were running out of time. We couldn't afford to second-guess ourselves when we were in peak condition. With his encouragement, I finally made up my mind. "All right. Let's split up.

Liner, you'll wait in front of the *Connection* door. I'll enter floor sixty and talk to the Guardian. If that doesn't go well, I'll retreat immediately to the door and you'll back me up."

"Okay..." It seemed like he wanted to complain, but all he did was nod obediently. It was a plan for the worst possible outcome. I could see my lecture from earlier was working just fine.

"Don't worry so much. Guardians used to be human. If I talk to them, they'll understand."

"If it's someone who was friendly with Kanami the Founder, like Lorde, then that's okay..."

Any other case would likely lead to fighting. I had to keep that in mind.

"Okay, I'll be back soon." I forged ahead to floor sixty, where the Thief of Light's Essence was waiting for me.

Chapter 3: An Unreachable Hand

Unlike the Dungeon up until this point, floor sixty was extremely organized. Moreover, it was really an exemplary boss floor, as it was wide open and spacious. Floor ten featured fire, thirty was crystal, and forty was all prairie. And floor sixty was light. There was light everywhere I looked, with nothing above the marble floor except light. But it wasn't like the painful light from floor sixty-one; this was gentle on my eyes. Even though the entire space was filled with light, I could still keep them open.

Thanks to that, I could observe my surroundings directly. The white ground was so polished it could be mistaken for tile, and it was perfectly level, without a single blemish anywhere. Countless white balls of light were rising from the ground like fireflies. Looking closely, I could see that there were slight variations in the color between the orbs. Some were pale to strong, some had iridescent outlines, and yet others were dark, almost black. The space, woven with light within light, was like drifting through a dream.

Then, in the center of that space, was a girl who was just standing up, as though awakening from a dream. Her hair, gently billowing around her, looked like it reached all the way to her feet. Like the light surrounding her, it contained myriad colors. It started off red, blue, and yellow, and then I could see there was even purple, orange, and green mixed in too. However, the endless colors that dazzled the eye gradually converged into a single one. Colors blended with colors, passing through a complimentary brown before arriving at a strange chestnut hue. Its depth of color seemed to change depending on what angle I saw it from.

The girl who had such fantastic hair was young. She was about Dia's height and wore a black dress with frills on the hem and sleeves. Her skin was pale, and her eyes were black. At first glance, she looked almost Japanese, but not quite. She looked like she would be half-or maybe quarter-Japanese if she were in my world.

My first impression was that she was beautiful. Not beautiful in the same way one would regularly praise another person for being, but beautiful in the way that nature was. That's how different from regular people she was. The impact of her appearance was similar to how I felt when I'd met Lastiara. Everything about this girl was lean. She had long eyelashes, narrow eyes, a shapely nose, and small lips. But if Lastiara was luminous, this was a girl who would draw you into the darkness. It was a completely different kind of charm, and yet they gave me the same impression.

In other words, she was beautiful...but extremely suspicious. Because of that, I carefully observed her through *Analyze* in case I needed to fight.

[Sexagesimal Guardian] Thief of Light's Essence

There was no doubt about it: she was the sixth Guardian of the Dungeon.

"Huh? Is this the Dungeon?" the girl muttered, standing up and squinting. She looked around the light-filled area before finally catching sight of me. At that moment, her eyes opened wide. "Oh! Oh! Master Kanami! You've come to meet me!"

She tried to walk toward me but stumbled midway. She quickly stood up again and made her way unsteadily in my direction. Her too-fragile appearance made me picture her as a baby wanting her mom. But I couldn't let my guard down. It was true she looked weak, but she was still on the same level as Lorde and Lorwen. I kept a hand on the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword at my waist as I watched her movements.

However, she ignored my implied warning and walked right up to me, seemingly overcome with emotions as she muttered, "Yes, I've missed you... I've been waiting for this moment for a long time..."

From her words, I didn't sense any curiosity or hostility like with Tida and Ide. My wariness grew in proportion to the shrinking distance between us, but her next words brought me a wave of relief.

"Just as planned, that's how you looked back then, Master Kanami. Then...this body in that body...I guess that's proof. Do you know how long I've waited for

this moment?" The girl called me Kanami, and her eyes were gentle as she looked at me.

Convinced we'd been acquaintances, if not friends, I dropped my hand from the hilt of my blade.

"Well then, Master Kanami, please touch me and caress me. If you caress me just once, then surely I'll be able to disappear. That's all I want..." She brought her hands together and wished for her own disappearance. At the same time, the distance between us became zero.

The sudden turn of events left me stunned. I quickly came back to my senses, though, and shook myself a little. If I could just caress a girl and clear floor sixty, I would be happy. Her wish would come true and so would mine.

"Uh...okay..." Feeling like no harm would come to anyone, I reached out my hand, placed my palm on her head, and gently stroked her hair.

"Thank you so much. Thank you...so much..." Her eyes closed a bit as she thanked me. She really seemed to be enjoying it with her entire being.

The girl stood tall on her tiptoes and seemed relaxed as she continued to accept my caresses. From her expression, I could certainly sense the signs of disappearance. Even I, who knew nothing about the situation, could tell that this day, this moment, was her true desire. A drop of water fell from her half-closed eyes, and the curtain was drawn on her story. I could feel that through *Responsiveness*. Finally, now, her long, long battle was over. I felt certain of that, and perhaps she did too. All that was left was to attend to her final moments.

With that in mind, I continued stroking, and stroking, and stroking—for about fifteen minutes. I didn't want to disturb her final moments, but eventually, I couldn't take it any longer and let out a few words. "You're...not disappearing, huh?"

"I...guess not..." she replied, seeming a little embarrassed.

We were in the same awkward situation. It seemed like she could disappear at any moment, but it wasn't happening. Her body was still there and hadn't lost any of its vitality.

“Why?” she repeated over and over as she quickly backed away from my palm. Then, after repeating the question several more times, she grasped both my hands desperately. “Please believe me, Master Kanami! I never lie! For a long time, I’ve been...always, always, always, always waiting—”

“Hold on. I have something very difficult to talk about. Could you listen to that first?” I interrupted her. I wouldn’t have thought of saying anything if she’d just disappeared happily. But that wasn’t what had happened, so I had to tell her that I wasn’t qualified to hear what she had to say.

Seeing my serious gaze, she nodded, and I began to explain slowly so as not to provoke her.

“I actually don’t have my memories from a thousand years ago...so I don’t remember who you are. To be honest, I have no idea what you’re talking about —”

“Huh?” Her mouth popped open in surprise.

“So I’d like to do proper introductions. My name is Aikawa Kanami. And you are?”

“Y-You’ve forgotten? Everything? Even my name?” she asked, without introducing herself. It was understandable. If any of my friends lost their memory, I’m confident I would say the same thing with the exact same look on my face.

“I’m sorry, I don’t really remember...” I replied as I nodded. I wanted to keep her calm and rational, so I didn’t explain much.

She seemed perplexed by my answer. Even so, a light of understanding shone in her eyes. There was a willingness to accept the situation and move forward. It didn’t take long for her to come to her senses. After taking a deep breath, she took a step back, lifted the hem of her dress, and curtsied. Her gesture was as reverent and graceful as Lorde’s.

“I understand. Then I’ll introduce myself again. My name is Nosfy.” She seemed sad and yet proud as she told me her name. “I fought in the war as the Banner of the South. At the time, you were the Commander of the Queensguard of the North. At the end, I died and you lived, and you went on to

create the Dungeon...” she said, as if to make certain I knew what had happened, given my lack of memories. There weren’t any major inconsistencies with what I knew. “I was searching for you during that entire battle. I thought about you until I died. Then you chose me after I died to be a Guardian for the Dungeon. So, now, a thousand years later, my long-standing wish has been fulfilled...or it was supposed to be, but it seems like my duty as a Guardian hasn’t been completed yet. I wonder why... I really wonder...”



I could tell from her every word that she adored me. But it was strange. She didn't seem shocked by my memory loss. She didn't seem surprised that she couldn't disappear either. Even *Responsiveness* couldn't give me a better understanding of her emotions. It was like I was staring at the sun and couldn't see what was hiding behind its light. She was totally different from any of the other Guardians I'd met.

"I'm sorry. That doesn't have anything to do with the Master Kanami who's lost his memories, though," Nosfy apologized. It was like she was throwing random words at me to see how I would react. She then changed the subject without seeming to be particularly bothered. "But why don't you have your memories? Last I heard, everything was going smoothly."

I didn't have any answers about Nosfy's lingering attachments, but I could definitely answer questions about myself. "Well, at the end of the events a thousand years ago, a person named Apostle Regacy ended up causing a lot of problems, and I was summoned into the Dungeon while it was still unfinished. Also, there's no Tiara in this time period, and my sister is asleep aboveground. So right now I'm working my way backward through the Dungeon."

"Tiara's not here and your sister is asleep? So you really do need to get back to the surface."

As we were finishing this conversation, Liner, who'd been watching from a distance, drew closer.

"Sieg, are you okay?" It seemed that he'd seen us talking calmly and guessed there wasn't going to be a fight.

"And who is this?" Nosfy asked, looking at him.

"This is Liner Hellvilleshine, a knight who's working with me."

"Hellvilleshine?" She looked a little surprised to hear that name but quickly composed herself. "It's nice to meet you, Hellvilleshine. I'm the Banner of the South... No, I'm the Dungeon Guardian, the Thief of Light's Essence, Nosfy," she said gracefully, holding out her right hand for a handshake.

"Nice to meet you. You can just call me Liner," he said, shaking her hand, as he sensed she had no intention of attacking. The gesture also worked as proof

that they weren't enemies.

"Um...is it okay if I call you Hellvilleshine instead of Liner?" Nosfy asked as she shook his hand.

At that moment, Liner let go of her hand and jumped backward like a beast facing its natural enemy. His hands were ready to pull out the twin swords at his waist. It was an unusual reaction. I was so caught up in it that I almost pulled out my own sword, but Liner himself didn't seem to understand what had happened.

"Nosfy, what did you just try to do to me?" he asked, a serious expression on his face.

Nosfy had a similar expression on her face, and she quickly began to apologize. "I'm so sorry! I thought that my curse had completely disappeared, but it seems there's still some remaining. I never meant to harm you! Please believe me!"

"The remains of a curse?"

"Yes, it was put on my body before I was born. I thought it disappeared once I passed through the purification of death, but I guess not. I am so sorry, Liner. I swear I will never let it show again."

The word "curse" reminded me of Reaper, who was under the same "curse" as the Grim Reaper in fairy tales, which meant that she couldn't exist as long as she was perceived. It seemed that Nosfy had a similar situation. Reaper's condition for lifting the curse had been Lorwen's death, but Nosfy's was her own death.

"No, that's okay..." Liner was clearly moved by her heartfelt apology and approached her to shake her hand again.

"Maybe it's because I lost the curse, but I feel very refreshed. I can't believe I can shake hands properly. Liner, would you let me pat your head a little?" Even after everything, that's all she was interested in.

Of course, Liner blushed and tried to run away again. "What? Why?!"

"It might resolve my lingering attachment and allow me to disappear.

Please?” She grabbed his hand and wouldn’t let go, holding on tightly as she looked into his eyes.

Under that pressure, Liner nodded. “Well, a little’s okay, I guess...”

“Okay.” Having received permission, Nosfy reached out and began petting Liner’s head like I’d done to her earlier. It was a strange scene. In the depths of the Dungeon, where losing focus meant certain death, a young girl was petting a young boy on the head as they continued to shake hands. The scene lasted several seconds.

“Thank you very much. But it seems like that didn’t fulfill my lingering attachment either.”

“Well, obviously. I have no connection to you at all.” With a dumbfounded yet embarrassed look on his face, Liner moved away. He seemed to have become extremely uncomfortable with Nosfy after that series of interactions.

I decided I should talk to her instead. “Nosfy, I have a lot of questions for you, but I think we should go back first. Even though this is your floor, it’s still dangerous.” Just getting to floor sixty had been a serious win, and this was still our first attempt at it. I figured it was as good a time as any to end our exploration, so I began preparing a *Connection*.

“What do you mean ‘go back’?”

“There’s a town in the Dungeon that is a re-creation of what the North was like a thousand years ago. We’ve been using it as our base of operations while we try to get back to the surface. The Guardian of floor fifty, Lorde, also lives there.”

“A Northern town from a thousand years ago... Lorde?” Nosfy’s expression, which had been a gentle smile this whole time, darkened.

“Is there a problem?”

“Master Kanami, please take me to Lorde.”

“What do you plan to do to her? Taking you depends on what you say next.” Feeling the ominous change in her, I stopped casting my spell. I had been careless because she seemed friendly with me, but she was still a member of

the South, which, a thousand years ago, had been an enemy to the North. She might be incompatible with the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

“I just want to talk with her.”

“Tell me what you want to talk about first. Otherwise, I can’t take you with me. Lorde is...a friend. If you’re going to do something to her, then we become enemies, right here, right now.” I had chosen the word “friend” after some deliberation.

Nosfy understood that I was on Lorde’s side, and she spoke slowly. “I can’t say that I don’t hold a grudge against her. She is the one who killed me, after all, so I have my own feelings about her. But that’s a trivial matter, and I have no intention of rehashing it. What I want to talk about is her current situation. She may be the one who can resolve my lingering attachment.”

Her feelings seemed to be sincere. It was hard for me to refuse, since it was all about resolving her lingering attachments and disappearing. Taking her friendly attitude up to this point into account, I decided to let them meet.

“Okay, I’ll take you. But I’ll be there when you talk to her.”

“Yes, that’s fine. Please don’t make that face, Master Kanami. I have no intention of fighting her again.”

I certainly couldn’t sense any desire to fight in her. At the very least, she didn’t want to meet Lorde in order to battle her.

“Okay.” I walked back over to the staircase leading to floor sixty-one and made a magic door. “*Connection.*”

The three of us passed through and returned to the castle, bringing along the Guardian who didn’t know what was keeping her here.



We returned safely to our room, and I immediately cast *Dimension* to figure out where Lorde was. She was alone in the garden, standing there absentmindedly. I wondered if her work for the day was done. We walked through the castle to bring the two Guardians together. Nosfy braided her too-long hair as we walked. I thought it was quite a skill, but it seemed to only be

possible because it was long enough to touch the ground. Bringing the back of her hair to the front, she deftly gathered it into a braid, then tied it together with a black ribbon, though I wasn't sure where she'd gotten it.

We reached the garden just as she was finishing braiding her hair into two long strands.

Lorde's face lit up when she noticed our approach. From her expression, she'd been awaiting our return.

"Oh! Welcome back, Kanamin, Liner! Huh?! Nosfy?!" She let out an unladylike squawk when she saw the girl next to us.

"I'm back, Lorde. They were kind enough to bring me here from floor sixty. Is that a problem?"

"Huh? You got to floor sixty?! No, or actually, you really drew the shortest of the short straws, huh, Kanamin? You're fine, Kanamin, but I'm in trouble! Yikes, yikes, yikes!" Lorde cried out, her whole body erupting with so much magic power that it undid her ponytail. Her green hair fluttered gently around her as the wings on her back, which had been tucked in tightly, opened up.

Her wings, hair, and magic, all the same green, intertwined and melded, and then transformed into a pair of gigantic wings. They were so huge that the particles of emerald that flowed out of them looked like stardust. They shook the entire garden, throwing it into disarray. Then she wrung even more magic out of her body, condensing the green power into her arm, causing it to transform. It was a rifle that was bigger than Lorde herself. Or more likely a bayonet, judging by the sharpness of its point. I knew that firearms weren't present in this world, but it was a shape that could only be called a gun.

With the huge wings and bayonet, Lorde was truly a monster worthy of being called the Guardian of floor fifty. This was the first time I'd seen her like that, but I was sure she was now fully prepared to fight.

"Lorde, it's been so long...since you killed me, I believe." Nosfy spoke softly, as though talking to a frightened kitten, as she was battered with that murderous surge of magic.

Lorde's face scrunched up, and she retorted with the point of her bayonet.

“N-No! I didn’t kill you, right?! You just blew yourself up on your own! I was so surprised when I saw you suddenly being engulfed!”

“I didn’t think I could beat you unless I used enough magic power to destroy myself. That basically means you killed me, doesn’t it?”

“Well, hey, that’s how wars are supposed to be! No hard feelings, right?”

“No, of course not. I don’t resent you anymore, and I don’t want to fight you.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Really.”

“Oh...” Lorde’s magic dispersed with a hiss like a deflating balloon. The gun on her right arm disappeared, and the wings on her back grew smaller. It was easy to see the change.

“It is true that because of you I was swallowed up by the continent, but it also saved my life. After that, thanks to being swallowed by the continent, I was finally able to talk calmly with Master Kanami. So I don’t resent you that much.”

“Oh, after the war and everything, when he was in the middle of creating the Dungeon? You were able to talk to Kanami properly then? Well, that’s a surprise. If it’s settled, tell me that first!”

The moment she realized there wouldn’t be a fight, Lorde was ready to greet her old friend. She pulled her sprawling hair back into a ponytail and moved closer to Nosfy.

“Yes. There are no hard feelings anymore. There is no reason to fight with you. And I think...you and I aren’t the same people we used to be, right?” Nosfy stared hard at Lorde and wore a slightly shadowed smile as she replied.

“Ha ha ha, that’s good. I was afraid I was going to be treated like a thieving cat again and almost killed!”

“You’re no longer the representative of the North, you’re a Guardian. Just as I am a Guardian and no longer a representative of the South. We’re the same, so shouldn’t we be friends?”

“Oh, I know what you mean! We can have a conversation! Oh, sister, I’m so impressed! Peace is the best, isn’t it? Ah, it’s nice to start over, isn’t it? Yes, it is.

If only we didn't have to be in such a stupid position, we could all understand each other! Now it's time to prove all that!"

"So, I'd like you to let me live here with you too..."

"Yes, yes! You can stay as long as you like in the room of your choice here in the Demon Queen's Castle!"

"The Demon Queen's Castle? So this is Viaysia Castle, after all..." Nosfy guessed the original name of the castle as she looked around. It seemed like she'd been there before.

"Oh...I guess can't allow you to be here, can I? As the savior of the South and all that. Don't you want to see peace in Viaysia?"

"Hmm? No, I'm fine here. Peace is good."

"Hmm, hmm? Well, but you went to war with the North before..."

"Yes, that's right. For the sake of world peace."

"If it was for world peace, why did you interfere with me? I was working hard for world peace too!"

"I guess it's just that the form of world peace differs from person to person. Perhaps world peace will never be realized until there's only one last human being left. It really was a useless war, wasn't it?"

"Seriously?! The top brass from back then would say such a thing?!"

"I was only doing what I thought was right, and I was not that passionate about world peace. I have no particular 'attachment' to the countries of the North or South. If anything..." Nosfy gazed intently at Lorde and not Viaysia Castle. Then, looking up through her eyelashes, she asked in a sweet voice, "Lorde, would you like to compliment me?"

The request was totally unexpected. Lorde tilted her head to the side in confusion. "Me? Compliment you?"

"Yes, I want it to be you. I want you to praise me for my efforts in that battle. Then I might be able to fulfill my lingering attachments." She was using her lingering attachments as a shield.

Lorde knew the rules of being a Guardian, so she couldn't refuse. "Umm, you really did well, Nosfy! You were super strong!"

Nosfy was silent but accepted Lorde's awkward compliment with a smile. She thought over the compliment for a few moments without saying anything.

Lorde, perhaps unsure of her own praise, gingerly considered what to say next, but it was Nosfy who spoke up first.

"Thank you, Lorde. It inspired me a bit...but it still doesn't seem to have fulfilled my attachment."

"Well, it is what it is, I guess. Since it's your enemy praising you..."

"No, I want to be complimented by you *because* you're my enemy. I always wanted to be recognized by you."

"No, everyone recognized you! I absolutely did! You were really strong!"

Lorde and Nosfy clasped their hands together and resolved their former enmity. Even though I knew that this was a reconciliation between the leaders of a thousand-year-old war, and a historical moment, it didn't feel real. To be honest, it looked like it could be an ordinary reconciliation between any two girls.

I interrupted them, thinking that they would continue flirting with each other forever if I left them alone. "I'm sorry to interrupt you while you're making up, Lorde, but I have a lot of questions I want to ask Nosfy. Like what our relationship was a thousand years ago, and about her curse."

"Huuuh?! Kanamin! Could it be?! Did you forget about her? Not just me, but Nosfy too?!" Lorde looked at me like I'd grown a second head.

But I'd already told her that I didn't remember anything from a thousand years ago. I couldn't understand why she was so surprised. "No, I don't remember her. But I've forgotten most of what happened a thousand years ago, so what can I do?"

"But you remember your sister, don't you? Then, if you don't remember Nosfy...well, then that's bad, right?"

"I don't know about that. The only thing I can remember is my sister, the

apostles, and Tiara..." The range of people I recognized from a thousand years ago wasn't very big.

Nosfy's expression changed at that. "Tiara..."

Hearing her mutterings, Lorde hurriedly continued her criticism. "I-It's fine if you forget about me! But at least remember Nosfy! You remember Tiara, so why have you forgotten Nosfy?! You really don't remember anything? Not even a little?"

"It's okay, Lorde." Nosfy stopped her from interrogating me further.

The room grew tense, but I didn't know why. Only the eyes of the two people who remembered what had happened a thousand years ago were stern, and I was left alone, not understanding what was going on.

"This is bad! As a girl, I can't just overlook it! No matter what else you forget, you can't forget Nosfy, okay? Because..."

Lorde had an expression that I'd never seen before. Then, a single word jumped out to correct the problem.

"Kanamin, she's your wife!"

"Huh?"

My wife?

Even though my brain had been honed in hundreds of battles, it still took me a minute to comprehend those two words. It felt like time had stopped, and a gentle breeze blew through the garden. I stood in silence, the only sounds being the rustling of the leaves and grass. *My wife*. Did that mean she was the wife of Kanami the Founder? I understood the words themselves, but I couldn't comprehend what they actually meant. Lorde stood in front of me, an angry expression on her face. Nosfy, smiling sadly, stood next to her.

"Wow..." Liner said quietly, from where he stood behind me. Slowly, the complex problems of my past were being untangled, and I was closer to understanding the meaning. A thousand years ago, Nosfy and I had been married. It was too outlandish to believe. Thousands of speculations flew through my mind as to whether it was a metaphor or slang, but there was only

one answer that suited the current situation. I couldn't admit it to myself just yet, though.

"Lorde... What do you...mean?" I asked, grasping at straws, hoping my guess was incorrect.

"Your wife's your wife, duh!"

"Wife...as in spouse?"

"What else could it mean?!"

"So you're saying that in the past, Nosfy and I were married?"

"Exactly! That's why I'm angry!"

"I was her husband and Nosfy was my wife. You're saying we were what people commonly call a 'married couple'?"

"Yes, you were a married couple! That's why Nosfy was fighting in the North! You're so heartless, Kanamin!"

"Huh?!" I was dumbfounded. Strangely, perhaps because of my experiences since coming to this world, I was less confused than I might have been. Maybe it was because somewhere in the back of my mind, I was prepared for anything to happen. That was why I had time to check the expression on Nosfy's face. She had the exact opposite expression from mine and was trying to calm Lorde down as though it was nothing.

"Lorde, that was a thousand years ago. The country that recognized us as husband and wife is gone. Therefore, it would be wrong to continue saying we are."

"But I can provide proof! I mean, a married couple is still a married couple even without that! They have pledged their love to each other! Isn't that eternal?"

Nosfy's expression turned stern. "We didn't exchange any vows or anything. It was a marriage in name only. It was a contract full of lies and deceit. A meaningless ceremony. It was totally different from your idea of marriage, Lorde. And Kanami's forgotten all about it. There is nothing more foolish than to claim that I am his wife now."

“Foolish?! But... But!” Lorde finally stopped speaking at Nosfy’s plain words.

Nosfy turned to me. “You’re troubled now, aren’t you, Master Kanami?”

Her eyes, like black agate, were staring intently at me. I knew that she would not tolerate any falsehoods, nor would she tolerate any mistakes. I could neither nod nor shake my head in response to this heavy question. Since I had no memories, I had no idea what to say. But Nosfy accepted my nonanswer with a smile.

“That’s how it is, Lorde. We are no longer a married couple; we’re now strangers. Of course, you shouldn’t speak of that either, as it will trouble Master Kanami. Now, that’s the end of this conversation.” Nosfy forcefully ended the discussion and was clearly ready to move on to the next topic. Maybe it was her, not me, who really didn’t want to talk about us being a couple.

“Well, if you say it’s fine, it’s fine but...I’m still mad about it!”

Nosfy ignored Lorde, who stood there frowning, and instead turned to address me. “What’s more important is what happened a thousand years ago. My story is simple. I was given to Master Kanami after he tried to take revenge on Apostle Sith but was defeated instead. After that, he fled to the North and invaded the country. Then, at the end, I was defeated and killed by the Sovereign Queen Lorde. That’s really all there is to it.”

“Wait a minute—I lost to Apostle Sith?” The reason behind the outbreak of war was major, but I first had to find out about the battle between Sith and me. The only memory I had was of beating Sith, so there was some discrepancy somewhere.

“Yes. It seems like you won in the final fight but lost the first. That destroyed your spirit, and I was the one who fixed you.”

“So I lost at first... Well, then, thank you very much for that...”

“There’s no need to thank me. It just means that I had a role to play. At the time, we were both just pawns on the board. Two pawns who happened to be next to each other.”

“So a thousand years ago, I was...”

Nosfy's account had filled in some of the holes in that story: I decided to take revenge on Apostle Sith for the murder of my sister and went to the South. However, my first attempt backfired, and I fell into the hands of the enemy. After that, Apostle Sith made me marry Nosfy, the Banner of the South, in order to tie me to that side. But somehow, I managed to come back to my senses and escape. Having learned that I could not win the war alone, I joined forces with Lorde and fought for the North. We started a conflict that took over the entire continent in an attempt to kill Apostle Sith. At the end of the battle, did Lorde and I abandon the North and forcefully pursue the fleeing Apostle Sith? If so, that answered a lot of questions. After defeating Sith, everything lined up with what I'd seen in the World Restoration Array. In my desperation, Tiara persuaded me. We moved on to making the Dungeon and were deceived by Apostle Regacy, leading us to the present, a thousand years later...

Was that all true?

"I think that's about right. But since I was just a pawn, I don't know the details of what happened to you after you left the South. I apologize." Nosfy confirmed that there were no major differences between what the two of us knew.

It would probably be best to ask Lorde about the details, but she was stubborn and didn't seem to want to talk about the past. Speaking of which, the minute the conversation switched to what had happened a thousand years ago, she'd started tending to the garden. It seemed like she *really* didn't want to remember the past.

"No, thank you for that, Nosfy. I don't mind, because to me the present is more important than the past. And regarding the present, you said something about a curse?"

"The formula for a spell was built into my body before I was born, and that spell was always leaking out of me. But now I seem to be able to control it. It seems that I have been purified in various ways in the process of becoming a Guardian, just as you predicted." Glowing magic was leaking from her body as she explained. I felt a strange power from that light, as if it were sucking everything in.

"This light is your curse?"

“It’s the light of enchantment. With it, I was able to unite the soldiers of the South.”

“You enchanted the soldiers? What a heinous spell...”

“It doesn’t have any effect on people with power. Master Kanami, you and Lorde are completely immune to it, and it’s not affecting Liner, is it?”

I looked back at Liner. He nodded to indicate he was okay, and I became certain that Nosfy had control over her power. Lorde rejoined the group as the conversation moved on from what had happened a thousand years ago.

“Oh, I knew it! That power is gone, isn’t it? I was wondering because the eye-wateringly bright halo was gone. I’m glad to hear that, Nosfy. Now we’re both free!”

“Yes, I’m glad to see you looking so carefree too, Lorde. I didn’t mind you being so serious, like you were cursed, but that childlike smile suits you well.”

Lorde wrapped herself around Nosfy like a child, and she accepted it with compassion in her eyes. Then Lorde came to a sudden stop. She seemed to have realized something important.

“Hmm...perhaps this is a premonition that my long-awaited same-sex friendship will happen!”

“Yes, if you don’t mind me being me, I’d be happy to be your friend.”

“Wow! Yay!”

Apparently, female friends were a rarity. Lorde was delighted, with the most infantile, regressive expression I’d ever seen on her. However, I understood that feeling. It was hard to be at ease when you didn’t have friends of the same sex.

“Is this still not right?” Nosfy asked in a small voice, as she was being hugged by Lorde. I only caught her quiet words because of *Dimension*.

“Okay, Nosfy, let’s go talk in my room now! There’s lots I want to discuss!” Lorde began dragging her away.

“Hey, wait! Lorde! I have a lot more things I want to ask her!”

“And I have a lot of things I want to talk to her about! As girls! Yeah! As girls!”

Lorde was very much stressing the fact that they were both girls, but what we were talking about here were *my* memories. It affected future forays into the Dungeon so I thought involving me was nonnegotiable, but that might be exactly *why* Lorde was being such a nuisance.

“Lorde, can we have that kind of girl talk later? I have a lot of important things to do over here, really...”

“No! There are lots of important things I have to tell you! Kanamin, you should remember the memories of your married life first! And until you do, poor, poor Nosfy belongs to me! Let’s go!” Lorde picked Nosfy up bridal style and carried her out the garden gate.

I just let them go, unable to react to the quick abduction. “Wait...isn’t your room in the castle?”

I wanted them to stay in the castle, at least, but Lorde disappeared into the city. I thought about eavesdropping with *Dimension* but decided against it because Lorde insisted on it being girl talk. The girls would likely notice anyway thanks to their abilities.

Abandoned in the castle’s garden, I turned to Liner. “Hey, Liner, did you know?”

“Huh? Oh...about that.” Liner seemed to have guessed what it was without even having to ask. After all, the biggest bombshell from the conversation had been... “No, this is the first time I’ve heard about the Founder having a wife.”

“Me too.” I had never thought that I’d been married a thousand years ago. It was a very troubling story. It seemed like it would be a challenge just to get aboveground, let alone back to my world.

Was the reason there was nothing like that in the Levhannite lore because Tiara was concerned about me or because she wanted to pretend I wasn’t there? Or was there another reason? Of course, there was also the possibility that the whole story about us being married was a lie. But as far as I could tell from Lorde, who had been a third party in it all, it didn’t seem like a lie to me.

“Do you think what they said is true?” I asked.

“Putting aside Nosfy, it doesn’t seem like Lorde is lying...” Liner replied.

“By the way, how old do you think Nosfy is?”

“She’s a little shorter than me, so maybe twelve? That’s a little criminal, huh?”

“I know, right? She’s very small, isn’t she? What do you think I should do?”

“Yeah...well, why don’t you just remarry her once we’re back aboveground?”

“Would that work?!”

“Don’t take it so seriously, Sieg. I’m joking.”

“That’s...a joke?”

It would’ve been great if all of this had been a prank, but it didn’t feel that way. From Nosfy’s appearance, I had a feeling that the things going on didn’t end with the marital drama, so I wanted to hear more about it. I wanted to clarify what her lingering attachments were sooner rather than later. To put it bluntly, I wanted to fulfill her wish before we got back aboveground. I didn’t intend to destroy any evidence. It wasn’t even like I was cheating. But I couldn’t stop the sound of my skills warning me that I would be in trouble if I returned to the surface with her. Indeed, if I introduced her to my friends as my wife when I saw them again, who knew what would happen? Hell would more than freeze over. I wasn’t kidding, it felt like I might have to even come up with my last will and testament.

“Sieg? I’ve never seen you sweat this much before. Are you okay? I’m sure we’re both exhausted from our time in the Dungeon today, so why don’t we go to bed early? Let’s head back to the room and I’ll cook dinner,” Liner urged, unable to help his desire to look out for me. His unusual gentleness indicated that he was more concerned than I had thought.

“You’re right. We worked hard in the Dungeon today. Let’s get some rest for tomorrow.” I nodded back at him, deciding to heed his suggestion.

“Good. Please rest up.”

A lot had happened today, but our plan of returning to the surface as fast as possible had not changed. The first priority was to recover from our earlier exploration, just as Liner said. Above all, I needed to heal my mental fatigue.

We returned to our room and ate dinner, just the two of us. Then we did a little bit of prep for our foray into the Dungeon tomorrow and went to sleep early. As I fell asleep, I felt my head clearing.

Neither Lorde nor Nosfy showed up that night.



Perhaps because I got so much rest, I completely regained my composure overnight. However, the next morning, as soon as I woke up...

“Good morning, Master Kanami.” Nosfy was there, nose-to-nose with me.

“Huh?!” I almost screamed at the close proximity but managed to swallow it instead. If either of us moved closer, our lips would touch.

“G-Good morning, Nosfy,” I said, voice trembling.

She smiled at me and remained the same distance away. “Master Kanami, if I may be so presumptuous, I have prepared breakfast for you.”

I moved only my eyes to see that there was indeed breakfast placed on the table in my room. It seemed she’d made it for me.

“Thank you... I’m going to get up now, so do you think you could move back?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon.” She smiled again and backed away.

I was finally able to sit up and see what my breakfast was. There was carefully cut bread, hot soup with red and green vegetables, a salad with steamed chicken, and fruit-infused water poured into wooden cups. I was speechless with amazement. What surprised me was not the sumptuousness of the dishes, but rather the secretive and clandestine way in which they had been prepared while I was sleeping. Even so, I was more nervous than most people. Ever since coming to this world, I had always been paying attention to the foods, even when I was sleeping. And yet here I was with a full breakfast set up right next to me, and its cook had come nose to nose with me. Perhaps she was trying not to wake me from my sleep, but all I could feel from her actions was concern.

“Um...Master Kanami...do you not like it?” Nosfy looked at me anxiously to see if I was in a good mood. I felt a chill over her unfathomable ability. I was sure she was just as powerful as Lorde was.

“No, no, I’m just surprised by how extravagant it is. Thank you, Nosfy.”

“Oh, I’m glad! I hope it tastes good. Please have a seat here.” She invited me to sit at the center table. I was overcome by the power of her invitation and did as I was told.

Nosfy sat down opposite me, scooped up some soup with a spoon, and presented it to me. “Okay, open up, Master Kanami.”

What was I supposed to do? Did she really want me to let her feed me? I felt some kind of guilt building up, even though I wasn’t really doing anything wrong. All of the skills that enhance my intuition were telling me not to do it. I trusted the skills that had saved my life countless times and made my escape.

“I have to wake Liner up before breakfast! And while we’re at it, why don’t we invite Lorde too?! After all, food tastes better when everyone eats together!”

“That’s true... Why don’t we do that?” Even though her words said she agreed with me, there was no doubt she was frustrated. She returned the spoon she had lifted into the air back to the bowl of soup, and her smile twisted a little bit.

“Okay, will you call Lorde, please?” I asked. “I’ll wake Liner up.”

“Yes, I’ll go get her right away,” Nosfy said as she left my room. After watching her leave, I turned to the bed in the corner of the room. Liner was lying on it with his eyes closed. I mercilessly grabbed his head with my hands.

“Liner, why aren’t you awake?!”

His hands intercepted mine.

“So you are!”

As I thought, he was just feigning sleep. His eyes popped open and he was clearly desperate as he started arguing with me. “How could I interrupt that?! I’m really bad at that stuff! Call me if you have chores to do or plan to kill each other! Then I’ll gladly sacrifice myself!” It seemed like the sickeningly sweet atmosphere that had filled the room earlier wasn’t his strong suit.

“I thought we were supposed to help each other in times of trouble!” I said.

“I was gonna! But honestly...I really didn’t want to get involved in all that.”

“Damn! Please, Liner, be a buffer for me! I’m begging you!”

“A buffer?! I’d just be crushed!” he yelled, breaking out into a cold sweat. In the end, he made his decision—a decision to use magic. “No way! It’s not knightly to get caught up in a love affair rather than die in a fight! I’ll eat breakfast somewhere else! *Wynd!*”

“You’re not running away, Liner! *Dimension: Faultline!*”

He had tried to use the force of the wind to get away from me and escape out the window, but I’d already predicted his movement. I immediately used my dimensional compression magic to shift the distance and instead bring him closer to me. I grabbed both his arms, and it became a contest of sheer strength. I already knew the numerical values of his strength thanks to *Analyze*. When it came down to strength alone, I could definitely take him.

“Let me go! *Ix Wynd!*” He tried to detonate his arms using wind magic to get me to let go, but I’d experienced this self-destruction strategy plenty of times already. I was already using *Dimension* to time everything, so I let go of his arms just as *Ix Wynd* went off and then immediately grabbed him again.

“I know you’re not really trying!”

“Why are you so stupidly strong?! I can’t deal with this! I’m running away!” Liner and I were both over level twenty. We’d gotten to the point where aboveground we’d be feared as monsters rather than revered as heroes. Therefore, even though we were skirmishing in a small room, it turned into a fierce battle. We exchanged hits using advanced martial arts techniques at a speed that couldn’t be tracked by the naked eye. It was a pity, but there was no doubt that this fight was one of the top-tier fights in this world. This fact gave me a strange feeling of emptiness and sadness. At the same time, however, I also felt a strange sense of relief. I knew that there was still room for us to grow and that Liner’s tendency for self-sacrifice was disappearing. But I didn’t want to feel like he was growing up because of this. I would have preferred a cooler scene—for example, when he was in a pinch, fighting a strong enemy in the Dungeon.

Then, just as the battle between the wind knight and the dimension mage was about to reach its climax...

“Oho ho ho! I’ve been summoned! I’ve been summoned so I had no choice but to come! It’s me!” Lorde flung open the door with a bang and strode into the room. The fight was temporarily halted by the intervention of a third party. We stopped short, mid-grapple.

“I’ve brought Lorde, Master Kanami. Or rather, she was waiting for us right in the garden,” Nosfy said, following her in.

“Huh? Huh? Liner, where are you going?” Lorde asked as he was making a break for the window.

“Well, it seems like they were talking about ex-couple stuff, so I thought I’d maybe get some fresh air.” Liner started making excuses to run away. But I didn’t want to let him do that, so I cornered him, still clutching both his arms.

“No way, Liner. I want to eat breakfast with you. I want to eat breakfast with you more than anyone else.”

“Oh no, Sieg, don’t worry about me! I’m fine on my own!”

“Don’t say that! We’re friends!” I gripped his arm even tighter. I wouldn’t let him get away.

“Why don’t you eat with us, Liner? Now that I’m here, it won’t just be the exes anymore!” Lorde said innocently.

“Damn it...” Liner’s spur-of-the-moment excuse crumbled, and he reluctantly settled down.

I quickly invited him to sit at the table before he could change his mind. Seeing that, Lorde also sat down. “Good! Now, let’s eat!” she said.

Thus, breakfast with the two Guardians began. There was no need to worry about the quantity of food. Even if I had seconds, it looked like there were nearly four servings’ worth of everything. Each of us raised a spoonful of the sumptuous breakfast to our mouths.

“How do you like the food, Master Kanami?” As expected, Nosfy sidled right up next to me to ask how I liked it, but thankfully, she didn’t try to feed me in front of the other two.

Frankly, her food was delicious. It was comparable to the professional food

served at the tavern in Vart. But, like the food Maria prepared, it was surprisingly healthy.

“I’m surprised. It’s quite good, but I think I prefer Liner’s cooking...” I said, trying to get Liner involved in the conversation, although he kept averting his eyes from me.

“Really?” she muttered, turning her gaze on Liner.

He broke into a cold sweat. Even though he wasn’t looking at me, I could tell he wanted me to stop. *Sorry, I’m not going to stop*, I thought. I wouldn’t be able to break out of this weird ex-couple atmosphere without his help.

Lorde, perhaps unable to stay quiet in such a tense situation, spoke up. “Yeah! It was really delicious, Nosfy! You must’ve been a good wife!”

“I tried my best at it. I’m quite confident in my cooking.”

“And to think your husband left such a good wife! Does he have anything more to say?” Lorde asked sweetly, bringing up the topic of our former marriage yet again. Apparently, she was recommending that we resume our marital life. But since this was something I had absolutely no recollection of, I had no choice but to avoid it.

“Uh, yeah...if the food was this good, then it’s no wonder she was a good wife. Well, then! About the Dungeon: I was planning on going in again today, and Liner, you’re gonna come too, right?!”

The force with which I changed topic made him look at me in dismay. It seemed like he didn’t want me to bring him into any of this, yet he couldn’t ignore the topic of the Dungeon.

“Well, if you’re going, I’m going,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Okay, we’ll go just the two of us again,” I said forcefully. *That way, we’ll be able to take refuge in the Dungeon for the rest of the day.*

“Hmm? Going back into the Dungeon? You really are ready to go home, huh? Before I knew it, you guys reached floor sixty yesterday.” It was, of course, Lorde who interrupted us. She puffed her cheeks out in annoyance over our eagerness to head back to the surface. However, I didn’t sense any of the

anxiety I had expected prior to departure. There was no sense of urgency like when the previous Guardians had been fighting for their lives; it felt more like a child throwing a tantrum and begging us to stay.

“I’m gonna be blunt—I’m not gonna let you go home so easily! You’re gonna have to stay here longer, everyone!” Lorde hit the table lightly. Her gentle anger actually made her kind of cute. Seeing her like that, the only word I could think of was “weak.” There was too little venom in her words. It was like a couple of friends playing a prank on each other.

On the other hand, Nosfy’s smile was thick with venom. I locked eyes with Liner and began explaining our plan and how we’d fared so far.

“Lorde, as I said in the beginning, we’re in a hurry. We have all the magic and equipment we need to defeat the wind dragon, and we just barely have enough food to get through the Dungeon. Frankly, there’s no reason not to go.”

“Huh? You’ve already prepared rations?”

“Yes, enough for the few days a one-way trip takes.”

“Hmph!”

Thanks to the generous paycheck from Mr. Reynand, I had enough food in my Inventory. I’d promised him that I would bring Ide back here, and the amount of money he’d given me made it worthwhile. I could safely say that all the preparations we could make here were done.

“I see. So you’re going into the Dungeon today, Master Kanami. In that case, will you take me with you? I will definitely be of use.”

Unlike Lorde, Nosfy seemed more than willing to cooperate. This was the ideal development, although I knew that our plan for tackling the Dungeon would change to accommodate the personality of the Guardian of floor sixty. At the same time, it was undeniably *too* convenient. I didn’t give her an immediate answer, probing what lay behind her smile.

“Huh? What?! Why does Nosfy get to go? There’s no reason for you to go! Actually, you broke the rules, so I’m confiscating you! You’re going to play with me!”

“You’re right. I have no reason to leave the Dungeon and go aboveground. I’m sure I’d be able to have a good time and renew our friendship if I stayed here, but...” Nosfy moved even closer to me. “Everything about me is for Master Kanami. I don’t want to say that it is my duty to support my husband as a partner...but I simply want to be of use to him. Truly, that’s how I feel.” Her sigh brushed my ear.

“Thank you, Nosfy.” My voice shook a little as I replied.

“It’s no problem,” she said, smiling at me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

But please, don’t threaten me with the word “partner”! I thought.

“Oh...wait...so I’m all alone here again?! And you three are going into the Dungeon?!” Lorde asked, looking between the three of us. We all nodded. “Well, then take me with you! I can help there!” she cried out with tears in her eyes, begging to come with us like a child who didn’t want to be left home alone.

“Huh? You really want to?” I asked.

“I wanna come! I’ve already decided! I was really lonely yesterday without Liner!”

“Well, you better not get in the way...”

“I won’t! I definitely won’t! I probably definitely won’t!”

Lorde looked away as she promised. I couldn’t believe her at all. But with that, our party was at four people, and two of them were Guardians. Thinking about it from a tactics point of view, our levels and team composition were the best they could be, although that was just from a power standpoint.

“Well then, we’ve got a party of four. But this lineup... It feels kind of nostalgic!” Lorde giggled.

“I feel like I’m going to be stabbed in the back...” It seemed likely that she was going to interfere with our plans. I also suspected that Nosfy would try something, although she was keeping quiet.

“I won’t betray you! Definitely not! Probably definitely!”

Her “probably definitely!” was way too suspicious. However, if the four of us could work well together, it would solve a lot of problems. I reluctantly let them accompany us.

“Well, I won’t tell you not to help us. Let’s leave after we finish breakfast. The sooner the better,” I said. We’d leave as soon as everyone finished the meal that Nosfy had prepared and try our hand at the Dungeon as this new party.

This was the fifth day of my life underground, and our third foray into the Dungeon.



“It really is strange...”

Standing in front of the door leading to floor sixty-six, I looked up at the dark sky of Viaysia. I felt like the distortion in the sky that I’d felt yesterday had expanded, so I’d stopped to take a look. The sky, which had been all black, was now showing a subtle change in color. A faint light was flashing through the dark distortion, like sunlight leaking through clouds. Of course, the light wasn’t as bright as the sun. It was a muted glow that didn’t really stand out in the blackness. Looking closer, it seemed to resemble the light of the magic gems dropped by monsters.

“Huh? The sky is always strange, isn’t it? More importantly, let’s hurry up!” Lorde pushed me forward. Liner and Nosfy followed us onto floor sixty-six.

After passing through the magic door, the familiar world of sky spread out before us. The wind dragon was flying leisurely through the too-wide sky of this floor, keeping an eye on us, ready to keep us from climbing the spiral staircase in the center. If we didn’t conquer this dragon, we wouldn’t be able to advance. When we’d discussed this earlier as a party, however, Lorde had beaten her chest and taken on the challenge of defeating the dragon all by herself. I knew that she was strong, but I was a little skeptical of this plan.

“You’re sure you can do this?”

“Of course! I’ll make sure you know I’m a useful character to have around!”

If she wasn’t useful here, we’d send her back to town and continue on as a party of three. Either way was fine with me, so I decided to keep my mouth shut

and just watch.

“Okay, I’m off! Watch from here, okay?” Full of confidence, Lorde walked out onto the plains alone. She showed no sign of being daunted by the prospect of taking on the giant dragon all by herself—she was the Demon Queen, after all.

Perhaps it was the enormous amount of magic power leaking out of her, but I really felt like I could leave it all to her. I remembered the wings and bayonet she’d shown off yesterday when we’d brought Nosfy back. To be honest, the thought of a battle involving such weapons tickled my childish curiosity, and I couldn’t help being excited. Before I knew it, the look on my face was one of a child waiting for a superhero show to start.

Lorde advanced across the meadow toward the dragon and began concentrating her magic into one place. However, unlike yesterday, the point of collection wasn’t her arm, but her throat. I braced for impact, thinking that her first move was going to be unleashing her magic. But I didn’t expect what she actually did.

“LITTLE ELFENREIZEEE!!!” A slow, languid shout came from her. It was the same kind of voice one would use to call a friend from the front door of a house—very familiar, friendly, and lighthearted. As far as I could tell from *Dimension*, it was just a voice that was made louder by magic. Nothing else.

Hearing that ridiculously loud voice, the wind dragon twisted his thick neck and looked at Lorde.

“We’re just gonna squeeze right by ya!” she continued.

What a childish request.

“Huh?” I thought she’d have a hard time with a request like that, but my anger soon fizzled out. The dragon had heard Lorde’s request, nodded, and then started to move away from the spiral staircase.

She waved at the retreating dragon’s back. The battle was over, in an unprecedentedly peaceful manner. I was speechless. This was a good development, though—a very good one. If we could get through here without taking any damage, that would be very good indeed. But where should those of us who were stuck in Viaysia because of that dragon aim our anger? I wanted to

tell Lorde that she should've told us from the beginning that such a thing was possible.

"Hee hee, what do you think, Kanamin? Isn't it great?" she asked, with a satisfied expression.

I was tempted to smack the vapid expression right off her face, but I restrained myself with impressive self-control and swallowed my anger for now. It was fine to leave destroying that prideful face until after we got back aboveground.

"I'm impressed he can understand words..."

"No, I think I'm the only one he can understand."

We rejoined Lorde, and as we walked up the stairs to safety, free of obstacles, we talked about what had just happened in place of a battle.

"Just you? Does that mean it's part of being the Thief of Wind's Essence?"

"No, this is an innate skill. I've been able to communicate with a lot of people since I was a kid."

"Oh, so that's what it means to be the Sovereign Queen Lorde. So, as long as I have you, I can avoid all the monsters in the Dungeon?"

"That's impossible. The only reason this worked here is because I'm good friends with Elfenreize."

"You're good friends? From when you were alive?"

"No, it's because I've been playing tag with him for the past thousand years. I killed him a few times, but now we're friends!"

"No way, you can't become friends if you've killed him..."

"Huh? We're friends! When I see him, he bows his head and says hello!"

I wasn't sure that made him a friend. Maybe an underling or something.

"Anyway, you played tag with him?"

"Because I'm so strong!"

Since she could fly, I figured it might be possible to play tag with a dragon,

though she would have to be prepared to die if she got caught. The fact that she could do that showed how strong she actually was.

We climbed up the stairs to floor sixty-five as Lorde described the rules of the game of aerial tag she had apparently invented. Before reaching the top, Liner and I shared information about what awaited us on floor sixty-five. The next floor was the one composed entirely of three-dimensional staircases. It was inhabited by Lizard Fliers. They had an ironclad defense, could evade all physical attacks, and neutralized magic with wind. Nosfy raised a hand as we talked.

“I see. I think I understand. Then I will show you my power on this next floor.”

“Nosfy...”

“I’m fine on my own if it’s similar to the monster I’m thinking of.”

“Huh? Wait a minute!”

Not to be outdone by Lorde’s success, Nosfy led the way to floor sixty-five. Then, without thinking about the enemy’s position at all, she started walking carelessly down the stairs. Naturally, a nearby Lizard Flier noticed her and quickly began flying her way. Its wings could cut through flesh like it was nothing. Fearing she’d be torn to pieces, I tried to chase after her, but Lorde caught me by the shoulder.

“Hey! Lorde! What are you—”

“It’s fine, because she’s Nosfy.” Lorde shook her head, completely relaxed.

Then, Nosfy let out a spell without any preparatory movements or incantation. “*Light Phantom!*”

Since we were in the Dungeon, I had *Dimension* active. However, I couldn’t perceive her spell formula. Her magic was so fluid, so fast, and above all, so natural. She waved her hand lightly to the side, and a blinding flash of light sliced through the Dungeon. However, the Lizard Flyer moved forward through it without hesitation. It sliced through Nosfy’s body with its sharp wings, but her body had become transparent, as if she were a 3D hologram.

“I see, so that’s a Lizard Flier. It uses wind as its sensory organ. But the sharper your sensory organs are, the better my magic will work. *Light.*”

The light became stronger and enveloped the monster as if soaking into it. Of course, the Lizard Flier, realizing that the magical light was eroding its body, tried to cast counter magic by ruffling its wings like it had done with us last time. Nosfy laughed at that.

“It’s already over. Even if you’re as fast as the wind, there’s no way you can compete with the speed of light.”

There was no way her magic was moving at light speed like she claimed, but there was no doubt that it operated on light. Therefore, the Lizard Flier, having been exposed to the light, was completely helpless and affected by the spell before being able to successfully cast counter magic. The monster’s magic and will to fight faded away. Then, it began wobbling away from Nosfy. It fluttered aimlessly through the air like a butterfly enjoying its freedom in the natural world.

I was left speechless. Nosfy nodded with a bit of pride.

“It was a success. This way, Master Kanami. I have magically calmed the monster’s will to fight. As long as we don’t take any hostile actions, we should be good to go.”

With that, she beckoned for us to follow her. But I couldn’t believe her words, and I couldn’t relax my fighting stance either. After all, I had almost been killed by this monster just yesterday. If possible, I wanted to be at least five meters away from it at all times.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” I asked.

“Yes. When you’re dealing with a beast that moves only on instinct, it’s a piece of cake. Anyone who uses light magic can do it. But more importantly, you must relax quickly. If you don’t, the monster I just neutralized will be provoked again.”

“I understand...”

Lorde, laughing, followed Nosfy first, and Liner and I followed behind them. We drew close enough to touch the Lizard Flier.

“You’re still looking tense. Please be as cheerful as possible!” Nosfy put her two pointer fingers to the corners of her mouth and drew it upward in a smile.

After her repeated warnings, Liner and I had no choice but to return our swords to their sheaths. The fact that the monster didn't react even when we were so close was proof enough that we wouldn't be drawn into battle with it again. Believing in this, I forcefully released the tension in my body.

"Yes, that's good! All right, let's continue upward. I'll quell any monsters that approach us with my light magic."

"I'll lead the way. But first, let me ask you something. Do you mean that your magic works on the mind and makes it lose its will to fight?" I asked Nosfy, who was walking next to me, as I led the way through floor sixty-five. I didn't have any good memories of Mental magic, so I couldn't help but be worried about it.

Nosfy pondered that for a moment, then began to explain carefully. "Yes, that's right. There's no error in your thought process. However, unlike dark magic, light magic cannot forcibly change another person's mind. It can only alleviate certain emotions through heart-to-heart communication and mutual consent. Therefore, it cannot do what you're worried about, Master Kanami."

It was clear that she could sense my concern from the expression on my face. Unlike Tida's magic, it seemed like hers had a lot of conditions placed on it.

"So it's necessary to have mutual understanding, not corruption by the light?"

"Yes, that peaceful condition is probably the biggest difference from dark magic. Monsters don't like to die for nothing either, so I've poked at their minds and worked out a peaceful solution." She said it lightly, but that technique was likely possible because she had enough magical power to make her opponent believe they would be killed if she actually fought them. I didn't think any other light mage could possibly take away a Lizard Flier's will to fight.

"So, in short, it's an intuitive magic to 'talk things over.' But since all you had was a 'discussion' depending on our attitude, we could still have to fight. That's why you told us not to provoke them."

"As expected of you, Master Kanami. You're correct. You're quite perceptive to magic." She gave a small clap and praised me.

I still wouldn't let my guard down, so I turned to the other girl in the party for confirmation. Lorde had experience fighting Nosfy and would be familiar with

the light magic of a thousand years ago. If she didn't feel any discomfort, then Nosfy was telling the truth.

Lorde seemed to wonder why I was staring at her, but she immediately confirmed that what Nosfy said was true. I was perhaps a bit nervous, but I had to be cautious when it came to Mental magic. I knew that much from experience. I definitely didn't want the situation to slowly spiral out of control without me realizing it.

"Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to learn more about your magic, Nosfy. I don't know very much about magic right now."

"Of course. I don't mind. I'll start with an explanation of the basic, foundational *Light* spell."

Now I could determine whether she lied about her magic by comparing it with Lorde's. Not wanting to miss this opportunity, I continued to ask about Light magic throughout the journey. We easily passed through floor sixty-five as I asked her more and more about her abilities. Lizard Fliers attacked us several times along the way, but we were able to get rid of them all with her magic. We were doing so well that yesterday's deadly battles seemed ridiculous.

With that, we entered floor sixty-four.

As we entered the new floor, Lorde rushed ahead of us in high spirits. "Okay! It's a new floor! I'm up next!"

"Are the next monsters spirit elementals? I'm proficient at dealing with those as well. Don't worry, Master Kanami. When it comes to a peaceful resolution, no one is better than me," Nosfy interjected.

"Huh? You get to go again?" asked Lorde.

"If we leave it to you, it will get wild. If I handle it, we can progress without fighting."

"Well, I mean...I guess so. But if we do that the whole time, won't it get boring?"

"That's not really a problem. Master Kanami, which would you prefer?" Nosfy asked coolly, the exact opposite of Lorde. Her plan made so much sense it was

impossible to argue with.

“I think Nosfy’s suggestion is the better choice, since my goal is to return to the surface safely.”

“Then excuse me.” Nosfy passed Lorde and began leading us onward.

The Green Ash Elementals on this floor had a huge perception range. We were quickly spotted by one, and it spun on the wind over to us. Nosfy, who’d been waiting for that to happen, intercepted it with a spell.

“Light.”

Bathed in the light, the Green Ash Elemental lost its will to fight just like the Lizard Flier had and began floating in the air like a balloon. I guess they’d been convinced to give up the fight through “discussion” again.

“It was a success. Now, let’s continue forward. Feel free to act like a tourist. In fact, due to the nature of Light magic, it is safer to be in tourist mode,” Nosfy said, looking back over her shoulder at us. Even a monster that had been a threat to Liner and me together was like putty in her hands.

“Thanks for the help. We’ll be able to move along easily like this.” Honestly, this was an unforeseen development. We were clearing the Dungeon without having to fight the most troublesome monsters. At this rate, it felt like we would back to the surface quite easily.

“Hmph...” It seemed like Lorde felt the same way. She’d been voicing her displeasure the whole time.

Nosfy used her magic light repeatedly as we progressed through floor sixty-four. Without fail, each elemental that approached us ended up floating away like a balloon.

“Light. Light. Light.”

We progressed as if we were walking along the Pathway of the upper levels, and before long we reached the area that led up to the next floor. From this point on, the inhabitants of the floor weren’t spirit elementals, but griffons—fantasy creatures. Nosfy looked a little troubled when I told her this.

“Griffons? Unfortunately, my magic can’t help with those. They don’t fear

death. Talking with them won't work."

It seemed like her *Light* spell's effectiveness wasn't dependent on the opponents level or magic power, but on their temperment.

"Then what should we do from here? Do we fight or do we run?"

With the four of us we could probably push forward and fight monsters off at the same time. As I asked for the opinions of the two Guardians, who likely had a lot of experience fighting during their lives, Nosfy was quickest to respond.

"No, there's no need for you to worry, Master Kanami. Lorde and I will deal with the monsters."

"We will?" Lorde said.

"I need to make sure you're not rusty. And I want to stretch my legs too; I'm feeling stiff."

"Oh, so that's what you mean. It's better than just running through it! Fighting together with you sounds kind of fun, actually!"

"Hee hee, when I was alive I never would've imagined fighting shoulder to shoulder with you."

The two of them giggled together as they began casting their magic.

"I'll show you just how cool your older sister can be! *Kuchel Bayonet!*"

"I'm looking forward to it, sister! *Light Rod.*"

The characteristic strong magic of the Guardians coalesced into two weapons. Lorde held a bayonet made out of wind, and Nosfy's spell solidified into a staff of light.

"Oooh? I've gained a sister?" Lorde laughed, delighted that Nosfy had called her that.

"Yes, a younger one. Let's start with a spear, shall we?" Nosfy agreed, laughing as well. A blade formed at the edge of her staff, changing the form of the weapon.

"Okay, then! I'll take this side, Nosfy; you take the other."

"Of course, sister."

“I’ll do my best!”

There was no way Nosfy really thought of Lorde as her older sister, but it seemed like she knew that saying so would make the woman work extra hard. She had a sly smile on her face each time she used the word.

Just as they decided on their roles, we were discovered by a number of Pale Griffons. They approached us from all directions, and Liner and I prepared to fight as well.

“You two can relax! Nosfy and I can handle it!” Lorde said.

It seemed like Nosfy felt the same way. Without much of a choice, Liner and I relaxed. At the same time, Lorde and Nosfy took off running. After that, the battle took only a second. Their speed easily exceeded ours. Lorde flew through the air like she was riding on the wind, and Nosfy ran along the wall in a way I never would’ve guessed possible based on her appearance. They reached the closest Pale Griffon in just a few seconds and struck with their weapons.

It wasn’t a simple sprint and attack. It was only because of Lorwen’s mastery of swordplay that I was able to recognize their high skill level. Their natural sprint, with few extraneous movements, was similar to the sliding footwork techniques of martial arts. No, it was such a high level of technique that it surpassed anything possible for a human. Furthermore, both of their attacks were supported by solid technique. Without a doubt, Lorde possessed Swordplay and Nosfy possessed Spearmanship.

At the hands of these centuries-old masters, the Pale Griffon roared as it took the blows directly to a vital point on its body. However, that wasn’t enough to kill it, perhaps because of its huge size. It tried to distance itself from the two Guardians, counterattacking with its claws. It was probably trying to flee upward and call for its friends.

But the Guardians didn’t allow that to happen.

“*Wynd Arrow!*” Lorde yelled.

“*Light Arrow,*” Nosfy muttered.

Their voices were opposite in volume, but their magic closely resembled each other’s. In the blink of an eye, Wind and Light magic filled the hallway with a

torrent of power. There was nothing the Pale Griffon could do against such an onslaught. The magic that filled the corridor was instantly compressed into thin arrows. The beautifully shaped arrows were proof of perfect magical control. They flew at a frightening speed and hit the Pale Griffon. Both women had aimed for the brain. The arrows landed at the same time and, without missing a beat, killed two of the enemies.

Chills ran down my spine as I watched the two monsters turn into light and disappear. The spells the pair had used were some of the most basic of basics. But “magic at its finest” was the only way to describe the result. The density, manipulation, and speed were all perfect. On top of that, the killing power was at Dia’s level.

Having killed the two Pale Griffons so easily, the women set their sights on the next enemy. The battles continued. However, there was never a single instance of danger. Both of them were physically strong, had a wealth of skills that practically made them belong to a higher dimension, and above all, their ability to deal with magic was almost too extraordinary. They chose exactly the right magic for the situation without wasting any of their enormous magical power. Perhaps because their attributes were Wind and Light, they had an abundance of long-range magic, and they didn’t miss a single fleeing Pale Griffon. They seemed to have a higher Magical Combat skill than I did.

Strong. They’re just strong, I thought. The Pale Griffons that were coming at us were exterminated in less than a few minutes by the duo’s overwhelming strength. I didn’t get any experience, but I picked up the magic gems the enemies dropped. It was an extremely ideal way to deal with the Dungeon, but it still didn’t stop the chill crawling up my spine. I looked at the two women coming back this way, both wearing expressions that seemed to say they’d just finished an easy workout.

“Aren’t you two *too* strong?” I asked, my voice shaky.

“Huh? I mean, yeah? I rose to power as a king because of my strength. As you would say, Kanamin, I became a Demon Queen. Hee hee, in the past, I ruled everyone by force, you know?”

“In order for a newcomer like me to unify the knights, simple power like this

was the bare minimum. Just because I was the Banner, doesn't mean I never fought..."

They answered my question so easily.

"To use your words, Kanamin, Nosfy is a 'hero' and super strong!"

I felt very distant from them. It had been a long time since I'd felt this way. They were different from me—I had just been borrowing my sister's power and repeatedly copying other people's skills. The two women in front of me now would be the main characters in a story. They were a demon queen and hero who would be talked about for generations if this were a legend. They were two saviors who had protected and led the continent. Thinking about it from a game standpoint, either of these two women could be the final boss in an isekai story. That's how much wisdom and pressure I could feel from them.

Then, as we were talking, they each used Restoration magic as if it were natural. They were too well-rounded. They were totally different from mages who only specialized in one type of magic. Realizing that there was no enemy these two couldn't face if they were together, I put my unnecessary fears to rest.

"Well then, we'll leave the rest of the fighting to you two..."

"Yes, please do."

"It's been a long time since I've done this kind of exercise, so I'll have to try a bit harder!"

Thus, our third attempt at the Dungeon proceeded without a hitch. As we approached floor sixty, the number of light-type monsters with an interest in fighting grew fewer and fewer, so defeating them became easier and easier. There was really nothing left that could be called a challenge here. The higher we went up, the easier the Dungeon became. It was almost a promise that we would make it back to the surface. Compared to being worried we might not be able to get past floor sixty-six, the future was looking much brighter. It was an ideal development. But I felt anxiety clinging to my heart like a thin film.

It's too ideal... I thought. Certainly these two were not my enemies. However, if the opposite was true—if they joined together and became my enemy, it

would be impossible to escape the Dungeon. With that as the only concern weighing on my heart, we continued on to floor sixty.

Unlike yesterday, we entered the floor's shiny marble area casually. As long as Nosfy was friendly, it was a space that could be called a resting point.

"Well then! The iron rule of travel: rest when you can rest! Picnic time!" Lorde announced as soon as we arrived.

Nosfy and I responded with a bit of dismay.

"I wouldn't call it travel; it's Dungeon diving..." I protested.

"But what Lorde said is absolutely true. Why don't we take a bit of a break, Master Kanami?" Nosfy apparently agreed with this ironclad rule. Liner, following laconically behind us, nodded as well, so we decided to take a break.

"I suppose we have been walking for a long time..." I agreed.

"Good! Okay then, Kanamin! Please get out the things I gave you before we left!"

"Oh, yeah, that. Sure..." I had a number of things in my Inventory that Lorde had asked me to hang on to. I took out the jute bag and satchel and set them on the marble floor.

"Um, so first we spread out the sheet, and then we build this table..." Lorde brought out what could only be called a picnic set from the bags. With economical movements, she had it all set up in a matter of minutes. Soon, the same tea party that we'd had in the castle garden was set up inside the Dungeon.

"It's almost noon, huh? Let's have some tea while we eat lunch!" She was so clever, she'd even brought a canteen of hot water.

"Speaking of which, it *is* almost noon..." We'd covered six floors. Since we hadn't been sprinting this time, a fair amount of time had passed. Accepting Lorde's suggestion, I brought out some food from my Inventory as well. As I did so, Liner stepped forward from behind me. He picked up the teapot and was about to prepare tea for everyone. I thought he was going to be a waiter again like before, so I chided him lightly. "Liner, we can at least prepare our own

tea...”

“Don’t worry about it, Sieg. I’m not going to stand there and serve you anymore. I’m simply trying to help. I want to do it so we can all eat lunch together as soon as possible.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you, Liner.”

His expression was different from the last time. I could see that he understood his own bad habits and was willing to try to fix them.

Impressed by the growth of the young man, I took my place at the table Lorde had prepared for us. Based on our stats, the four of us could walk all day, but that didn’t mean we never got tired. Each of us was breathing heavily as we sipped our tea. Then, Lorde began to make lighthearted small talk as if we’d really come here to picnic.

“Phew! As one would expect of Nosfy’s floor, the room and the atmosphere are so clean and beautiful! Viaysia gets boring after a while, so maybe we should go on excursions here sometimes! What do you think?”

“No, Lorde, we didn’t come here to have fun.”

“I’m sure you guys came out here to Dungeon dive, but I came to have a picnic. I’m enjoying my vacation!” she grumbled. Even though we were in the Dungeon, she was totally relaxed. She stuffed food into her mouth with a smile on her face.

“Hey! You’re eating too much, Lorde!”

“Huh? But this is how much I usually eat!”

“If you eat as much as you usually do in the Dungeon you’ll throw up when you move. Just stop.”

“I’m not going to stop, because today is all about food for me! Nom nom nom!”

“You idiot! Seriously, stop!”

Even though all she was doing was eating, Lorde’s movements were agile and lean. With her mouth full of food, she deftly avoided my attempts to stop her. I had no choice but to sigh and give up.

“Well, I guess it’s fine...” Even though today was going well, I didn’t expect us to cover the remaining sixty floors all at once. I’d just have to bill her for the food she ate today once we got back to Viaysia, then I’d be able to replenish my stock.

I calmed down, sipped my tea, and tried to recover my energy. Liner and Nosfy were doing the same. We didn’t cram ourselves full of food and prepared for the next battle.

A few minutes later Lorde, having eaten her fill, stood up from her seat and rubbed her stomach. “Phew! I ate a lot! It’s fun to eat someplace different from usual! Okay, good night!”

“This girl...” I sighed, watching as she immediately lay down to go to sleep. Liner and Nosfy looked on with dismay as well.

“Huh? Didn’t you say earlier that we’d take naps?” Lorde asked sincerely.

“Yeah...but...I don’t like your attitude.”

“Huh?! You’re so mean!”

“I’m not mean. Anyone would think that way if they saw you eating and sleeping so brazenly.”

“But we were talking about eating and sleeping! It’s not my fault!”

“You’re ready for a good night’s sleep on a full stomach...sheesh.”

“Well, yeah.”

“It’s just supposed to be a nap, okay? A *nap*.” I heaved a sigh and stood up. Then I went over to where Lorde had thrown herself onto the ground and sat down against the wall. Nosfy, who had just finished eating, followed suit.

“It’s like Lorde said, we should nap too. So...” She sat down right next to me, leaned against me just like that, and began to drift off. She was just a hair’s breadth away.

“Nosfy, you’re a little...close...”

“Is that a problem?”

“I wouldn’t call it a problem...but it makes me nervous...”

She was silent as she stared back at me. It seemed like she wanted to sleep right next to me. But that would not only not restore my energy, it would also reduce various other things of mine.

“Please, I won’t be able to sleep.”

“Why won’t you be able to sleep, Master Kanami?” Nosfy’s exhalation brushed my ear as she laughed bewitchingly. I thought that making a bunch of useless excuses would only make the situation worse, so I revealed my honest, innermost feelings.

“You’re a very cute girl, and I won’t be able to relax...”

Nosfy’s smile deepened when she heard that. “Hee hee hee, thank you very much. When you put it like that, I guess it can’t be helped.” She slowly stood up and moved away from me, her expression stiff.

“Nosfy, c’mere!” Lorde said, beckoning her over.

The two of them were soon asleep together, holding hands. As I watched them to make sure they were settled, I looked around for the last of my companions so I could truly relax. However Liner, having finished his meal, had moved about a hundred meters away without me noticing. I moved into his safety zone to complain and take refuge.

“Liner, don’t pretend this has nothing to do with you.”

“Sorry, but I don’t want to be your buffer.”

“I understand. I won’t make you do that. But please, at least come a bit closer.”

“Fine...as long as that’s all,” Liner agreed reluctantly, seeing how desperate I was.

Nice, I got a shield, I thought. Lorde and Nosfy were asleep side by side, and Liner and I leaned against the wall and closed our eyes. Floor sixty was full of light, but it didn’t hurt my eyes. It was actually kind of relaxing, like I was basking in the sun. It was likely that Nosfy, as the master of this layer, would notice if any enemy approached. Thanks to that, we were able to rest peacefully without much need for vigilance.

A short while later, we awoke from our nap, roused Lorde from her deep sleep, and resumed our exploration of the Dungeon. Thanks to how empty this floor had been, my strength and MP had recovered more than I had expected it to.

“All right, that’s enough. Let’s get going.” Ushering everyone along with me, I headed for floor fifty-nine. After this point, everything would be new. I strengthened my Dimension magic out of an abundance of caution.

“Liner, Nosfy, are you ready? From here on, I’d like to defeat as many monsters as we can while we progress.” I wanted to confirm our strategy. Up until this point there hadn’t been any battles, but that was because we’d known what kind of enemies we’d be facing because of our previous foray onto those floors. Considering the long road still ahead of us, it would be better to fight the monsters and check their strength.

Nosfy shook her head. “I don’t think there is any reason to fight the monsters around my floor. Basically, monsters with light-attribute magic do not take hostile actions against other creatures. It would be a waste of time to check. If there is a need to attack, it will be when you approach floor fifty and the monster’s attributes change.”

Monsters with the light attribute weren’t enemies. It was something I’d been sensing in the back of my mind, but Nosfy confirmed it for me.

“Why don’t they attack us?” I asked.

“I mean, it all has to do with their attribute. I explained a bit earlier, but Light magic is based on *Discussion*, not conflict. That’s the idea behind Light’s Essence.”

“So we should leave light-attribute monsters alone.”

“That is the smartest choice. We can continue on our stroll up until around floor fifty-five.”

Not only was Nosfy a master of Light magic, but she was also one of the Guardians of the Dungeon. Trusting her words, we made our way up the spiral staircase and onto floor fifty-nine. But on the way there, a disgruntled voice floated up from the tail end of our party.

“Hmmmm, jeez, going through the Dungeon is a lot easier than I expected it to be... In that case...”

It was Lorde, but since she’d voiced her feelings out loud, it actually made me feel better. Honestly, I was much more afraid of Nosfy, whose expression was always an unreadable smile.

With a seamless grin, Nosfy pulled Lorde’s hand. “Come on, Lorde. We’ll leave you behind if you just stand there in a daze.”

“Um, hmm, um, I wish you could all be in Viaysia forever...” Lorde acted like a spoiled child, but the magic she had was vicious. The closer we got to the surface, the stronger her magic seemed to become. Her mouth twitched along with her power. “I wish this pleasant mood would last forever.”

I continued walking in silence as her complaints reached my ears. I couldn’t do anything else. For Lorde’s lingering attachment, it was imperative that we get back aboveground. If I didn’t bring her someone who understood her soon, her power would only swell.

“That’s enough complaining. It’s fine, so let’s keep going. We don’t want to cause any problems for Master Kanami.” Even though Nosfy seemed understanding, she was in the same position as Lorde, and her vicious magic power had been growing since yesterday. It seemed like I would be dealing with her for a very long time. There wasn’t any guarantee I’d find something to resolve her lingering attachment while we were aboveground, although there were more opportunities to do so when compared to being in the Dungeon. In the end, it was of utmost importance that these two Guardians get aboveground.

I thought about all of this as we moved through floor fifty-nine. The corridor here was made of stone, the same as usual. However, the stone was shining brightly. Since it was directly above floor sixty, the light here was so strong it was preventing me from seeing clearly. However, I had *Dimension* at my disposal, and the two Wind magic users could use *Wynd* to get a general idea of where things were. Above all, the presence of Nosfy, a master of Light magic, significantly reduced the difficulty of the floor.

“*Light.*” To her, adjusting illumination was like breathing. With just one word

of basic magic, the light burning our eyes was gently neutralized to about the same level as it had been on floor sixty. This made this floor more comfortable than the normal floors. The path was also nicely leveled, making it very easy to follow. It was as if we were walking through the corridors of some magnificent temple, not the Dungeon.

Of course, the monsters weren't a problem either. While there were spirit elementals floating around, they had no interest in attacking us. On top of me using *Dimension* to avoid them to the best of my ability, Nosfy was using her Light magic to talk with them, ensuring they wouldn't impede our progress. There wasn't a single weak spot in our exploration. We had an unprecedented amount of leeway to work with.

We progressed without issue through floor fifty-nine, fifty-eight, and fifty-seven. Along the way, we found a room with only magnificent pillars and a temple with a vaulted ceiling, but none of the floors had particularly troublesome structures. The paths were all well laid out, so there was little drain on our energy. Even if we encountered a new monster, we could leave it to Nosfy to avoid combat.

Ah, this is really, really... "Easy. We can probably make it all the way to the surface like this."

Floor fifty-seven, which we were traversing now, was the best example of this. No Diver from aboveground would think the Dungeon could be like this. After all, a corridor about fifty meters wide ran in a straight line right to the next staircase. Although there were a variety of monsters at the edge of the corridor, they only seemed to add to the excitement.

"If we can get to floor thirty like this, then I can put down a *Connection*," I said, mentioning the name of the most important spell when it came to diving.

"*Connection*... The magic you use to move around. In that case, why don't you put it here?" Nosfy suggested, spreading her hands wide to gesture to floor fifty-seven.

"No, I could...but if I leave it here then monsters will mess with it and break it, won't they?" I thought of the reasons I hadn't left *Connections* anywhere besides boss floors before. One was because the Pathway interfered with them,

and the second reason was because monsters would break them.

“That’s what I’m here for. I can talk to the monsters around here and get them to protect the magic door instead.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Really. I’m not lying.” She’d said something so outrageous so easily. It was information that completely overturned my Dungeon diving plan. It was so important that upon returning to the surface, I immediately wanted to recruit a student who was capable of Light magic from Eltralie Academy.

“I’m sorry to say this when you seem so happy, but it only works around floor sixty. The rest of the time, you have to be in a place with very mild-mannered monsters...”

Even so, the advantage to shortening the route was tremendous. I’d thought I wouldn’t be able to create a shortcut with *Connection* until we reached floor thirty, But if it could be placed on floor fifty-seven, my plan could change drastically.

“That’s good enough for me. Thanks to Nosfy, the end is in sight.” Laughter welled up from deep inside me.

“Hee hee, if it makes you happy, then all the better.” Nosfy seemed as happy as if my joy were her own. However, there were others who weren’t so happy.

“The end?” Lorde asked, from behind us. The face that had been clouded by our progress through the Dungeon twisted with unhappiness even further at the suggestion of a definite end. *Dimension* didn’t miss the change in her expression.

I immediately turned around to speak to Lorde but was interrupted by her scream.

“Oh no! My hand slipped!” Along with her idiotic cry, a vicious wind, filled with her magic, kicked up and struck all the harmless monsters around us.

The location and timing were bad. The space was open and there were many monsters roaming around just within sight of Lorde. Various types of monsters were hit by the gust of wind. Floating in the sky were white spirit elementals

and white birds, and the ground was populated with white snakes and Living Armor. All of their eyes changed to black and they glared at us. In the next instant they were all moving to attack us.

Lorde saw this and laughed. “Aha! I knew it!”

“You knew it?!”

“Oh, no, my hand just slipped! That’s all!”

I was appalled by her ludicrous excuse. She’d been complaining this whole time, so I’d known something like this would happen eventually. But I’d had no idea she would resort to such childish measures so soon. I was left speechless, and Nosfy was the first to react, calmly forming a spear of light.

“If her hand slipped then there’s nothing we can do, Master Kanami. Prepare to counterattack.”

“Damn it!” Ignoring Nosfy’s rebuke, I spread *Dimension* wider and assumed a battle stance. The first monster to reach us was a Pierce Pigeon, which I’d seen before on floor sixty-two. Its size was similar to that of an ordinary bird, but its body was lighter. Its feathers were made of glowing magic, and they rippled like a stream of water flowing over a mirrored surface. It flew in from above, but Nosfy’s spear of light knocked it away.

The next to attack was a white snake slithering across the ground.

[MONSTER] White Snake: Rank 60

This one, too, was close in size to its normal counterpart, but the surface of its body was shiny like a Pierce Pigeon’s. The White Snake slithered toward us but was intercepted by Liner with his twin swords. His sharp blade easily repelled the small body of the snake. However, it didn’t actually pierce the creature’s scales. After seeing that, I also spotted new monsters approaching from other directions.

I couldn’t stand the thought of being surrounded by a wide variety of monsters I had never seen before, so I began casting a spell. “*Dimension: Faultline*! Nosfy, Liner, I’m going to mess with distances to keep the most

troublesome ones away from you, and then you can take them down!" I used magic freely, distorting the space around us. Instead of simply sending all the monsters flying far away, I adjusted their positions so that they would reach us in the order of ascending rank, as I could see in their Stats. My two party members, who had guessed my idea of wanting each monster to be destroyed individually, began to focus on the nearest enemy.

"Understood, Master Kanami! And, Liner, please observe the enemy's body more closely. You see the light magic flowing there, don't you? Physical attacks won't work on this kind of foe."

"So that's what I have to do! Well then, *Scythe Wynd*!"

"A good choice. I shall follow suit. *Scythe Light*!"

With the helpful advice from Nosfy, Liner was able to successfully intercept the enemy. And just as the two magic blades caught the monster, I saw the other Guardian about to follow them into battle.

"Lorde! Don't you dare move!"

"Huh? I shouldn't?"

Somehow, the very person who had caused this situation was about to join the fray with a bayonet in hand.

"Of course you shouldn't! Why did you think you could join us?!"

"Well, it looked like you could use help...is all..."

"This is your fault!"

"Ah...oh..."

My reprimand seemed to have finally forced Lorde to realize the seriousness of what she'd done. She got a little teary-eyed and let the wind bayonet dissipate. While it might have been all fun and games to her, it was a matter of life and death to us. I kept an eye on her to make sure she didn't do anything unnecessary that would make things worse. After stopping Lorde, I tried to assess the situation with *Dimension* rather than drawing my sword. I would rather give instructions here than join the front line, because it would increase the overall strength of the party. The only decent offensive magic I could use

right now was *Distance Mute*; I was still practicing the others.

Rather than wasting time on the front lines with that spell, which had poor MP consumption and hit rate, it would be better to concentrate on supporting the two on the front line. I judged that to be the optimal solution based on my battle experience to date and my Intelligence stat.

In accordance with that judgment, I concentrated all of my abilities and every last nerve in my body on understanding and commanding the battlefield.

“Nosfy, stay to the left. Liner, I’ll take care of your evasion, so just throw yourself at it! *Dimension! Dimension: Faultline!*”

“Huh?! I trust you, Sieg!” Liner answered immediately.

I would use everything I had to cast my magic so as not to betray his unwavering trust. And then, right there, right then, I created a new magic.

“*Dimension: Difference!*” The magic that I’d been working on in the middle of the night for the past few days succeeded for the first time in battle. *Dimension: Difference* was a spell that specialized in creating spatial errors. *Dimension* grasped the shape of the space and calculated the enemy’s line of attack. Then, the space where the attack would pass through was slightly distorted by *Dimension: Faultline*, causing the opponent’s attack and defense to fail. It was like *Wintermension* with only Dimension magic.

Liner sensed my spell on his skin and began to go all out, abandoning his defenses. Seeing the opening, the monsters immediately pounced on him. One of them, a Living Armor, slashed diagonally across Liner with its sword. The blade, which should have caught Liner dead center, swung out like an amateur’s and totally missed. Taking advantage of the gap, Liner swung his Wind magic sword at full strength.

“Slash and tear! *Wynd Flamberge!*” He swung the twin swords clad in Wind magic at top speed, and the Living Armor was cut into a crisscross pattern. But we couldn’t relax yet.

“Next! Nosfy, be careful! The White Snake is coming at you from behind! Liner, next draw the attention of that white spirit elemental, and then after three seconds, retreat toward me!”

“Thank you for the warning, Master Kanami!”

“I’m on it, Sieg!”

I gave instructions to each of them, sharing information about the shape of the whole fight. Then, in order to defeat the spirit elemental that Liner would not be able to beat alone, I begin to construct another new spell. This one, too, had been conceived during the past few days of my magic training. The image of the magic was that of an iris flower. I hadn’t yet been able to reproduce the *Torsion* spell that Kanami the Founder had used, but I could at least imitate it.

“*Form: Torsion!*” After enough magic had built up, a dimensional distortion formed at the tip of the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. It was a distortion that, if one looked closely, could not help but look like a flower. The improvised magic flower was far from perfect—the magic was so weak that it would dissipate when moved farther away. Unlike the magic of Kanami the Founder, this spell had been downgraded to a form that had no physical offensive strength at all. However, if the opponent lacked a physical body, even that should be enough.

“I’ve brought it close, Sieg!”

“Great! I’m going to hit it with magic!” I swung my sword coated in *Form: Torsion* at the side of the spirit elemental that was focused on Liner. The blade slipped through the Holy Element’s body. As expected of a spirit elemental, physical attacks were ineffective. However, I was able to attach the flower of *Form: Torsion* to its body.

“Distort!” The dimensional shift contained within *Form* immediately exploded. The explosion had no physical effect, but it was sure to have a great impact on the enemy’s magic power. In game terms, it was a spell that attacked MP instead of HP.

The magic power that made up the body of the spirit element shifted, distorting into a whirlpool.

“*Sehr Wynd!*” Without delay, Liner unleashed his finishing magic, and the spirit elemental’s body dissipated.

“All right, this is working! We’re going to intercept all of them, guys!”

“Yes, Master Kanami!”

“Okay, let’s do it!”

While Liner and I had worked to bring down one monster, Nosfy had defeated two of them. There were still a lot of enemies attacking, but thanks to her help, we were able to keep our line of defense strong. Thus, over the course of several minutes, we succeed in exterminating the ten or so monsters that had surrounded us. A large number of light particles drifted through the wide corridor. After I retrieved the fallen gems, I checked to see if there were any other monsters and then spoke to Lorde.

“Lorde...why did you do that? Explain it to me.” Honestly, I wanted to yell at her. However, I tried to speak as gently as possible and listen to what she had to say. If I got emotional at this point, it would be the same as in the past when I’d decided that Alty, the Thief of Fire’s Essence, was an enemy.

Perhaps because of my effort to remain calm, Lorde spoke her mind even though she was trembling. “Well, y’know...if things continue to go this smoothly, everyone will return aboveground. You’re saying it’s the end, Kanami, so I... Oh! Duh! Let’s just wipe out the monsters one floor at a time like we’re doing now! That will take much longer!”

Lorde wanted me to stay with her as long as possible even though she looked like she was ready to cry. I was perplexed by her childlike request. Right now, she was expressing her emotions more than ever before. There was no mistaking her honest and straightforward desire.

That was exactly *why* I was so surprised and troubled. I’d been so wary about Lorde having some ulterior motive and had deceived her and concealed my plan for exploring the Dungeon from her, so it actually seemed kind of comical to me that those desires could have something darker behind them. No, rather than seeming two-faced, it was like she really was a child. There was no need for convoluted schemes with her.

I decided to give her my honest and open thoughts. I had no choice but to do so. “I’m sorry, Lorde, but I can’t do that. I have to get back to the surface as soon as possible. My sister and friends are waiting for me. Please... Please understand...” I grabbed her by the shoulders and made eye contact with her.

By never looking away, I showed that I, too, was sincerely appealing to her.

She gazed back into my eyes, undaunted, but quickly relaxed her body and turned her face downward. “Okay...I understand. I know that Hitaki is more important to you than everything else, Kanamin,” she said slowly, her voice timid.

I was relieved by her cooperation. At the same time, I felt a sense of discomfort. *Is this really how it's supposed to be?* I wondered. It was almost *too* anticlimactic. Was this apathetic girl really an Essence Thief who'd lived for over a thousand years? A queen who'd rallied tens of thousands of people, led tens of thousands of soldiers, killed tens of thousands of enemies, and betrayed tens of thousands of allies? A being with grandiose titles like Mad Queen, Demon Queen, and Sovereign Queen Lorde? *Really?*

The mental images didn't seem to come close to overlapping. I'd seen overwhelming violence befitting a queen, but if I included this mental aspect, it was almost too hard to believe.

“Well, Kanamin, I'll be waiting for you in my kingdom. I'll wait forever and ever! So you definitely, totally gotta come back, okay?” Lorde timidly begged me like a child promising to play with a friend again.

“Of course. I promise.”

“If you break your promise, I'm gonna be mad! I'll probably cry!” Her face grew red, and her eyes were teary.

“Y-Yeah...” Maybe I was mistaken. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd always felt that Lorde, an ancient queen who'd lived for a thousand years, was deliberately acting like a child. I'd thought she was playing the clown, hiding her madness, and watching how I acted. That was why I'd been wary of all the various possibilities that could play out up until today.

But what I saw in front of me now really was just a child.

I didn't think there was any trap laid for me if we just talked. I was used to being deceived, and I'd gained a lot of life experience in this world. Above all, I was now observing her using Responsiveness and Swindling. I was convinced that she was speaking from her heart. The Lorde in front of me was so different

from the legendary Sovereign Queen Lorde that it made me feel sick.

As I was dealing with that strange sensation, Lorde kept bugging me. “You’ll definitely come back, right, Kanamin? Because I’ll be waiting forever and ever!”

I had to rethink all my previous impressions of her. I couldn’t find the words to answer immediately. In the short time that I was at a loss, Nosfy, who had been silent in the back, came forward. She looked as if she couldn’t bear to watch this.

“Lorde, what nonsense are you saying? That’s impossible.”

“Huh?” Lorde was startled by Nosfy’s harsh tone as she suddenly interrupted her.

“I honestly can’t listen to this. I’m going to tell you this a little early for your sake, but the lifespan of ‘that space’ is very short. It is practically impossible to wait forever and ever, as you say.”

“Lifespan? There’s no such thing, though. Because I’ll live there for all eternity. That’s what I decided...”

“Lorde, are you serious?” Nosfy furrowed her brow and continued as if rebuking a daydreaming child. “Listen, there’s no such thing as ‘eternity.’” As if it were perfectly natural, she thrust an all-too-common law of nature at Lorde.

But Lorde refused to accept it. “There is so! After all, I’ve already lived there for a thousand years! A *thousand* years! So I’m sure it will be fine from now on too! Absolutely!” she retorted, her voice shaking.

“No, it will end. From what I saw, that space only has a month left.”

“A...month?”

This was the first I’d heard of it as well. However, I felt strangely comfortable with the story. Was it because I had seen the sky distorting there? Or was it because I was the one who’d created that space? Whatever the case, I could easily accept the idea that it only had one month left.

“I’ve heard about the origin of that space. I can only speculate based on that, but perhaps the lifespan there was set at a thousand years from the beginning,” Nosfy continued.

“Huh? Nosfy, what are you saying?” Lorde replied.

The information was important for me too, but I missed my chance to interrupt her.

“The former Master Kanami had a plan that he would go to your space after a thousand years. Therefore, he set a lifespan of a thousand years for it. Any longer than that would be a waste of magical power, so it was only natural.”

“But...even if a thousand years have passed, I can’t disappear!”

“If Kanami’s memories were intact, he would probably be able to extend its lifespan. But now that’s much more difficult. Master Kanami, can you use spatial magic?”

The first thing that came to mind when I thought “spatial magic” was my Inventory, but my analysis of it hadn’t progressed at all. Right now I had my hands full trying to reproduce the magic I’d seen Kanami the Founder use aboveground.

“I don’t think I can use any spatial magic... But wait a minute, Nosfy, you’re going too fast.”

Her tone was way too harsh for Lorde right now, so I wanted her to stop. But Nosfy shook her head.

“No, Master Kanami. This is important for her to know. Lorde, did you hear me? Collapse is inevitable. If you wait there ‘forever and ever,’ as you say, you’ll become part of the collapse. As your friend, I want to protect you from that.” Her face was as strained as Lorde’s was. I could tell from her expression that she, too, was speaking from the heart. But at the same time, I also began feeling a sense of unease. It was the same sense of unease I felt regarding Lorde.

“That’s... That’s a lie! Nosfy, why would you...”

“Based on the distortion of the sky in that place, it might not even be a month. You need to get prepared as quickly as possible, otherwise you might not make it in time.”

“That’s a lie! Lie, lie, lie! You’re lying!”

“There is no one better at reading magic than I am. And you know I never lie. There is no way I am wrong.”

“Uuuuhh...that’s...”

“The end is almost near, Lorde. When that place comes to an end, you’ll be forced to go to the surface.”

“The surface? Go up there, after all this time?”

Nosfy continued to voice her reasonable arguments. She was saying the right things and demonstrating the correct path to follow. She looked innocent and pure, like a praying nun, but...

“Don’t make that face. Think instead. Be positive. You should rejoice that its time has come to an end.”

“Can’t you do something about it? Nosfy, *you* can do something!”

“That place is not composed of light, but of dimensional magic. I can’t do anything. And even if I *could* fix that place, I never would.”

“Why?!”

“Lorde, haven’t you had enough? Now is the time to face your true lingering attachments. There is no use in continuing to dwell on the past in that place. Let’s look forward. Yes, people are creatures that look forward and evolve. This is not a limit, but an opportunity. You have a chance to get out of this dingy basement and into the bright light of the sun. What you should do now is be grateful for that chance and move forward...”

“Shut up!”

Sound logic was too harsh for such a childlike person. Lorde finally lost her patience, threw a tantrum, and violently released the magic in her body. The storm she created was comparable to Liner’s *Sehr Wynd*, and the three of us standing there were nearly blown away.

I was thrown into the air, but I quickly adjusted to land on my feet. The same went for Nosfy and Liner. The three of us weren’t low-level enough to be damaged by a randomly released *Sehr Wynd*. Liner’s facial expression changed. He’d been keeping an eye on everything from the back. Pulling out his twin

swords, he forced himself between me and Lorde, glaring at the two Guardians. It looked like he would intercept any further attacks.

“Wait, Liner! Everyone calm down. Don’t fight each other! We’re in the middle of the Dungeon!”

“But, Sieg! These two!”

I tugged at the hem of his shirt, as he still looked ready to leap at them. He was the only one I was able to successfully stop, though. The two Guardians with their vicious powers continued to argue.

“Shut up! Shutupshutupshutup!!! You need to shut up! It’s *not* enough! A thousand years is still not enough! I’ll never go aboveground! Never ever!”

“Lorde, don’t be so selfish. You have to go, even if it’s not enough.” Nosfy seemed calm in the face of Lorde’s tantrum. However, looking closely, I could see she was sweating a bit. It seemed that the situation was dangerous for her as well. But she didn’t want to stop arguing.

“You’re so stuck up! Nosfy, you’re more obsessed with the past than I am! You can’t say anything to me when you act like such a pick-me!”

“*I’m* acting like a pick-me?!”

“Yeah! A pick-me! They’re ‘lingering attachments’ because they’ve been unfulfilled! If it was that easy, I wouldn’t have been in that place to begin with! You don’t even know your own lingering attachment and yet you’re acting soooooo stuck up!!!”

Lorde waved her right hand wildly and hit Nosfy with her green magic power. Nosfy canceled it out with her shining magic power without hesitation. As the argument accelerated, their powers were increasing to explosive levels. They were already at the point where they were almost unconsciously shooting vicious magic bullets at each other.

“Hey! Both of you! Stop! Magic is...” If they continued to exchange spells, it would turn into a great war involving the monsters in the Dungeon. That had to be avoided at all costs.

“You have lingering attachments too, right, Nosfy? But will they be fulfilled

aboveground, in the future?! Can't they be fulfilled in the past, just like mine? Are they not lingering because they can't be fulfilled?! If that space is destroyed, won't you be the one who suffers the most?"

"That's...not true. Our situations are different. Please don't say careless things. Besides, we are talking about you now, not me..." Nosfy kept denying what Lorde was saying, but she was certainly upset. The amount of sweat dripping down her face had increased.

As the argument progressed, the distance between them shrank. Finally, they were close enough to grab each other, and both reached for the other's hands. My Responsiveness skill activated. It was a warning and felt like a bolt of lightning striking my brain. I felt that the two of them must not touch each other now, and I quickly cast a spell.

"Distance: Faultline! Separate them!" By manipulating space, I was able to get them about ten meters apart. Their outstretched arms cut through the air without meeting each other.

"Kanamin?!"

"M-Master Kanami!"

The pair finally turned their attention to me after I used Dimension magic on them. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I was sure that they could tell that I was really angry.

"I told you to calm down! Both of you, think about where we are!"

Hearing my rebuke, Nosfy looked ashamed and Lorde looked down apologetically. The pause, both physical and emotional, seemed to have restored a little calmness to both of them. After a short bit of calm, it was Lorde who spoke first.

"I'm going home for today..." Like a cowering child, she intended to go home by herself. Even now she was turning her back to us to hide the fact that she was about to cry. I spoke to her back.

"Go home'? You mean you'd walk back from here by yourself?"

"If I fly with all my might, I'll get back quickly, so don't worry. I got a little too

hot, so I'm going to get some wind and cool my head. Sorry, everyone..."

"Hey!"

Lorde shook free from my restraints, spread her wings, and jumped into the sky. Her flight was so fast that there was no way to stop her as she ran away from us through the Dungeon.

The three of us were left alone there. Liner, seeing Lorde leave, relaxed a bit and returned his swords to their scabbards. Nosfy, however, had an incredibly uneasy look on her face. The usual refined expression she always wore had crumbled away.

"Master Kanami...was I wrong? I thought I was doing the right thing as her friend."

"No, I think you said the right thing. There's no doubt about that. But I don't think it was a case where just saying the right thing could solve the problem. Especially with a kid like Lorde, sometimes even saying the right thing can have the opposite effect."

"Lorde is a child?"

Nosfy was right. A little harsh, perhaps, but definitely offering the right advice for a friend. It was admirable compared to me, too afraid of Lorde's power as a Guardian to dig deeply into her inner workings. However, their views were fatally at odds. I didn't think it was either one's fault, simply bad timing.

"Since Lorde is a child, even though I'm doing the right thing, it won't be resolved?"

"That's right. Sometimes it just depends on the circumstances."

"I...see... Ouch!" Nosfy suddenly crouched down with her head in her hands. The suddenness of it surprised me. This was the first time her expression had changed due to pain since entering the Dungeon.

"Nosfy! What's wrong?!"

"Nothing, just a bit of a headache."

"Are you okay? You look like you're at your limit too."

“You may be right. I have some thoughts of my own after speaking with Lorde.” With my help, she staggered to her feet, and although I didn’t think her HP had decreased, I tried to get Liner to use his recovery magic just in case. But Nosfy refused.

“Thank you, Liner, but no. Let’s hurry up and move forward. We’ve lost a lot of time because of that dispute.”

“You still plan on going further into the Dungeon?”

“Yes. After I have told her as much, I cannot rest on my journey to return to the surface. Above all, I am here to be of service to Master Kanami. Yes, that’s what I’m here for. So, please let’s hurry, let’s hurry!”

Leaving us to worry, she began walking alone down the marble corridor. Her expression was pained, but the magical power that surged out from her back was only growing. After her quarrel with Lorde, her presence as a Guardian was clearly increasing. In other words, her lingering attachment was expanding. The Thief of Light’s Essence was advancing like a ghost down the corridor. It was an ominous sight. There was no way I could follow her.

“No, Nosfy, let’s head back for today. We’ll go back to Viaysia and talk to Lorde again. It’s a little disappointing, but let’s end our trip into the Dungeon on floor fifty-seven today.”

“But you have to return to the surface as quickly as possible!”

“That is true...but I’m not going to abandon Lorde. And you haven’t been feeling well since your argument with her.”

“Please don’t worry about how I’m feeling! I want to become your strength, Master Kanami! Yes, that must be what my lingering attachment is! So then I—”

“If you’re thinking it’s for my sake, we’ll end it here today. Thanks to all of you, we were able to get this far. So that’s enough for today,” I said, interrupting her fanatical words.

“Well...then let’s at least get to the stairs up to floor fifty-six. There will be the fewest monsters near the stairs, so you will safely be able to leave a *Connection* door there,” she replied weakly, turning her unhappy expression away from me.

“Okay. We’ll end there.” With our course of action decided, we began our exploration again. Nosfy was moving forward quite quickly, and Liner and I were following behind her. But it didn’t matter what formation we were in. Even though there had been so much fighting, the monsters on floor fifty-seven didn’t come near us. They just watched us from afar, looking frightened of something.

We reached the stairs in under an hour.

“Finally. I think we’ll be safe here. *Connection*.” I began casting my spell a suitable distance away from the staircase. A purple door appeared, and Nosfy immediately cast a spell as well.

“All right, I’ll talk to the monsters around here and make sure they don’t come near this door.” There were very few obstacles on this floor, so visibility was good. Nosfy shined her light on all the monsters she could see. If what she said was true, this combination of *Connection* and *Light* would secure the warp zone to floor fifty-six. That was basically a quantum leap forward in just a few days. However, it was also true that I had a new troublesome problem to deal with. From their interactions yesterday I’d thought that the two Guardians were a good match, but that was clearly not the case at all. Even though they had no intention of antagonizing each other, there were too many differences in the way they thought. My head ached just thinking about it, but I couldn’t run away from the problem.

“Master Kanami, the door will be okay now. Let’s go back.”

“Yeah.”

With Nosfy in the lead, we headed through the *Connection* and back to Lorde’s world, Viaysia.



Upon returning, I immediately deployed *Dimension*. It didn’t take me long to find Lorde. It had been less than an hour since we had parted in the Dungeon, and she was still inside the castle.

“I found her. She’s in the archive...no, in the vault.”

Lorde was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the pile of broken paintings in

the vault. Tears were shining faintly at the corners of her eyes, and her entire nose was red. She looked much calmer, but it seemed that she'd been crying alone this whole time. I brought Nosfy and Liner along with me as I headed to the library. The rusty door was open, but the door leading to the vault was locked, as if to prevent others from entering. Opening it would be easy. Either Nosfy or I could break the door simply by pushing hard on it rather than by casting a single spell. However, if we forcefully opened the door, it would never be able to be opened again, either physically or mentally.

I decided I would try and speak to her from the outside, but Nosfy stopped me. It seemed that she wanted to do the talking as a way to take responsibility for having driven Lorde into this state. I decided to follow her lead and stepped back to watch.

"Lorde, we're back. Could you please open the door?" she called out in a gentle voice. Her first priority was to see Lorde face-to-face.

Lorde must have already known that we were outside the door. Her reply was quick. "No. I don't wanna see you right now." A flat out refusal.

Nosfy's face darkened at the clear rejection, but she quickly regained her composure and bowed her head even though Lorde could not see her. "I'm sorry, Lorde. I was out of line earlier. I apologize."

"No, you don't have to apologize. I'm sorry I yelled at you." Lorde apologized back in a soft voice, as if she'd accepted Nosfy's sincere apology. Her tantrum seemed to have subsided, perhaps thanks to their brief time apart. I felt the atmosphere around us relax a little bit. At the very least, it wasn't such a touch and go situation as it had been in the Dungeon.

Liner, who was watching from behind me, removed his hand from the hilt of his sword. From his point of view, he must have felt that the worst of it was over. With both of their apologies out in the open, the conversation proceeded with a gentle air.

"But you still think I have to go aboveground, right, Nosfy?"

"Yes...I think that is the correct path." Nosfy had apologized but didn't change her stance on the matter.

“Even I know it’s the right thing to do,” Lorde admitted ruefully. “But I’m not grown-up enough to choose the right path just because it’s the right one. So...sorry...” Although they were now able to understand each other, their opinions were still running parallel. Lorde had no intention of returning aboveground.

“That... That’s not true! You’re a more respectable grown-up than anyone else! The fact that I was a worthy opponent is proof of that! You’re all grown-up! More than anyone!”

“You’re wrong...”

“I’m not wrong! If the Sovereign Queen Lorde isn’t a grown-up, then who is?! Who on that battlefield was?!”

“I don’t like it, so that’s why I’m here. So, you’re wrong.” Lorde repeated her denial again.

“Huh?” Nosfy couldn’t seem to understand the repeated denial and was stunned.

Lorde, naturally, spoke up with another apology and refusal. “I’m really sorry, Nosfy. I’d like to be alone today.” The pleading in her sorrowful voice was enough to make the other Guardian step back.

“Okay...” Nosfy moved away from the cold, closed door, looked at us, and shook her head. Then she shrugged apologetically. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault Lorde is like this...”

“No, it can’t be helped. She wants to be left alone with her thoughts. It’s best to leave her alone for a while.” Even if I had spoken to her instead of Nosfy, the result would’ve been the same. I had a faint feeling that she didn’t want to be queen, but I wasn’t sure why she was so adamant about not being grown-up. Unless I could understand the reason, I wouldn’t be able to persuade her. It was better to just leave her alone rather than continue to poke and prod at her. It was more dangerous for one of us, who didn’t know all of the facts, to speak from the heart at this point. In fact, Lorde was calming her raging temper on her own right now. There was no reason for me to force my way into the vault.

The only thing I could do now was to proceed with the Dungeon dive as soon

as possible and bring back her family member, Ide, the Thief of Wood's Essence. But unlike me as I calmly analyzed the situation, Nosfy was trembling.

"Augh, all I do is fail! Again..." She gritted her teeth in disappointment and grabbed my hand. "Master Kanami, what should I have done? Please teach me... If doing the right thing doesn't solve the problem, what on earth should I do?"

I backed away a little bit. Her eyes held absolute trust in me. Like Liner's eyes a short while ago, they were delusional in their belief that I could do something about the problem. But I was neither God nor anyone else of note.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know either." I confessed that it was beyond my power.

"Huh? You don't know either?!" Nosfy was completely shocked.

This was the first time I'd seen that look, but I could tell that she was more delusional about me than Liner had been. *If I mess things up, she really will think of me as a god*, I thought.

"That's why I hadn't told her anything up until today."

"You really don't know, Master Kanami?"

"That's right. I don't know anything at all—that's why I always say the wrong thing."

Kanami the Founder a thousand years ago might have been someone worth believing in, but I had to impress upon her that I was not. Even now I had no confidence in what I was doing. Maybe there was something more I could say to her and Lorde, but I wasn't sure what it was. I was searching for the right words, getting lost, and somehow still managing to have a conversation with them.

"Even Master Kanami makes mistakes..." Nosfy whispered, hearing me be so open about my shortcomings.

"Nosfy, I don't think it's good to only do what *you* think is right. I don't think that's enough. So let's think about what's missing as a group from now on. Maybe that's best." There were things a person couldn't figure out alone but that could be sorted out as a group. Just as I had said to Liner a little while ago, I told Nosfy I would need her help as well, and I squeezed her hand back.

“It’s not enough to just be right... Is that the reason I cannot disappear? Then what Lorde said about lingering attachments that can never be fulfilled again is...” Nosfy didn’t answer me but put her hand to her chin and began to think. She seemed to be applying the fact that correctness wasn’t everything to her problem as well.

“In any case, let’s leave Lorde alone today. We’ll do what we can in the meantime. Now, we’re gonna head to the blacksmith to prepare for the next dive. Do you want to come?”

We’d advanced nearly ten floors through the Dungeon today, and it was already close to evening. If we were to explore again tomorrow, we had to hurry up and visit Mr. Reynand before he left his workshop.

After thinking it over for a few moments, Nosfy shook her head. “No, sorry. Like Lorde, I’d like some time alone to think.” She wanted to seriously consider what Lorde and I had said to her. There was no reason to stop her, since she had nothing to do even if she came with us to the shop.

“That’s fine. We’ll be able to handle the preparations for tomorrow.”

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take a little walk around the castle.”

Nosfy stayed inside while Liner and I went to Mr. Reynand’s house. As usual, we passed through the old corridors and courtyards and then disappeared into the streets of Viaysia.



I was approached several times by townspeople as we walked along the verdant streets. Some of them teased me, saying things like “I heard your wife came back?” which left me at a loss for words.

While I was trying to cover it up with a smile, Liner spoke to me with a serious expression on his face. “Hey, Sieg. I want to make sure first: are you going to save both Lorde and Nosfy?” Now that we were alone, it looked like he was finally able to say what had been on his mind. Unlike me, Liner was very wary of the two Guardians.

“I promised Mr. Reynand that I would help Lorde. Of course, I’d like to clear

up Nosfy's lingering attachments as well, if possible. You don't like that idea?"

"Honestly...I think that those two are too much for us. They're so strong that I'm afraid to say anything about helping them." He was not using "strong" as if he were talking about a master of swords or magic, but "strong" like an unavoidable natural disaster.

"It's true that they're both strong. I think they're so strong that no one in this world is a match for them. But no matter how strong they are, I think they have the same problems we do. They're two girls who get worried and laugh, just like anyone else."

"You do realize that you're crazy for treating them like normal girls, right? Are you really not frightened in the face of their magic?"

"You sound like Palinchron. It's true, I'm a little scared. But I still want to help them...somehow." I thought of the death of Alty, the Thief of Fire's Essence, another one of the Guardians. She was strong like a monster and insightful like a sage, but her last expression had been that of a frail girl. If possible, I wanted to understand Lorde and Nosfy. I didn't want to give up on understanding out of fear ever again.

"Sieg, it's not just their magic that scares me. The weight of their lives, the weight of their positions as Guardians, the weight of their very souls—all of it is unusual. I'm going to ask you again, do you still want to help them? I think it's better to keep a distance from them, as was my original plan. As a knight in your service, I'd advise you to do the same."

This was probably the last time he would give me advice or ask if I was certain about my plan. Liner knew that I existed to help my sister. He was gently warning me that helping the two Guardians might get in the way of that and asking if that was okay with me. He was genuinely worried that I might regret my choices. I nodded my head, comforted by the warmth of our friendship.

"Yes, I'm going to help them, Lorde especially. I don't think of her as an enemy anymore." I was sure that running away from the Guardians would have a much more disastrous end. It would be better to face them head-on, as we had with Lorwen. To ensure that my experience to date had not been in vain, I vowed that I would not run away from the Guardians.

Liner, seeing my conviction, let out a deep sigh and then laughed a little in dismay. “All right. That’s fine with me, since I’m just helping you. And I don’t think of that idiot Lorde as an enemy either. She’s just like the neighborhood’s disappointing sister.” He offered to accompany me on this arduous journey as if it were a matter of course.

“Thank you, Liner. That really helps.”

“No need to thank me. After all, I’m the knight who protects Sieg and Lastiara...or rather, I’m your friend, first and foremost.”

I could feel his growth based on how he phrased that. He was no longer a narrow-minded boy. He had gone through many battles and had matured both physically and mentally. I still couldn’t shake my apprehension about the Guardians, but I had a trusted colleague by my side. The situation would be different from what had happened with Alty. This time, we should be able to bring about the best possible outcome.

We arrived at Mr. Reynand’s house while we were talking. Strangely, he was not in his workshop but in front of his house, looking around restlessly.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Reynand?”

“Oh, laddie. I’m looking for my granddaughter.”

He was searching for Beth. Fortunately, my magic was good at finding people. I immediately spread *Dimension* all over Viaysia and searched for her. It didn’t take much time or magic power. She was closer than I had expected.

“I found her. She’s standing still near the Demon Queen’s Castle...in a...flower garden?” Behind the giant castle there was a secret area where many different types of flowers were blooming.

“Oh, she went to the castle. But the flower garden? No, it’s good she hasn’t gone far. Let’s go inside.”

“I can bring her back here if you’re worried.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Mr. Reynand seemed to have had his own thoughts after hearing about Beth’s whereabouts, but he firmly refused my proposal and led us into the workshop.

It seemed that he knew what we wanted. We entered the workshop and he immediately began checking the equipment that Liner was wearing. He was looking directly at the state of the armor he had made and how it fit in with the other equipment.

“Hm. So you’re Liner. I see you’ve been using my sword.”

“Y-Yes, I’m Liner. It’s a very easy-to-use sword. It’s helped me tremendously.” Liner seemed a bit frightened of his stern gaze.

“Tell me if there’s anything else you want. I’ll make it better than what you’ve got now.”

“Um, no, I can’t say there’s anything I need.”

“No. Just tell me. You must have a problem or two in your Dungeon diving.” With a stern tone, Mr. Reynand tried to squeeze some desires out of Liner. As he’d said before, he still didn’t seem to like those magic tools that were only suicidal in nature.

“Oh, yes. Speaking of problems, then yes...”

As Mr. Reynand listened to the details of our battles in the Dungeon, he decided on the equipment that Liner would need.

“And the other thing I’m having trouble with is that I feel like my attacks don’t work great on wind-attribute monsters. Or, well, I can only attack with the wind magic, so I guess that’s natural.”

“Hm. Because of my modifications, Rukh Bringer is now completely wind-oriented. It is normal to have such problems. It would be better to have a different sword for wind-attribute enemies.” Mr. Reynand looked around, but he’d been doing nothing but repairs in his workshop lately. There was nothing comparable to what Liner was using.

“Laddie, do you have anything good?”

“A sword? All I’ve got left is this...”

[TWIN BLESTBLADES OF THE HELLVILLESHINE CLAN, SINGLE-WINGED]

Attack Power 2

Having lost a wing, they no longer possess their former might.

From my inventory, I'd removed a fine item I'd found on an altar in the Dungeon.

"It has the Hellvilleshine family name in its epigraph, so I think it should be Liner's, but it seems like part of a paired set, so I don't think they have their full power if they're used alone."

"Hmph. Certainly this won't be enough to balance a magic gem on its own. A sword made on the premise of a twinned pair, huh? But it is a good sword. The workmanship is good, and the ore used is good. It's good enough to make up for it losing its match. At least, it won't break very easily..." Mr. Reynand picked up the sword and examined it.

While I had to rely on Status to make judgments about quality, Mr. Reynand seemed to understand the details of the sword. I only knew its numerical attack power, not its sturdiness or anything.

"Laddie, if you want to use this sword tomorrow, you better go polish it up. And put a new strap on the sheath so that Liner can wear it around his waist."

"Oh, yes. I'll polish it." I took the sword back again and immediately went over to the workbench. I, being well-versed in menial tasks, followed Mr. Reynand's instructions without hesitation.

However, Liner, who would be using the sword, voiced his dissatisfaction. "Wait a minute! I'm already wearing two swords on my waist! And you want to add more?!"

"Yes, you should have three swords. It's common to have an emergency sword on the battlefield. With your strength, it shouldn't be a problem."

"No, it's not the weight that bothers me. I prefer to stay agile, if possible. My fighting style is to use my speed to charge at the enemy."

"Being agile isn't always better. Besides, you're young and can try out many

different styles. Just have three. I'm not lying."

"Um...I guess I can see how it might come in handy in the far future...but I need something that will be useful immediately. That's why I'd like to specialize in just one thing."

"I can't stand to watch your single-minded self-destructiveness. You'd better put some weights on so you don't fly away."

"No! I have to! You don't get it! I don't have time to worry about other ways to fight right now! If I want to be on par with the Guardians and Sieg, I have no choice but to stick to this style!" Liner, who'd been restraining himself because he was dealing with someone older, finally lost his patience and raised his voice. In fact, he was so angry that he was shouting at Mr. Reynand. I'd just felt his growth a moment ago, but it seemed like he was still on the first step.

"Hey, Liner, Mr. Reynand is quite strong, so be careful."

Surprisingly, Mr. Reynand could be very quick to strike. When I was working there, I'd had to take a few hits from him. Thinking that Liner would repeat my mistake, I tried to warn him, but this was drowned out by the unexpected scene.

"Hmph. *Flame Accelerator*."

"Gyaaah!" Liner screamed.

Mr. Reynand's large fist, wreathed in red magic, struck Liner's jaw precisely. Losing consciousness from that single blow, Liner fell to the floor with a loud thud. Mr. Reynand was over Level 30 and specialized in physical strength. He had been further strengthened by an unfamiliar Thermal spell from a thousand years ago, so as expected, even Liner was unable to withstand the blow.

"Good. Now we just need to adjust the magic tools." Acting as if nothing had happened, Mr. Reynand began to look through Liner's equipment, which was lying on the workshop floor. He noticed my gaze and briefly stopped his work. "Are you going to stop me too, laddie?"

"No, I'm good." I thought about it for only a moment before shaking my head. What Liner had said was right, but that didn't mean that Mr. Reynand was wrong. This was also a problem that could not be solved simply by being right.

Liner's current fighting style was too extreme. If it were just a fight for today and tomorrow, that would be fine; however, Liner's life would be long, and he still had decades left to live. In the long run, it was obvious that he should change his exhausting fighting style. By all rights it was my role to give that advice to him. But Mr. Reynand had done it for me. Rather than stopping him, I should be thanking him.

As I was making a scabbard for the One-Winged Sword, Mr. Reynand took the magic tools from the unconscious Liner and muttered things like, "This one is usable, but I don't want that one" and "This one is for suicide too. I'll break it." He sorted them out on his own. In parallel with this work, he also checked in with me about our dive today.

"So, laddie, how far'd you get?"

"Up to floor fifty-six."

"What? You cleared floor sixty so easily? At this rate, you should be able to get aboveground soon."

"To be honest, it was thanks to the cooperation of the Guardian of floor sixty."

"Oh, who was it that came out?"

"Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence."

"Hmph. Nosfy the Banner, huh? I had the impression that she could go either way...but I heard that you two were formerly a married couple, so I guess it's only natural it worked out."

"It's not without its problems. Just a little while ago, Nosfy said that Viaysia will collapse soon, and now Lorde's closed herself up in the castle." The collapse of Viaysia was a matter of life and death for everyone living here. It would probably be good to talk to Mr. Reynand, who was likely the oldest person in town.

"This Nosfy person said our kingdom will collapse soon?"

"Yes, she said it had about a month left. Did you know that?" I thought I had told him a shocking truth, but Mr. Reynand remained calm.

“So, just a month left,” he muttered to himself. “No, but I’ve been seeing some signs of it since you showed up, so I expected it.”

“I learned that this world was originally only created to last a thousand years. And Nosfy said that the only way to extend its lifespan was through my Dimension magic.”

“That sounds logical. I don’t think she’s lying.”

“It seems like if I could use spatial Dimension magic, I might be able to do something about it, but...”

“You don’t need to worry about this place. We’ve already made peace with the collapse. Well, everyone except for Lorde, that is.” Mr. Reynand tapped me on the shoulder and shook his head as I regretted my lack of competence.

“Lorde refuses to accept the collapse of this place. If that continues, she’ll be destroyed along with the kingdom. I’m going to try to get Lorde down here as soon as possible. The Dungeon diving itself is going well, so it’s not an impossible feat.”

“Mm. The worst of the Guardian layers are over. It’s not such an absurd idea in that case. All you have to do now is to take care of yourselves and be vigilant.”

“Yes, as soon as I’m done with these preparations, I’m going to go back to the castle to rest. Then we’ll return to the Dungeon tomorrow morning.”

“So soon. You’re going again tomorrow morning?”

“Honestly, I have a bad feeling about it. I need to go as quickly as possible.” Perhaps it was because it was Mr. Reynand I was talking to, but I could easily voice my concerns. The elderly blacksmith in front of me had the receptive power to make me do so. And, seeing me busily preparing to attack the Dungeon, he sighed.

“Listen, laddie. I don’t want to tell you to take it easy, but you mustn’t die. Remember, you can’t do anything if you’re dead.” He had continued to exist in this place since his death. He must have had time to do many things over the past thousand years. Yet his advice to me was to stay alive. I was sure those words came from his own experience. “I know I asked you to help Lorde, laddie,

but don't get too caught up in that. It's okay to worry about her, but don't neglect yourself. That will crush you, and then you won't be able to help anyone. Tonight, take time to compose yourself and think things through. It may be the case that you decide to abandon this whole place. After all, what happened here happened a thousand years ago."

"Abandon this whole place?"

"Like the young man lying there, this place is not overflowing with hope for the future. On the contrary. It's more like a graveyard. It's just a matter of how it ends. I won't hold it against you if you give up on us."

He put our own futures first with his soft words. I guessed Mr. Reynand must have sensed that I was exhausted, both physically and mentally, from the quarrel between Lorde and Nosfy. He withdrew his wish for me to save Lorde, to ease my burden.

"Mr. Reynand..." To be honest, I was about to cry. Since coming to this other world—or maybe even in my original world—I thought I had never had such a concerned adult in my life. "Thank you very much. I'm glad I met someone like you, Mr. Reynand," I said, trying to keep the tears from spilling from my moist eyes.

"Hmmm. Even without me, you would have managed on your own. The man I knew as Kanami the Founder was like that." Mr. Reynand turned away and did not accept the sincere thanks. He looked a little embarrassed.

"No way. If I was alone, it would be easy for me to ruin everything. But your words made me feel much better. Like... Like a father, you know?"

"A father?" Mr. Reynand stared in amazement at my frank statement.

"Well...I didn't have a dad, so...I guess..."

"Oh, you didn't have a father... It's no wonder, then."

More accurately, my parents had abandoned me, but Mr. Reynand seemed to accept what I'd said. A thousand years ago, I might have been the kind of guy who looked like he hadn't gotten a good education from his parents. Or maybe he still felt that way about me. Maybe he was worried about me because he felt I was a child who couldn't be left alone.

“But it is a mistake to compare me to a father. I am not a good father. In the end, no one in my family could understand me. That’s why only one of us has survived without having their soul worn out. If you ever have a child, don’t let me be your role model.”

“That may be difficult. I already have a lot of respect for you.”

“Then you’ll be a fool just like me.”

“If I’m anything like you, I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Too late, then. You’re already a great fool.” Mr. Reynand shook his head like he was throwing in the towel.

I accepted it with a smile and showed him what I had completed while we were talking. “All done. I’ve completed the Twin Blestblades of the Hellvilleshine Clan, One-Winged for Liner. What do you think?”

“Hmm. Well, I have no complaints about the workmanship. All that remains is to sort through his magic tools and replenish what is missing.”

After checking on the leather strap attached to the scabbard of the Unpaired Sword, Mr. Reynand began rummaging through the magic tools that he kept on the shelves of his workshop. One after another, Liner’s equipment was changed, leaving the person who was to equip it behind. In the middle of this process, I had a sudden thought.

“Mr. Reynand, if this place is going to be destroyed, why don’t you come to the surface with us?”

“Me? Up there?”

My desire for him to continue helping me aboveground just spilled out. “Yes, together. If everything goes well, don’t you think that’s the way it should end? Let’s do it with the intention of getting out of this graveyard. I’m going to watch over Lorde and the others, and protect their futures, and I’m going to work as a blacksmith again aboveground. I’ll tell you about a workshop I know.”

“It certainly would be best if I could see Lorde happy...”

“And not just that, let’s make your own dreams come true too.” Mr. Reynand was always worrying about others. I wanted him to think of his own happiness

for once.

“My own dreams...” As he thought about himself, his hands stopped their search and he got a faraway look in his eyes. It seemed this was something he hadn’t thought about in decades or even longer. After a long silence, he began to speak again. “Then maybe I’ll take Beth with me. Maybe we’ll be able to start over, even if only a little.”

“You’ll definitely be able to start over.”

In the end, he still ended up thinking of someone else. After all, he was nobody but himself. I decided to drop the matter and just prayed that his wish would be fulfilled.

“Hmph. What’s it even like up there these days, laddie?”

“Right now, above the Dungeon is a large region called the Allied Nations. There’re a lot of adventurers—or rather, divers—there, so I think a skilled blacksmith would be very popular. Otherwise...” We talked about our bright visions of the future and finished Liner’s equipment. At the end of the day, I asked Mr. Reynand to cash in the magic stone I had acquired.

Having completed everything I needed to do, I left Mr. Reynand’s comfortable workshop. We’d forcibly reequipped Liner’s gear and now I was carrying him, still unconscious, on my back as I walked through town. On the way, I exchanged my money for food for the Dungeon. Although the townspeople were a little disconcerted by our appearance, they seemed to let it go when they saw that it was Liner who was unconscious. Apparently, over the last few days it had become commonplace for him to have a bad time. I chuckled at this change in the city and walked back to the castle.

Lorde was sleeping curled up like a cat in the vault, and Nosfy was sitting in the flower garden where Beth had been earlier, alone and looking up at the sky. The black sky made it hard to tell the exact time, but it was almost night. After dropping Liner into his bed so he could sleep, I lay down on the couch and closed my eyes so I could check on the results of the past few days.

[STATUS]

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 353/353

MP: 1,165/1,165-200

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 25

STR 14.01

VIT 15.54

DEX 20.77

AGI 25.87

INT 20.79

MAG 45.23

APT 6.21

[SKILLS]

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.79

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56 Dimension Magic
5.33+0.40 Magical Combat 0.79 Responsiveness 3.56
Commanding 0.89 Rear Guard Technique 1.01 Knitting 1.15
Swindling 1.34 Smithing 1.00 Sewing 0.68 Blessed Iron
Smithing 0.56

The biggest growth was in magic, and in conjunction with that, my total MP had risen as well. And of course, my skills had increased too. Smithing had become a full-fledged skill now, and the Commanding and Rear Guard Technique skills had shown up before I knew it. However, my direct combat skills didn't seem to have improved at all. And as for Liner...

[STATUS]

NAME: Liner Hellvilleshine

HP: 409/409

MP: 102/281

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 27

STR 14.04

VIT 10.21

DEX 11.76

AGI 16.88

INT 13.40

MAG 10.76

APT 3.87

[SKILLS]

INNATE SKILLS: Wind Magic 2.57

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Holy Magic 1.27 Swordplay 2.38

Bloodknack 1.12 Spell Manipulation 0.89 Concentration 0.56

Optimal Moves 1.22 Fortitude 1.11

His strength was growing steadily. Unlike me, his direct combat skills had grown significantly. Perhaps thanks to Lorde teaching him, the value of his Wind Magic had increased by nearly 0.50 all at once. I'd seen a lot of different statuses, but this was the first time I'd seen such an increase in such a short period of time. In addition, he had acquired the skills of Spell Manipulation and Concentration, as expected of a disciple of the Thief of Wind's Essence.

Of course, it was not only his magic that was noteworthy. I looked at one of the three swords propped up on the bed.

[Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan]

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

Attack Power 27; Attack Power corresponds to the user's Level. The user has the potential to remember the sword techniques of Lorwen Arrace.

Can change shape.

+2.00 to the user's Earth Magic.

During our time underground, he'd also become a disciple of the Thief of Earth's Essence. Thanks to his prolonged use of Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, his skill in Swordplay had rocketed up. It was just as I had expected. Even if I had completely mastered the Arrace sword, I doubted my skills would've grown that much. Ideally, I would have liked for him to have acquired Earth magic, but it seemed that hadn't worked out.

I talked to myself as I lay on the sofa after checking over both our Statuses. "Today was rough, huh? I wonder if it was this hard for me a thousand years ago."

I'd been trying not to think about it too much, but my mind turned to the past. Unlike the world aboveground, there were many remnants of that era here. Above all, the presence of the two Guardians, Lorde and Nosfy, was the most significant. Ever since today's fight, I'd been wondering about what it had been like for those girls a thousand years ago. The sense of discomfort I remembered feeling from them earlier hadn't gone away yet. Both Lorde and Nosfy seemed to be too different.

That's right...a thousand years ago they certainly were...

"Huh?!"

Suddenly, a vivid image of the Guardians flashed through my mind. It was not the two of them as they were now but in opulent attire befitting rulers.

"That's right... That's when I met them..."

Little by little, I began to remember. I recognized this flashback-like phenomenon. This was a recollection that occurred when my soul, which had leveled up, drew closer to my past as Kanami the Founder. It was likely that the magic gem of the Thief of Dimension's Essence had regained some of its original

power from the magic of the level up.

As soon as I understood that, I meditated. I instinctively knew how to make the most of this phenomenon. I went to the most optimal place to organize my memories—the darkest depths where the deep psyche was submerged. In order to reach the dream of a thousand years ago, I fell asleep without resistance.

Chapter 4: Demon Queen

It was dark. It felt like I was walking on the bottom of the ocean, it was so dark. It was a realm so deep that no light could penetrate it. It was a world where even moving a finger was a struggle, and it took seconds to take a single step forward. I immediately relaxed my body and decided to drift in the water. It was not wise to move of one's own will through this dark and heavy world. Little by little, my body ascended thanks to buoyancy. Up and up I went, and bit by bit, light began shining through the water.

The light revealed a variety of things. A dark-haired girl standing on an icy lake; a dark-haired boy living in a dimly lit cellar by candlelight; an elderly man sitting in a rocking chair surrounded by more than ten thousand books; an elderly woman standing at the top of a tower, looking like she was in pain; a blonde woman at the top of a tower reciting poems in anguish; and a princess from a small country, her beautiful hair shimmering...

That was when I realized I was dreaming and also when I understood that I was seeing memories from my past. According to Apostle Regacy, I was tapping into the memories of Kanami the Founder, who had failed to successfully reincarnate. There was no doubt that memories were being restored as a result of the increased magicbane in my body. Like bubbles floating up through water, one by one, they returned.

I selected one memory from the bunch. Instinctively, I chose the one of the person with whom I had the closest relationship. It was the memory of my first meeting with Lorde. In my dream, I saw a green-haired girl returning home triumphant, welcomed by countless people. She was not just a girl. She was a young queen riding on the back of a huge, ferocious beast, accompanied by thousands of soldiers, pushing her way through a storm of admirers. The crowd was all semifers, and at that point I realized that the city resembled Viaysia. The column of soldiers, equally triumphant, was marching down the main street, which I recognized, with the green-haired girl at the center.

Is this how I met Lorde? I wondered.

Four travelers were mixed in with the cheering crowd. They were disguised by magic, but I knew all of their names. The blonde woman was Apostle Sith, the dark-haired girl was Hitaki, the youngest girl was Tiara, and the masked boy was Kanami the Founder. For some reason, they all wore cat ears and tails. Maybe only semifer had been allowed in the North back then, but I sensed my rather arbitrary hobbies in that choice.

I continued watching the dream, feeling so fed up with my past self and wondering what sort of stupid thing I was about to do this time. My eyes were serious as I stood within the parade. I was gazing solemnly at Lorde from a distance. Unlike the Lorde I knew today, this one was full of dignity and vigor. Instead of her usual clothes, she was dressed in fine silk and wore a bulky suit of armor on top of it. Atop her head was a crown adorned with many jewels, showing off to everyone that she was a ruler. Of course, her ponytail was flying loose like a city girl's, and her long and graceful green hair floated elegantly in the air. The wings on her back were spread out wide. Looking at her, anyone could recognize she was worthy of being immortalized in paintings.

Yes, she's a fine queen indeed, I thought.

There was not a single flaw in Lorde's face. She had brought home the victory like it was rightfully hers and was coolly accepting the cheers of her people. She was truly a queen among queens. Her face was so commanding, noble, aloof, and rakish that it almost seemed unfitting for her gender.



Lorde was evaluated by the group of apostles and saints who mingled with the people.

“Is that the Mad Queen? It certainly looks like she has the right style to be called that. Tiara, what do you think from what you can see?” Apostle Sith asked, hoisting Tiara up on her shoulder.

“She seems amazing. Even though she’s called the Mad Queen in the South, here she’s known as the Sovereign Queen Lorde. I didn’t think rumors could be so reliable!” Tiara replied.

Apostle Sith laughed. “I suppose so.”

“From now on, let’s not believe rumors that cross borders, shall we? I never thought that the Queen of the North could be so beautiful,” Hitaki added.

The conversation grew muddier after that, because her brother—or rather, Kanami the Founder—standing next to them began acting strangely. He was *Analyzing* Lorde.

“What’s the matter, brother?” Hitaki asked anxiously.

“Nothing, she’s just different from how I imagined. I’m surprised,” he replied.

“More beautiful?”

“No! That’s not what I’m talking about! I mean something more serious!”

“What’s the difference?”

“The queen seems to be...in a lot of pain. I feel like she’s still asking for help even now...”

I held the same opinion as Kanami the Founder, who was watching Lorde so soberly. She was suffering now and always had been. I felt like she’d been asking for help for a very long time. But the reaction of my friends at the time was terrible.

“Oh, here we go again. You say that every time you see a beautiful girl,” Hitaki answered.

“Seriously. The bad habits of my dear friend are so vexing,” Apostle Sith added.

“Again, teach?” Tiara whined.

From the way they spoke, it was clear that he always got involved with beautiful women. Now, as I was struggling in the depths of the Dungeon, I wondered what on earth Kanami the Founder was doing and started to feel angry even though I knew he was technically me.

“No, it’s not like that. I’m just saying that it looks like she’s struggling. But since she’s the Queen of the North...”

He was insistent, but the reaction of his friends was nonchalant. No one else seemed to think that Lorde was asking for help.

“Absolutely not, teach. We’re travelers in the stream and we can’t reveal our true identities. If we get close to that super cool queen, we won’t be able to stay in the North,” Tiara warned him.

“There is only one thing for us to do now, and that’s collect magic power. That’s our top priority,” Apostle Sith insisted.

The pair calmed him down, and Kanami the Founder nodded reluctantly. “Yeah, I know...I know.”

Among the group, only Hitaki looked into his face without saying a word. Her black eyes were intent on seeing through the mask to the expression behind it.

The queen’s triumphant parade proceeded, and Kanami the Founder and the others lost sight of Lorde. The four walked away amid the frenzy that continued even after the queen had passed. In the end, it was not part of Kanami the Founder’s story, as they decided to keep their distance from Lorde.

So that’s how it was. Our first meeting was just passing each other, really, I thought. If I remembered correctly, it wasn’t until much later that Kanami the Founder and Lorde had cooperated, after Hitaki had become a monster and I’d separated from Apostle Sith and Tiara. Therefore, this memory would be interrupted now.

I returned again to the dream area that felt like the bottom of the ocean. The water was gradually filling with light. I had a feeling that my dream would end when this light completely filled the water. I looked around frantically, trying to retrieve as many memories as I could before the dream ended.

The next one I found was a memory of a boy and a girl walking through the tower of a castle. For a moment, I couldn't tell who they were, but looking at their faces, there was no mistaking them: Kanami and Nosfy. This time, it seemed to be a memory of how they'd met. However, both of them looked a little different from the way I knew them.

Nosfy was still the same beautiful girl in frilly black clothes. The only difference was the color of her hair. I felt that it was a little lighter in color than it was now. Kanami the Founder's black hair had grown longer, reaching almost to his chest. It was closer to the body I'd had when I'd emerged from the World Restoration Array than it was to my current form. The length of his hair indicated that a considerable amount of time had passed since the previous encounter with Lorde. It was probably around the time his sister had turned into a monster and he was acting alone to take revenge against Apostle Sith.

As I recalled, according to Nosfy's story, once I'd been defeated by Apostle Sith, I'd been in a state of serious self-doubt. This might be a scene from that time. The lifeless, vacant eyes of Kanami the Founder attested to it. He walked unsteadily, as if sleepwalking. Nosfy helped him by propping him up from the side. I had heard about it, but it was terrible to actually see it.

"Master Kanami, this way, please..."

The two continued down the corridor lined with glittering furnishings. Nosfy had to hold him up many times as he almost fell down. They eventually entered one of the large rooms in the castle. In the center of the room was a long table that could accommodate twenty people, and a meal for two was waiting on it.

"Here is today's breakfast. Come, let's eat together." Nosfy was diligent in her care of Kanami. The room was too large for them. On the floor was a finely patterned carpet that looked like it belonged in a museum. On the ceiling was an extravagant chandelier made of magic gems. The walls were lined with paintings ten meters in height. Frankly, the room was tacky and ostentatious. It seemed a little strange that there were only two people in such a place.

"Isn't it delicious? I woke up early and made it myself. I made a lot of the dishes that you like..." Even though she knew she wouldn't get an answer, Nosfy scooped up a spoonful of the food and put it in Kanami's mouth as she

talked to him. He managed to eat his meal, although his unfocused eyes were wandering about. It was a painful sight.

Nosfy was even more difficult to look at than Kanami was in his miserable state. Although her smile remained fixed on her face, it was dry as bone. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, perhaps because she was happy to be spending time with him. However, it was certain that there was more than enough sadness to outweigh the happiness. She was smiling, but her eyes were so moist that she looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

With a tearful smile, she continued to take care of the food. “Oh, there, on your mouth...” she said in the middle of the meal.

Kanami’s posture had slipped a little and he had a bit of food at the corner of his mouth. Nosfy saw this and reached out her hand, but then she stopped herself abruptly. The thinly veiled expression on her face deepened. The ratio of joy and sadness remained the same, but I could see that the emotions were swelling. Then, after repeatedly reaching out to touch Kanami’s cheek, she retracted her hand. After a few moments of hesitation, she finally wiped his mouth with a napkin. At the same time, tears started to flow. Even the little bit of joy that had existed seemed to have disappeared. Trapped in grief, she lowered her gaze, and tears trickled from her black agate eyes.

“Father...” she murmured as she looked up at the ceiling.

I didn’t know what she meant, but I could tell from the tone of her voice that it was something very important. However, even though I saw it, Kanami the Founder didn’t say anything. He didn’t move. He didn’t even react. That seemed to make the girl even sadder.

I wanted to look away from the memory, but this was how Nosfy and I had met. Without a doubt, this was how we’d met. Even though I knew it was a dream, I wanted to reach out my hand to stop her tears. But I couldn’t reach her. This had already happened. It was in the past. So I couldn’t stop the sound of tears falling, and then—something damp touched my cheek.

Huh?! It was my cheek. But it was not part of the story in my dream. It was me, the one sleeping, who was experiencing that sensation. The memory of the encounter with Nosfy was interrupted by this stimulus. Like the surface of

water being hit by a stone, the memory fizzled out.

Together with that warm, wet sensation, I felt myself gradually waking up from the dream. Then, I let my heavy eyelids lift and fully woke up.



As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw almost the same scene as yesterday morning. Nosfy's face was there, nose to nose with mine, and her black agate eyes reflected my sleeping form. It was almost the same scene, but there were a few differences, and that little difference was basically fatal. Unlike yesterday, Nosfy was straddling me as I slept, her pink tongue extending from her tiny mouth to lick my cheek. I could hear the sound of saliva dripping as her tongue trailed across my cheeks.

"Huh?!" I tried to push her away as quickly as possible the instant I realized what was going on, but she didn't move. There was only a harsh sound and pain in both my arms and legs.

My automatic activation of *Dimension* and *Responsiveness* made me aware of my surroundings. I was lying on a large bed. My arms and legs were bound with shiny threads of magic. The threads on my right hand went through the back of the bed and connected to those on my left hand. The same went for my legs. They were restraints that couldn't be broken by strength alone.

"Good morning, Master Kanami," Nosfy said, smiling and interrupting her licking.

"N-Nosfy?" I realized that the sounds and warm feeling I'd sensed in my dreams had been her work. But I didn't know why I was in this situation. Maybe it was because I had seen her devoted form just before this, but I felt my stomach drop like a rock.

"What are you thinking, doing this?!" I asked, completely bewildered.

"It's something I've thought a lot about," she replied as she remained in place and stroked my cheek.

"Why were you thinking a lot about this?! Untie me right now!" I struggled against my bonds, but all I got in return was a shake of her head with her blushing face.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she said, throwing away my request and speaking only of her own desire. She was trying to get me to agree, but it was obvious she wasn’t listening to a thing I was saying.

She stroked my cheek, traced my neck with her index finger, and rubbed my collarbone with the palm of her hand. I had no idea what I was supposed to not be minding. Her salaciously hot breath covered my skin as her face drew closer. Little by little, I began to understand what she was up to. If my guess was right, it was too sudden, too absurd, and too dirty.

“No, you didn’t mind it for a long, long time...because we were a married couple! There is nothing strange about being husband and wife, is there? Right, Master Kanami? Isn’t that right?”

“Why you!” That statement confirmed my guess.

Shit. Super shit. It wasn’t the same as the feeling of death I’d felt in battle, but it was a chill running down my back that rivaled it.

“All this time, you’ve been trapped in another world...that is, in the Dungeon, haven’t you? You must have had a lot of troubles during that time. If you could just think about letting go with me, I wouldn’t mind. Please do so...”

I didn’t know why or how, but this girl with chestnut-colored hair wanted to do *that* with me. I felt my face twitch. My face grew pale instead of red. The girl in front of me was beautiful. Comparing her to Lastiara, I would say that she was the most beautiful girl I could think of. Her translucent skin was without a single stain, and each strand of her chestnut-colored hair shimmered and shone alluringly. She was charming like a white porcelain flower that bloomed and absorbed everything around her. If she had been in my world, she would certainly have dominated for a century as the pinnacle of idols and models. And this beautiful girl wanted *me*.

Normally, I would have been puzzled but a little pleased. That would be the normal reaction for a man. However, what I was feeling right now was a strong sense of fear. To put it crudely, I even felt a physiological aversion. I didn’t know why, but I knew I could not get involved with Nosfy like that. Of course, common sense told me that this situation was criminal, so I slowly tried to convince her with some generalizations.

“Nosfy, calm down. That’s the kind of thing that people who like each other do with each other’s consent, not something done between people who just met. You know that, don’t you?”

But she didn’t stop. Even as her brows furrowed, her hand continued its exploration.

“Yes, mutual consent is important... Well then, Master Kanami, please give me your consent now. Let this not be one-sided but rather a loving affair. Now.”

“Now?! Like this?!”

“Yes, now. *Light Knife.*” Nosfy smiled as she cast the spell. The light created a blade that looked like a very sharp kitchen knife, which she placed gently on my neck.

“Don’t point a blade at me! That’s not consent!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Bad habits, you know?” Embarrassed, like a child who’d been scolded for biting her nails, she dismissed the blade. My confusion over the implication that this was a familiar threat only increased.

“Please, I beg you to allow me to fulfill my lingering attachment...”

“Wait. Please calm down. You’re saying that *this* is your lingering attachment? Really?”

“Yes, I wanted absolute proof. My spirit won’t be dispelled just by being ‘friends’ or something! I know there is no one else for me but you, Master Kanami! Then and now it was always only you! So I want proof that we were connected! Proof that I have fulfilled my mission! If I have that proof, then surely I will—” Nosfy ended her passionate outburst with a wail that didn’t fit her usual demeanor.

Afraid of being overwhelmed by her force, I had no choice but to shout back. “But to tie me up and take me by force, do you really think this is right, Nosfy?! Is this really what you want? There’s no way!”

Nosfy’s momentum began to wane a little under the sound of my angry voice. “I...don’t think it’s right. But wasn’t it you who said that doing the right thing is not enough?”

“That’s not what I meant! This is very different!”

“Then what did you mean?! To me, you are absolute, righteous, and perfect! I am confused because you make your words so unclear! I wanted to get closer to that wonderful person! In the past and now, I keep wanting to somehow get closer and touch you. Yes, after all, that is my only lingering attachment! My everlasting regret...”

Her face came closer as she yelled. At any moment, her small lips could touch mine. This was no longer the time to be throwing words at each other. I felt that I would be at her mercy if I didn’t do something quickly, so I used my last resort, which was to invoke magic.

“Distance Mute!”

A Dimension magic spell that could even slip through walls, its power wasn’t all about attacking. Its use was wide-ranging, and I’d used it to open locks not too long ago. Instead of covering just one arm, I got it to momentarily cover both of them so I could slip free of the rope. Due to the unaccustomed and forced spell construction, I lost a huge amount of MP in a single go. It felt like a drill was going directly into my skull, but this was nothing out of the ordinary. I kept my composure and used my free hands to grab Nosfy.

She must’ve been quite confident in being able to keep me tied down with her magic rope, as she was unable to respond to my counterattack. I managed to flip her over onto the bed and quickly tried to escape the room.

“Master Kanami! *Light Staff!*” All the entrances and exits, including the windows, were immediately covered in latticelike bars of light. I realized that they were filled with a ridiculous amount of magical power, and I had no choice but to stop. If I tried to escape directly, I would only be caught from behind.

I turned back and shouted, “Nosfy! Now is not the time for this! At least wait until I get my memories back! That’s the right order!”

She rose from the bed and continued to smile and giggle. “Yes, that’s what I was going to do at first. In the proper order, my lingering attachment would be resolved last. Therefore, I thought that you would first return aboveground, save your sister, save Lorde, and slowly regain your memories, and then I would put my feelings into action. Yes, I still think that is the right thing to do. It would

definitely be the most correct way to do things.”

“So why aren’t you doing it like that?!”

Her response was more rational than I had expected. Compared to the enemies I had not been able to converse with before, the difference was obvious. However, this inversely accelerated my fear. Put simply, Nosfy had created this situation in a very logical manner.

“I realized something while I was watching Lorde and Master Kanami. No, it’s something I thought about a thousand years ago too.”

Nosfy, who spoke without hesitation, showed no sign of confusion. As I’d thought earlier, it was clear that everything she did was the result of careful consideration.

“The one who is right always loses,” she said as an explanation for her outburst. Then she laughed, but there were tears in her eyes, and she looked miserable.

I was speechless at the simplicity of her reasoning. I had been predicting a more complex and bizarre reply, but this was totally unexpected.

“A thousand years ago, I lost everything while pretending to be an adult. At that time, I had a chance to win you over, but I missed it. I was taught to do the right thing, so I did, and all that was left was death and regret. I am not satisfied with that result. This is a world where good things are not returned to those who do good. The more good I did, the unhappier my life became. There is no way I can be satisfied with such an ending...”

Her appeal was too straightforward to be a lingering attachment. It was too common a thing to have happen in a lifetime. However, the weight of a dead person’s words had been added to it, and it had become something unmanageable. I couldn’t simply say “You’re wrong.” There were no easy words of comfort I could offer. I was left speechless, and only the cries of her soul continued.

“If that’s what being an adult is like, then I don’t want it. I want to be a child like everybody else. I don’t want to live a life of understanding. It’s hard to be a good girl. It’s really, really hard. I can’t do anything more...” It was clear that she

envied Lorde and me. Perhaps because of her natural disposition, there was no dark trace of jealousy there. She was simply envious. Therefore, she was just trying to imitate everyone else.

I could understand that. It was the accumulation of my own misunderstandings. It was the girl in front of me, not Lorde, who was the most disturbed by yesterday's series of events. Ultimately, last night, Nosfy had reached her limit. And now she was on the verge of breaking at the very core of her being.

"Everything is just as Lorde said. She *is* more mature than anyone else. She really understands the meaning of life. Merely playing nice won't change anything. Just doing the right thing...it won't make you happy!"

I was overwhelmed by the faint voice that leaked out of her, expressing feelings that truly came from the bottom of her heart. I was trying to persuade her, but she was having more success persuading me instead.

"I was always taught to do the right thing, do the right thing! Just as I was taught, I tried to live the right way! In the end, I died being 'right'! And then, finally, I realized it! The word 'right' was only for the convenience of those who taught me! Yes, I always knew that, somewhere in my mind! The more right you are, the worse off you will be!"

To be honest, I could understand where she was coming from. I knew too much about it just from my experience in this world alone, and whether I wanted to be or not, I was swallowed up by the momentum of it. I was unable to move a single step, and Nosfy was approaching me. I couldn't refuse her—because this girl was genuinely seeking happiness. There was no malice there, and of course there was no hostility. There was only affection. It was too beautiful to ignore.

"So I think now is the time for me to speak honestly. I have always, *always*, wanted to make a mistake." At last, the true lingering attachment of the Thief of Light's Essence was revealed. "Even if I make mistake after mistake after mistake, I still want to be happy, and I want to stay happy and end happy. That is my lingering attachment..."

Before I realized it, Nosfy had come within an arm's reach of me. She took my

face in her hands.

“I know it’s not right...but I still want to take everything from you, Master Kanami. A thousand years later, here and now...” Her black eyes were madly reflecting only my image.

I knew that she really needed me, but I couldn’t nod back so easily. As if trying to escape, I checked again to see what she wanted. “If you get that ‘proof,’ will that satisfy you? Do you really think you can fulfill your lingering attachment like this? I’m sorry, but I don’t...”

“But...it’s all I can think about...” Her reply was immediate.

I was lost over her lack of hesitation. If I gave her what she wanted, it might be the end of the trial of the sixtieth floor. That wasn’t a bad deal for me. It was tempting and very easy. But my rational mind doubted that it would be so simple. After all, a situation had never been improved by taking the easy way out. Furthermore, this was not “the right thing to do” as a basic premise. It was a matter of course. It was practically rape at this point. It was legally and humanely out of bounds. From that point of view, I didn’t think the lingering attachment would actually be fulfilled.

Certainly, in this unreasonable world, doing the “right thing” alone might lead to unhappiness. It might be better to choose the “wrong” thing.

But will she really be satisfied with what she gets by making such a mistake? Won’t it only create new regrets?

After all was said and done, I could picture Nosfy muttering to herself, “This is wrong too.” It wasn’t just Responsiveness telling me so; my intuition formed from past experiences said the same. But above all that...my thoughts went around and around like they did during battles. At the end of it all, there was a girl with golden eyes and long, shining hair. A girl who continued to live in my mind at all times.

Lastiara Whoseyards.

I had known ever since I’d heard the word “bride” yesterday that Lastiara was the biggest reason I could never accept Nosfy. The rational thing to do would have been to use my position as “husband” to take advantage of the Guardian.

Simply doing so would have hastened our return to the surface by more than half. But even knowing that, I couldn't do it. It was very simple...because there was another girl I liked. So I couldn't accept that we were married, even as a lie. That was my only reason, and a childish one at that.

Once I understood that, my consideration came to an end. I let go of my rational, mercenary way of thinking, and the words leaked out of my mouth on their own. They were my true feelings, which I had thought about over and over again.

"No, Nosfy. I can't do that. I absolutely can't..." Never one to argue with my own mind, I looked back at her and squeezed the words out.

In return, a cool regret filled my heart. I had given priority to Lastiara, a girl who was not here, instead of Nosfy, the one who was lamenting her misfortune in front of me. I had denied her. It was a guilt I would never be able to shake off. Nosfy would be sad. Her face would contort and she might cry. If, at the end of it all, I ended up in a fight with her, it would be my fault. I would be ready for battle, ready to respond no matter what. I would be prepared to accept any kind of reprimand.

"What?"

But my resolve was in vain. What I saw in front of me was the exact opposite. What Nosfy had plastered on her face was not an expression of sadness. On the contrary, she was smiling with her mouth hanging open, as if she had met an unexpected stroke of luck. What had changed the most was her magic. It was visibly diminishing, and her body was fading.

I knew what was going on. It was a phenomenon that occurred when a Guardian fulfilled their lingering attachment. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to maintain her body, as she no longer had any regrets holding her together. She was becoming so faint that it seemed as if her very existence were disappearing from the world.

"Nosfy...your body..." I pointed at her, confused by this sudden turn of events.

"Huh? Oh, yes, what's wrong with me?" Nosfy, who had been stunned into laughter, came back to herself. She brought her hands up to her eyes and

discovered the strange phenomenon that was happening to her. “My body is growing faint? Is this what it’s like to resolve a lingering attachment?”

It seemed that she also knew the meaning of this phenomenon. Now, here, she understood that a part of her life’s dearest wish was being fulfilled. Even as she remained wide-eyed and amazed, she began to consider the situation silently. Perhaps she was thinking about the true nature of her lingering attachment. That would make sense. What she thought she couldn’t reach had unexpectedly fallen right into her lap. It was only natural for a person to search for the cause.

Nosfy began laughing even harder as she came up with the explanation. Her laugh was a little ridiculous. It didn’t suit her usual modest sensibilities at all. She laughed with abandon. She understood her own lingering attachment and laughed at it. No, that sound that was coming out of her mouth was too distorted to be described as laughter. She was looking down on something and laughing at it from the bottom of her heart.

“Nosfy? Is your lingering attachment really gone now?” I asked fearfully, only half convinced.

“Ha ha ha! Yes, one, though not all of them, it seems. And now I can finally see my real lingering attachment and its true meaning.” She nodded, now in high spirits.

Even though I denied her request? I couldn’t help but wonder.

“What’s with this timing?”

“I just wanted to think that that couldn’t be right, but...it is what it is, I suppose,” Nosfy said, continuing to nod earnestly to herself.

I couldn’t nod along with her. Although it was a failed attempt, Nosfy had tried to assault me. She hadn’t made a mistake. I felt uncomfortable that it had ended so easily even though she had insisted for so long that making a mistake was the lingering attachment keeping her here.

Nosfy continued her explanation, seeing that I still wasn’t convinced. “Apparently, Master Kanami, to me, ‘making a mistake’ was what ‘rejecting what was right’ meant up until today. All I had to do was reject it...”

That was all she said about it. I figured she felt that explained everything. She left me with a questioning look on my face while she looked up at the heavens and laughed again.

“Eh hee hee hee, aha ha ha ha ha! So this is how it is! Ha ha, I’m a Saint or a Banner or whatever! It’s so funny! It’s a good laugh, isn’t it?! Aha ha ha ha!”

She continued laughing. To be honest, it was creepy. But she was laughing with so much satisfaction that I was afraid to stop her. I spoke to her cautiously so as not to dampen her smile.

“Hey, Nosfy...what is your true lingering attachment, then? I’d like to understand, so do you think you could explain it a little more simply?”

“Hmm, hee hee, to sum it up, I would say that I want to be unreasonably selfish!” Nosfy looked over her shoulder at me with a catlike expression as she explained. “I’ve lived my whole life without being selfish in any way. It seems that anything to relieve that exasperation was good enough to do it. It was too easy and so counterintuitive, hee hee hee.”

It was a plausible response. That would explain the sudden transparency of her body. But I didn’t believe it completely, because the suspiciousness I’d felt from her from the start had only intensified.

“Um, so what you mean is...”

“I’ve just told you my selfish desires and gotten a little relief from the sorrows of life. It means that my body has become lighter because of it. Also, um, I’m sorry, Master Kanami. It was very off the mark to say that I needed ‘proof’ of our bond. All I wanted was to be selfish. Yes, that’s all.”

As she said that, the staff of light blocking off my escape disappeared. At least she was no longer trying to force me to exchange vows. Thankfully, it seemed that her lingering attachment wasn’t so intense as to require the use of magic to restrain me. It was a much more modest desire now.

Will Nosfy really be able to disappear as easily as Lorwen did? Really? I wondered.

“Is your lingering attachment seriously just to say something selfish?” I asked.

“Yes, just that. Therefore, you need not listen to me, Master Kanami. It seems that all I have to do is speak it and it will be fine.”

She was really telling me it wasn't something I needed to act on. It was a lingering attachment that was beyond easy to fulfill. Of course, there must have been a lot of suffering before she could be honest with herself. But I couldn't believe it when I heard that this was the end of my battle with the Guardian of the sixtieth floor.

“No, Nosfy. I don't want there to be any misunderstandings. It's not that I don't want to listen to any of your selfishness. I couldn't this time, but I can handle a little bit of it...” I offered her my cooperation, even if only for my own peace of mind.

“Hee hee, you are so very kind.” Nosfy giggled with a smile I hadn't seen at all yesterday. “Very well, then, kind Master Kanami. I accept your offer.” She laughed, catlike as well, and approached me with fluid movements, trying to take my hand. My hypersensitive senses caught the beginning of her movement, but since there wasn't the slightest trace of magic or hostility, I couldn't just brush her off.

“I'm going to be selfish. If you don't mind, could you please cheer up my friend Lorde? I'm not asking you to convince her, but please help her go back to the way she was yesterday.”

“Lorde?” It felt a little anticlimactic even as she squeezed my hand. Her new selfishness was pure and something I couldn't deny her.

“I want to make up with Lorde. We are friends, after all.”

“Well, if that's what you want, I can. I'll cheer her up and get her to make up with you.”

“Thank you very much! You're very kind!” She began laughing again now that I'd heard out her selfish desire. It was as if she'd reached the pinnacle of happiness in her life.

“You...seem happy. No, well, it's like you've found the answer to your life's question, so I guess I can understand.”

“Hee hee hee! I'm sorry. But now that I know that *this* is my lingering

attachment, I just can't hold the laughter back."

"Certainly it's not good to hold back. You should say what you want to say and laugh when you want to laugh." *But you know there are such things as limits*, I added to myself. I was honestly puzzled by her sudden one-eighty.

"Yes. So I'm going to let the rest of my life be full of selfishness, albeit in small ways. Hee hee, I'm glad. I am so glad that I met you and Lorde. I feel that meeting the two of you before anyone else made everything turn out well. I feel like it is fate that the three of us are together on this day, in this place, and in this situation. Yes, this is fate! Thanks to you two, I have come to understand who I really am!"

Nosfy let go of my hand and began heading toward the door. She seemed to be truly satisfied. Her steps were light and she looked about ready to start skipping.

Just before opening the door to leave, she turned around. "Oh, Liner's in the hallway on a bamboo mat, so please collect him. I'm sure it would get complicated if I talked to him, so would you be able to tell him I said sorry?"

I hadn't seen Liner anywhere in the room earlier, which I guess was because he'd been tossed outside.

"Yeah, sure..."

"Well then, thank you. Really...thank you," she said emphatically. Just before she left, she looked up into the air and murmured to herself. "I won't restrain myself. After all, I've finally become a child." She left, and only those words remained.

A silence befitting the late hour returned to the room, and the darkness of the night deepened. I let out a sigh. It felt like a storm had passed. My drowsiness had been completely blown away. After a short moment to get my bearings, I went out into the hallway, where a chilly breeze was blowing. Nosfy was no longer there. There was just Liner, lying in the corner of the hallway, wrapped in a shiny magical cord. As soon as I spotted him, all his restraints, including the gag, disappeared.

Liner, having regained his freedom, stood up and took a deep breath before

shouting, “That girl! Are you okay, Sieg?! What did she do to you?!”

“I’m fine. We just talked, that’s all.”

“What? She tied me up just to talk to you?!” Exasperated, he started exuding magic. He looked like he was about to chase after Nosfy, who had just left, but he clearly realized that even if he caught up to her, he would only be beaten at his own game.

“It was an important talk...about her life. She didn’t want anything to interrupt our conversation, no matter what. She said sorry too.”

“A talk about her life? Damn, why didn’t she just say that?” Liner, who knew how Guardians worked, understood the importance of such a conversation and accepted my explanation.

“So, after talking about it in depth, we discovered that her lingering attachment is to be unreasonably selfish. Apparently, she was never once selfish in her previous life.”

“Selfish? Huh. So what was her unreasonably selfish request then.”

“She said she couldn’t do it herself, so she wants me to cheer Lorde up. I’m going to visit her again in the morning.”

“She wants Lorde to be happy. Well, if that’s what it is, then it’s fine. But Sieg...do you really believe being unreasonably selfish is her lingering attachment? To be honest, I can’t help but think that everything Nosfy says is suspicious. Honestly, is it a lie?”

Liner gave voice to the feelings I was trying to avoid. I knew it. I knew that Nosfy was all sorts of weird right now. I felt anxious about the unpredictability of it all. Depending on the situation, she might not only be an obstacle to our return to the surface, but also a life-threatening enemy.

“Maybe...but I want to believe her.”

Even now, I sometimes wondered what would have happened if I hadn’t run away from Alty’s wish and had taken it seriously. To find out, I decided to listen to Nosfy’s selfishness. I couldn’t really afford to do so, but I could try while working to get back aboveground. I also wanted to cheer up Lorde anyway, and

if this would make the two of them more mature, it would be worth the challenge. I wasn't sure if Liner understood my line of thought, but he nodded and sighed.

"I understand. If the master says so, it's the knight's job to follow along silently. I'll just wait and see."

"Thank you, Liner."

After we finished our conversation, we left the chilly hallway and returned to our room. As we did, I stretched *Dimension* out and searched for a girl who was in the middle of a whirlwind of turmoil. Lorde was still in the vault, curled up asleep among the destroyed paintings. The way she sighed in her sleep was childlike.

I curled up on the sofa just like her and closed my eyes. Maybe I was still tired, because I quickly nodded off. The same went for Liner, who was fast asleep in the bed next to me. And with that, the day came to an end. The next day, I would fulfill Nosfy's wish and cheer up Lorde.

With that decision, I sank into the darkness once more. But regrettably, no more dreams came to me. The chance to remember the past, which was so important, had passed.



The next morning, I woke up a little late, but that was probably because I'd been up in the middle of the night. However, in order to fulfill Nosfy's desire, I immediately spread *Dimension* out. Leaving the detailed preparations for the Dungeon to Liner, I began searching for Lorde. I wanted to finish Nosfy's request before our venture into the Dungeon, if possible.

Before I could find Lorde, I discovered an anomaly in the castle. To be precise, a crowd of people had gathered outside, in front of the castle gate. At the head of that group was Beth. She was looking through the gate with a very anxious expression. The other townspeople had the same look on their faces. I heard Lorde mentioned in their conversations, so I decided to go investigate first.

When I appeared in front of the gate, Beth, apparently the leader of the group, called out to me, very impatient and worried. "Oh, Sir Commander of the

Queensguard! Good morning! Um, Her Majesty hasn't come out of the castle yet! Do you know anything about that?!" Without waiting for my reply, she barreled ahead. "Actually, I made a promise to meet with Her Majesty last night. But even though I waited a really long time, she didn't come! And this morning she hasn't come out yet, and I thought it was weird, so I..."

The people around her obviously felt the same way, as they also began voicing their concerns.

"What happened to Queen Lorde?"

"She's never been sick even once..."

"I don't remember the last time I didn't see her flying around in the morning..."

From those voices, it was clear that Lorde was adored by her people. It also told me that she was in town every day without fail. But there was one thing I thought was strange. I looked at the gate I just came out of. There it stood, the open gate, closed to no one.

"I understand what you're saying, but if you're so worried, why don't you go inside?"

"What? Because we don't belong to the castle. That's why we're worried." Beth wasn't the only one, everyone else had the same expression.

Apparently, no matter what happened, the people weren't allowed in. That implied it was a law around here.

"I understand. I, the Commander of the Queensguard, will check on Lorde, so you can wait here." Having noticed the peculiarity of the situation, I undertook the search of the castle on their behalf.

"Thank you, Sir Commander!"

Leaving Beth and the other townspeople bowing their heads in gratitude, I hurried back inside. As I walked, I extended Dimension to the vault where Lorde had been yesterday, but it was empty. There was no one in the courtyard or watchtower either.

After searching all the places Lorde might like, I finally found her. She was in

the center of the castle, the place I would've expected her to like the least. It was the throne room used for audiences. Behind the throne at the far end of the room, she was sitting like she was stuck in gym class and fidgeting, muttering to herself, endlessly chanting the same words over and over again.

"I do not choose the path I walk. I am the wind. Then I am an accelerating spirit. Accelerating. Accelerating. Accelerating."

I could tell immediately it was an incantation, but there wasn't any spell being cast, nor was there a change in her green power. There was, however, some kind of price being paid for the incantation. There was nothing being gained by it, only things being lost.

After entering the throne room, I approached Lorde, intentionally walking loudly instead of knocking, and called out to her from a distance.

"Lorde...is it okay to be incanting?"

"Yeah, it's fine. It's like a spell to make you feel better." Lorde, a veteran of many battles, had noticed my approach from the start and answered my question without any sign of surprise.

"Beth is outside. She's worried about you."

"Oh...that's right. I promised I'd play with her..."

"Beth's not the only one. Everyone's here."

"Oh, is that so? Everyone came..." There was no strength in her replies. She seemed to be in despair that the world she thought would last forever was crumbling. It would be difficult to cheer her up, but I still wanted to do what I could. I knew it would be better to do my best and regret it than regret not doing anything at all.

"Yes, they're worried about you, Lorde. Why don't you go see them? Maybe seeing everyone will help you feel a little better."

"They're worried about me? Ha ha, I see, they're worried about 'Lorde'..." She repeated her name in a self-deprecating manner. Then she muttered weakly and cringed, "Which Lorde do they mean? Everyone already knows the real me..."

The muttering wasn't directed at anyone; it was just a monologue. It was impossible to guess its whole meaning. It was barely enough to see that this situation wasn't Lorde's intention.

"Hey, Kanamin...I don't wanna go aboveground..."

"Yeah, I know."

"If I do, people will expect things of me again. I hate that... I hate it when people expect things of me because it makes me feel heavy. I hate the surface..."

I blamed my earlier self for her excessively feeble appearance. Now I was convinced—Lorde wasn't hiding anything. There wasn't a shred of the cunning that had been present in the Demon Queen. She was just a delicate child. The only way to save her was to hold her hand gently.

"I understand. I won't say anything more about you going to the surface. I won't let Nosfy talk about it either, so stop making that face."

"What?" She was clearly puzzled that I'd agreed with her. She must not have expected that kind of response. "But... But... What was I saying?" she continued with a trembling voice.

"There's still a bit of time before this place collapses, right? I'll resolve your lingering attachment before that happens. Then everything will be settled. No one will complain."

"You can resolve my lingering attachment?"

"Yes, so you don't need to keep worrying." I wasn't completely sure, but I kept on affirming it to cheer her up. "I'm going to bring your younger brother here soon."

"What? You're going to bring Ide here?"

"Yes, I consulted with Mr. Reynand, and he thought that would be the best thing to do. I don't remember a thousand years ago, so I can't understand everything about you. We thought it would be best to bring someone who remembered you from a thousand years ago and was close to you. And family—Ide—would be perfect for that."

“But...if Ide comes here...”

“I’m sure the whole reason you two became Guardians is so you can meet again now a thousand years later. That’s what I think. Because family is more important than anything else. They’re the ones who understand you best. You should meet with Ide, talk about everything, and reconsider your lingering attachment. Then it will be resolved.” Although I exaggerated a little to give her hope, these were mostly my genuine feelings. A family reunion between siblings would resolve both of their lingering attachments. That was my thought process as I explained it, at least.

“No, Kanamin. Don’t do that.” Lorde flat out rejected my plan, her face contorting as she shook her head. “No...I don’t want to see Ide.”

“But he’s your younger brother. He should be the one who knows you best—”

“I said I don’t want to!” she shouted, without waiting for me to finish. She stood up and peeked out from behind the throne, then gripped the edge of the throne and slammed her reasoning into me. “Because if I meet Ide now, I’ll have to play the perfect queen again! It took me a thousand years to be released from the Sovereign Queen Lorde! I’ll be right back where I started!”

The edge of the throne shattered with a crack. To my astonishment, Lorde continued to shout.

“I don’t wanna be queen again! I can’t bear those expectations again! Because I... Because I...” Tears were forming at the corners of her eyes. But before they spilled over, she turned her face away and put her forehead against the throne to hide them. “If I just keep living here, then that’s all it will take for me to disappear. So there’s no reason for Ide to be here. This peaceful time in Viaysia was what I wished for. It’s what I...wanted...”

And so it came back to Lorde’s first wish. She continued to cling to a desire that had been meaningless for a thousand years.

“Kanamin, don’t do anything unnecessary. If you aren’t willing to stay here with me, then just leave me alone.”

Lorde collapsed to her knees and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. She was in such a state that there was no way I could describe her as the Sovereign Queen

Lorde, and my next words flew naturally out of my mouth.

“I’m not gonna leave you alone! I’m going to save you, Lorde! So don’t make that face!” I don’t know why I said that. Maybe it was because my Double Covenantor skill had activated or maybe because of the promise I’d made to Nosfy. Maybe I just wanted to make a crying girl feel better, or maybe I felt it was my mission. I couldn’t narrow it down to one reason, but regardless, I couldn’t abandon her.

“You’ll save me?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll save me like you did before?”

“Yeah.”

Lorde raised her head. Her face broke into a smile as if she had found a glimmer of hope. I, too, felt like I had finally found a clue. If I was to cheer her up, it would be now or never. Making sure I was choosing my words carefully, I attempted to show her a world where her wish came true.

“So what you want is for Ide not to have any expectations of you, right? If that’s the case, Liner and I will beat him to a pulp. After that, I’ll make sure he knows that he shouldn’t have any expectations of you because you’re totally useless now. I’ll make sure to bring you a brother who has zero expectations. That would be okay, wouldn’t it?”

“Huh?!” Lorde’s eyes went wide. It was clear that this lonely girl missed her family. Of all the paintings in the vaults, the one from their childhood was the only one still intact. Above all, it was the life I’d spent with her up until today that provided the answer.

“I think you need your family. You won’t be able to disappear forever because you don’t have someone you can trust. That’s all I can think of!”

“Really? I need...family? Someone I can trust? It certainly...seemed so...”

That was why Lorde had tried to stop me and Liner from leaving. It was because she wanted to laugh together with family, even one as temporary as ours.

“I will definitely bring your family here. So cheer up. You look better with a smile on your face. Nosfy said so too, remember?” With those words as a stopgap, I closed the last bit of distance between us. Slowly, I walked behind the throne and reached for her. She was on the verge of collapsing. “I’ll be back as quick as I can. So you just wait here with a smile on your face. It won’t just be me; Liner will be there too. You don’t have to worry about anything anymore. You don’t have to, Lorde.”

Lorde regained her strength and took my outstretched hand in hers and stood up. She nodded as if she had found an answer to her years of anguish.

“Y-You’re right. I have Liner too. Yeah, you’re right...”

“Yes, and you have Nosfy. She wants to make up with you. Go see her after this.” It was important for me to act as a mediator for the two of them. I couldn’t forget to emphasize her existence.

That should clear up Nosfy’s selfishness, I thought.

“Yeah, and Nosfy. Then that’s fine, right?” Lorde’s expression became very bright as she realized she wasn’t alone. She didn’t seem to be sulking or planning to shut herself away anymore.

“Good, you seem to be better. Now go see Beth and Nosfy.”

“Yeah... But I’m too embarrassed to go right now, so I’ll do it a little later. I’ll get back to my usual self, and after I’ve had a chance to think things over, I’ll—”

“Sure, that’s fine.” Looking closely, I could see a blush on her cheeks. It seemed that Lorde, as a girl, was concerned about her appearance. I wasn’t so insensitive as to force her to go out there. I felt like Beth and the townspeople would be more at ease if she showed up feeling and looking as close to normal as possible.

“All right, well I’ve got to get going. We’re heading into the Dungeon again.” I had to hurry in order to fulfill the promise I had just made. It was crucial for everyone here that I succeeded in my exploration of the Dungeon.

Lorde nodded in reply. Then, with sure steps, she sat down on the throne. “Okay, I’ll see you when you get back. Also...thank you, Kanamin. It seems like my wish really will come true...” She looked away with a smile as she played

with her glossy green hair. The too-sweet gesture gave me goose bumps. Lorde, who had overcome one of the mountains in her way, looked a little more mature.

How can she look so grown-up? I wondered. The sight was so unbalanced that a chill crept down my spine and wouldn't leave me. There was no doubt that she was feeling better. Anyone could see that.

"Yes, I'll make it happen soon. Wait here." Maybe my current attempt at persuasion hadn't failed, but I wasn't sure it had succeeded either. Regardless, I still had to leave. With those final words, I exited the throne room. Then I walked back out of the castle. First I had to deal with the people waiting outside the gate. I greeted them with a warm smile to deliver the good news.

"Everyone, Lorde is fine. She'll probably be out in a little bit to see you." I kept the fact that she'd been crying a secret, as I'm sure that's what she would've wanted.

"She's fine? Then why didn't she come into town today?"

Beth and the others still had questions, so I had to smooth it over more.

"Oh, well, that's because yesterday we brought an old friend of Lorde's back from the Dungeon. They stayed up late talking and overslept."

"An old friend of Lorde's?" The murmurs of the people grew louder. Was it such a surprise that Lorde would have a friend?

"Yeah, it's another girl, so she was really excited to talk to her."

"I see..." Beth still didn't seem to believe it, but she had no choice since I was the one telling her. At least, that's what it seemed like to me.

"It's true. She'll probably be out by noon, so you can ask her about it then. You don't need to worry." There were things I wasn't telling them, but none of it was an outright lie. I spoke assertively, and the crowd seemed mollified.

"I'm glad she's not ill."

"Hmph, she caused quite a stir..."

"I'm glad that Her Majesty is all right."

The crowd began to disperse. Of course, some of them decided to wait around for Lorde. Beth was among those waiting.

“I don’t have anything to do today, so I’m going to wait for Her Majesty.”

“Sure. I understand.”

“What are you going to do, Sir Commander?”

“I’m heading into the Dungeon. That’s my main occupation.”

“Oh, really? I would’ve liked for you to wait here with me...”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. I have to return as quickly as I can to the surface.”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind.”

I could tell that she did mind. Even as her mouth said it was okay, her eyes clung to me. But I didn’t have time to waste here.

“Well, see you...” I said, turning on my heel and heading back into the castle. I walked away from the gate and spread *Dimension* out again. My next step was to find Nosfy. I wanted to report quickly that I had fulfilled her selfishness and cheered Lorde up. Otherwise, I had a feeling that she would get up to something.

I passed by the throne room, where Lorde was still sniveling, and let my magic permeate the castle. I was able to quickly find Nosfy in my room with Liner. It seemed like she’d come in just after I’d left earlier. I headed to my room at a quick pace to save Liner, who was growing pale now that he was alone with his natural enemy. As soon as I opened the door and entered the room, Nosfy’s greeting came flying at me.

“Hee hee hee, good morning, Master Kanami! And thank you! I’m so touched you were able to cheer Lorde up so quickly. She can be as finicky as a cat sometimes! Yes, I’m very, very glad.” I could tell from that greeting that she knew the details of the conversation I’d had with Lorde.

“Morning, Nosfy. I think Lorde is okay now. I promised I’d knock Ide out and bring him here and she perked right up. She’ll probably come see you in a little while, so be nice when you see her, please.”

“Of course! I’m going to wait for her here. I’m sorry, but for that reason, I

won't be able to accompany you into the Dungeon today."

"No, it was something Liner and I had to do on our own originally anyway, so don't worry about it."

"Thank you very much. You're really very kind, Master Kanami. Well then, I'll let my selfishness pass! Ahh, but selfishness is so nice! It's like my heart is being washed away! Hmmm, maybe this means my disappearance due to resolving my lingering attachment is imminent!"

She emphasized her mortality by repeatedly interrupting her statement with laughter. But I couldn't just take her word for it. She said she was close to disappearing, but it probably wouldn't be anytime soon. I would likely have to listen to her selfishness a few more times, as measured by the intensity of her body's presence. Leaving me in doubt, Nosfy chuckled and sat down on the bed.

"Yes, Lorde, please come quickly. I'm waiting for you! Yes, forever and ever...I'm used to waiting..." she said, giggling more. She leaned back against the mattress and let her eyes wander the room as she waited for Lorde to show up.

"Well, I've got to go get Ide, so we're going to head into the Dungeon." I had my own role to play. If I didn't fulfill it, even if the two of them made up, everything would go down the drain.

"Yes, I will pray that your dive into the Dungeon today is a success."

"Connection." I created a magical door in the corner of my room. Then, Liner and I stepped into the Dungeon. This was effectively a shortcut to yesterday's save point—floor fifty-seven. We stepped out into the pure-white space and surveyed our surroundings. Thanks to Nosfy's magic, there were few monsters around. Some of them were looking at us, but they did not seem to have any hostile intentions. There was a staircase leading to floor fifty-six in front of us. This was our fifth time exploring the Dungeon, and our return to a two-person party. Without any communication between us, we began walking toward the staircase.

"Sieg, are you sure about that? To make such a promise... It's not gonna be that easy to get Ide here." Now that we were alone, Liner didn't hesitate to voice his doubts.

“It’s the only thing I can think of to save Lorde. We have to...” I strengthened my own resolve by repeating it out loud to him. I was determined to speed up our Dungeon dive in order to help her.

Up until today, I’d been going through the Dungeon as fast as I could for my sister. But that was the fastest I could travel while keeping in mind the safety of our shared body. However, I wasn’t going to do that anymore. It felt like I wouldn’t make it in time. The memories of nearly dying many times in this world urged me on. The experience of having fought against vicious and powerful enemies was also a guiding factor. At first glance, the two Guardians now wore a cheerful air. However, there was no doubt that an aura of disquiet lurked within that cheerfulness. Nosfy laughed openly but had not yet revealed the depths of her heart. Lorde, her eyes glowing with hope, hadn’t quite met my gaze. So I promised myself that I would traverse this Dungeon literally as fast as I could so that I wouldn’t have any regrets.

“Liner, we’re going to get aboveground this time. Let’s end it today.”

Liner wasn’t the only one who was able to expose his true feelings after entering the Dungeon. It was me too. Finally, I was able to say those words.

“Huh?! Today?! Are you serious?! It’s more than fifty floors to the surface!” Liner was, naturally, shocked at the impossible task.

“Yeah, I’m serious. I want to end it.” There was still more than half of the Dungeon between us and the surface. With fifty-six floors, it would, after a simple calculation, take fifty-six hours to complete. It seemed a little insane to think we could finish it all in one go. But I wouldn’t take it back. “I ran around the castle today and managed to patch things up...but I’ve reached my limit. After talking to the two of them, I’m convinced there’s no time left,” I said as I led the way. I had appeared, met Lorde, called Nosfy, and now that the three of us from a thousand years ago were all here, something in Viaysia that had been stagnant for a long time was starting to move again.

“But Lorde is okay now, and you’ve made arrangements for her to make up with Nosfy, right? Do you still have to be in such a hurry?”

“I think it’s all superficial. I’m just guessing based on my experience fighting various Guardians, but clearly there’s something wrong with both of them...”

Their expressions had been brighter than when we'd ended our dive yesterday. Lorde's tantrum had stopped and Nosfy had quieted down too. Things seemed to be going well. However, I wasn't leading the kind of life that would allow me to be optimistic about that. In fact, I even felt kind of trapped.

"I understand what you're trying to say. But please don't go alone. If you're going to the surface, let me help you," Liner warned me. I guess I looked like I was getting too worked up.

"I'm not going to do anything rash. Honestly, I'd be in a worse spot without you. If you don't help me, I think it will be impossible."

I was speaking from the bottom of my heart. We'd practically killed each other in the past, and that's why we were able to have such a frank and honest conversation. In addition, we'd shared our thoughts with each other during our dives over the past few days. I wanted to make the most of it.

"Let's go, Liner. We're not going to take any breaks from here on out."

"You're a rough party leader...but I'm glad to have you."

We climbed the stairs to floor fifty-six with our unified goal in mind. At the top, spreading out before us, was the familiar stone corridor. The Dungeon's construction had returned to normal here. Unlike the craggy rock surface of the lower levels, the walls were still slightly luminous, but *Dimension* showed that the focal point of this floor was a maze. As a user of Dimension magic, the maze wasn't much of an obstacle. Relieved by the familiarity of the corridor, we proceeded at a quick pace along the shortest route that I identified from *Dimension*.

Along the way, we encountered a few monsters, but we were not attacked. As Nosfy had said, it seemed that no hostile monsters would appear as long as the light attribute remained in their nature. While there was still time, we discussed the finer points of our earlier absurd proposal.

"But, Sieg, even if you say you want to make it all the way to the surface this time, what about food? We only have enough for one meal, right?" Liner said, focused on the practical aspects of the plan.

It was true I didn't have enough food in my Inventory right now, partly

because Lorde had wasted a bunch yesterday, but also because we just plain didn't have enough.

"We'll have to endure without."

"That sure is a solution, huh?" Liner's voice trembled. My answer was counter to all the fundamentals of Dungeon diving. He seemed to regret his rash decision to help me.

"I'm not saying this without any thought. I don't think we can prevent the deterioration of our health due to hunger, but I don't think it will be too much of a problem from here on."

"The enemies will be weaker the farther up we go..."

I hadn't felt that the monsters around floor forty were too strong when I'd hunted with Lastiara and the others around there a while ago. Once we entered the forties, we wouldn't have to be frightened of the monsters like we did in the sixties.

"I've done the time calculations, so you don't have to worry. I've memorized the path between the surface and floor forty completely, so there are actually only sixteen floors left. And, considering it takes about two hours to clear one floor here, we need thirty-two hours. For the other forty floors, where I know the route, as long as we don't waste any time, I think it will only be about twenty hours. So in total..."

"Ugh..."

"To put it simply, two days of sleepless nights should do it." I gave it to him simply, since it seemed he wasn't keen on the finer details of my calculations.

Yes, it was only a matter of holding out for two days. We definitely had a chance of winning that challenge. However, it was undeniably a challenge that I would never take on as my usual self. From a profit-and-loss perspective, it would not be rational to take such a risk. As a coward, I was afraid to go through the Dungeon without a hundred percent chance of winning and absolute safety.

But that wasn't how I was going to do things anymore. A hundred percent win rate and absolute security were illusions. I knew that all too well. There was no

such thing as a hundred percent in this world. It was this kind of thinking about safety margins and leeway that always, always made me one move too late. I felt like I'd been too cautious these past few days because Lorde's power was far superior to mine.

Reflecting on this, I realized I needed to gather my courage and rush down the road hand in hand with risk. I used to be so afraid of the Dungeon that I could barely move through it quickly, but now I should be able to run. For the remaining sixteen or so levels, I was going to run, run, run, through all of it.

"Two days without sleep or rest... You must really be serious to choose such a risky method."

"Yeah, I need to hurry. No, I really should've been doing this from the very start." Looking back, the skill I'd used at the very beginning of this underground life, Double Covenantor, had not been a good idea because it disabled my sense of urgency. Although I was grateful for the mental stability, I was aware it had made me much more lax.

"Sieg, it's gotten a little darker..."

While we were discussing our strategy, we'd gotten deep into floor fifty-six. However, since the monsters were still mainly of the light attribute, we'd been able to proceed smoothly without getting into any battles. Now, the brightness of the corridor was visibly changing. The more we advanced, the less light there was, and at times it flickered on and off like a light bulb that was going out. It seemed to indicate that the safety zone of the light attribute was about to come to an end.

"Yeah, let's proceed carefully. Like Nosfy said, the enemy's attributes are probably going to start changing now."

We became more alert and pushed forward into the darkness.

It wasn't glittering monsters that awaited us on floor fifty-five, but ferocious-looking beasts instead. The ceiling was a little high, and it was the usual dirty corridor that we were used to seeing.

"I think the monsters will start attacking us again, Liner. It'd be great if we could avoid them as much as possible, but I don't think that we'll be able to do

it perfectly, so be on your guard.”

“Got it. Leave the advance guard to me as usual,” he said, moving ahead of me as we headed down the corridor. We were aiming for the surface on the shortest path that *Dimension* had found for me. As we progressed, it became clear that we wouldn’t be able to move as easily as we had on the floors full of light. Inevitably, there would end up being a monster standing in our way that we just couldn’t avoid. In those instances, we decided we’d take it by surprise. Unlike our previous forays into the Dungeon, there was no time to wait and see. We had to prioritize speed over safety and force our way through the floors.

The first monster we faced was a beast type that resembled a wolf. What made it different from a normal wolf were its four legs. Instead of legs of flesh, it moved through the sky on appendages of densely packed magic.

[MONSTER] Sky Wolf: RANK 52

So, it’s called a Sky Wolf...

True to its name, it was a wolf that ran through the air. We attacked it from its blind spot. Liner ran in a straight line toward the enemy, and I followed.

I struck up another conversation as we ran. “I’d like to correct one thing you said earlier about sleepless nights—I don’t think it’s as dangerous as you’re worried it is...because we’re getting stronger. Especially you.”

The Sky Wolf, sensing the attack, turned around. Its reaction time was fast, and it succeeded in intercepting our surprise attack. Recognizing us as the enemy, it transformed its two front legs into terrifying claws.

Liner, on the ground, and the Sky Wolf, in the air, crossed paths. That was the first blow. Liner’s twin swords clashed with claws and fangs, sending both of them flying backward. A second blow followed. Seeing Liner and the monster charge at each other in the same manner again, I launched my magic without chanting. By observing the first exchange of blows, I was able to predict the movement of the second. Based on that information, I lightly changed the trajectory of both attacks with *Dimension: Difference*. The shift in trajectory was probably only about a centimeter, but the effect was enormous.

“Wynd Flamberge!” Liner’s all-out wind attack was the only blow to land successfully. The Sky Wolf’s body was cut in half, and it exploded into glittering light.

“Liner, your strength is on a totally different level!” I said as the battle ended. Even at this depth, his offensive power was more than sufficient. The sword he was using might have had an effect, but against the weaker monsters in the area, he could win just by making the first move and striking the biggest blow.

Liner tossed me the magic gem from the monster and cocked his head. “Have I really gotten that strong? I thought it was just the monster getting weaker. But my strength is still nothing compared to a Guardian, right?”

“No way! They’d be at a disadvantage. Have more confidence in yourself.”

When I first met Liner, he’d been about to be devoured by a monster up on the single-digit floors. But the next time I’d met him, he’d shown me that he was growing stronger, even if he did have suicidal tendencies. The time after that, he and his friends had worked together to hunt me down. And then, in the final battle with Palinchron, we’d fought shoulder to shoulder, and his talents had been fully developed. In addition, he was now learning magic from Lorde, the Demon Queen from a thousand years ago, and had equipment made by Mr. Reynand, who possessed the Blessed Iron Smithing skill, which further improved his power. If that wasn’t someone growing stronger, I didn’t know what was.

“As a knight of wind, I can’t imagine anyone more perfect...even in terrain like this.”

I kept talking as we moved through the Dungeon. We were entering the next area after defeating the Sky Wolf. The stone corridor changed shape and became even more rugged. Rather than walls, it was now sandwiched between cliffs and became a steep, rocky path. It was no longer flat and level, and sometimes required climbing over sheer precipices. It was at these times that Liner’s magic really came in handy.

“Wynd!”

Thanks to the buoyancy of the wind, we were able to climb up the cliffs as easily as a mountain goat. The delicate control of magic instilled in him by Lorde

prevented the unnecessary consumption of magic power and physical strength. The wind magic was within the range of natural recovery, so his MP was not being reduced in any meaningful way. With his current skills, he would be able to move freely even on floor thirty-five, which was completely underwater.

“You can respond quite skillfully. I think that breadth of response options is a great strength. You should be able to fight any Guardian, depending on how you handle it,” I continued. It might have been a bit of an exaggeration, but I really hoped it was true. In any case, there were three Guardians summoned right now: Ide, Lorde, and Nosfy. There could come a time when we had to fight multiple Guardians at once, in which case...

“Depending on how I handle it, I could even defeat...Guardians...” Liner had seen where I was going with that line of thought and was mentally preparing himself.

After about twenty minutes of climbing up the cliff as we talked, and dealing with the birdlike monsters we encountered, we finally reached the stairs to floor fifty-four. After using my customary *Dimension* sweep to get a rough idea of what the next floor looked like, we quickly entered the stairway. This floor also had a few special areas here and there, such as cliffs, but it was basically a normal stone corridor. Furthermore, we would take the shortest route, where the enemies were weaker, and run through it as fast as possible. In this situation, what we had to take the most care of was the distribution of physical and magical power.

As part of this, I encouraged Liner to change weapons in the middle of a battle. “Liner! These monsters are resistant to your wind magic. Switch Sylph Rukh Bringer for the One-Winged Sword! And save your wind magic!”

“That’s right, I have a third sword!” Liner deftly put one of his blades back into its sheath and replaced it with the sword he had acquired just yesterday. The One-Winged Sword hadn’t obtained its full power yet, but there were times it could deal with enemies that Sylph Rukh Bringer couldn’t handle. We used a lot of little tricks like this to save our magic and easily dealt with all the enemies standing in our way.

“Phew! That fight went really easily thanks to your guidance, Sieg.”

“I’m still getting the hang of it. The value of my Commanding skill is still pretty low.”

“I mean, my last party leader was Sheer Regacy, and before that it was my sister Franrühle, so...”

“Ah, yeah, compared to them...” I agreed.

Liner didn’t seem to have experience fighting with a proper leader. He seemed touched that he was able to act as the advance guard while remaining safe. We resumed our progress, and I ruminated over his comment that the fight had been easy. Since the enemies’ ranks were getting lower, those words must’ve just slipped out. I felt the same way, but I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Okay, I’ll fight in front from here on out. We need to go a lot faster...” I pulled out my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword as I moved forward to join him, deciding to throw caution to the wind so that we could defeat enemies ever faster.

“I understand, boss. There’s no way I’d object,” he agreed without a moment’s hesitation, clearly having full faith in me. And so began our true forced march through the Dungeon. Basically, we ignored the terrain, the enemies, and everything else. Even if we found an unusual monster or an altar with a divine weapon on it, we ignored it. We ignored, ignored, ignored, ignored, and aimed only upward.

With a chant of *faster, faster* beating in my heart, we rushed through floors fifty-four, fifty-three, and fifty-two. Our aggressive progression had its downsides, and we were occasionally attacked by monsters from behind. But when that happened, we used our magic without hesitation and forcibly defeated them.

I have to go faster. Faster and faster and faster! Like I was using an incantation, I prayed I would reach the faraway surface. The price to be paid for that acceleration was safety, but the results were tremendous. Although we were out of breath and attacked by enemies on several occasions, we were conquering the Dungeon in less than half the original search time. We succeeded in accelerating our dive and quickly reached floor fifty, which was the floor of the Thief of Wind’s Essence and the halfway point of our journey.



We took a careful look around as we arrived safely on floor fifty.

“So, this is floor fifty... Lorde’s floor...” I murmured.

Spreading out before us was a grassy plain. It was similar to Ide’s space on floor forty, and there was nothing particularly novel about it. There were gusts of wind that beat against us, as if to assert its wind attribute, but that was all.

After checking for danger around us, Liner started to walk away. “But, Sieg, right now Lorde is on the back side of floor sixty-six. So what happens then? A Guardian won’t appear, right?”

“That’s what it was like with Alty and the others. If we can, we should take a bit of a break here before continuing on...”

Without a Guardian, this would be the perfect floor for a break. We’d been walking for hours, so it would be best to give our legs a rest if we could. As we kept walking to check the safety of the floor, clouds gradually began gathering. And not metaphorically either. As we approached the center of floor fifty, they began to overflow onto the ceiling even though we were still in the Dungeon. Finally, raindrops began to fall. Combined with the gusty winds, it felt like we were in the middle of a storm. The grass was undulating like an ocean current.

“It seems like it’s raining in the center. If we want to rest, we should do it on the edge,” I said, as I moved back away from the center.

That’s when it appeared. In the middle of the storm, in the middle of floor fifty, the shape of a person appeared. The figure, which had been kneeling, was starting to stand up. I felt a sense of déjà vu. It was just like a summoning when a person entered a Guardian floor.

“L-Lorde?” I spread *Dimension* out and whispered the first name that came to mind. But it wasn’t her.

“No, it’s me, Master Kanami.” A girl in black with chestnut-colored hair turned around and called my name. There was no mistaking her face. I had seen the same scene just the other day. It was Nosfy who had appeared on floor sixty, even though she should’ve been there.

Her appearance surprised us. She walked away from us and surveyed the area, seeming pleased with the situation. “Phew. I was worried because it had been such a long time, but it seems like the insurance worked perfectly. I can finally use my original magic without restrictions.” She stifled a laugh as she looked at her hands.

“Nosfy...why are you here?”

“Oh, don’t you know? When a human enters a Guardian’s floor, *Summon Outworlder* is activated, calling an Essence Thief to appear.”

“*Summon Outworlder*? I know that a Guardian is summoned, but shouldn’t it be Lorde who appears here?”

“Yes, it was originally Lorde who was the target of the summoning, but we just had a discussion about it and switched the target to me. It was like magic without a caster, so it was really easy.” Nosfy was talking about revising one of the foundations of the Dungeon like it was nothing.

“So that’s something you can do...but why?” I was surprised and puzzled by the depths of her light magic. I didn’t understand why they had changed the object of the summoning. I didn’t know what the girl in front of me was thinking. That’s why I was rooted to the spot despite knowing who it was. Responsiveness was ringing alarm bells at the idea of getting closer to her. Liner, standing behind me, also seemed reluctant to move.

Seeing us, Nosfy kept laughing. Her sly smile and stifled laughter didn’t stop. “Well, I’m not going to let you go any farther. *Light Rod! Nosfy’s Banner!*” A banner made of light magic appeared in her hand.

“Damn it!” The storm at the center of the room was growing stronger. I sensed that our place of idle chatter had turned into a battleground.

I stepped back, and Liner drew his twin swords. In contrast, Nosfy waved the banner of light around as if putting on a performance, then thrust it into the ground so that it stood up. Surprisingly, it was indeed being used as a banner of light, not a weapon.

The moment the flag was planted, the color of the magic in the area changed. The green magic of the wind was painted over by the white magic of light, and

floor fifty was filled with a single color. It was such a drastic change that even the belligerent Liner had to stop to take a look.

Nosfy spoke in a languid manner. “Indeed, Master Kanami. Nevertheless, it was a little too fast. It’s only been five hours since you left this morning, you know. It’s only lunchtime! Perhaps you were planning on getting aboveground by the end of the day? If you’re in that much of a hurry, just tell me. I have my own reasons, after all. Hee hee hee.”

Her tone was amicable. It was as if the earlier declaration of hostility had never happened. Our bewilderment only increased.

Seeing me at a loss for words, she continued, “Why don’t we have a little chat here until Lorde is ready?”

She proposed this as if it were the main reason for her sudden appearance. My brain, judging the situation as a battle, revved up to high speed. My gray matter pulsed with a dull sound, tapping on my nerves. If I let my judgment be dulled now, I would lose. I was almost certain of that. At the end of my high-speed thought process, I chose to gather information first and gestured with my right hand behind my back to Liner in the rear, telling him to wait.

“In that case, let’s hear it. What is Lorde preparing for?” I asked.

“To put it simply, the Trial.”

My brain and heart beat in unison. Trial—that word only brought up painful memories. When I realized that my fifth Trial was quickly approaching, the speed of my thoughts jumped up even more.

“Why? Isn’t it a little too late to go through that?”

“It’s not too late at all. You’ve just arrived on floor fifty, so it’s the perfect time. Now, I’ve answered your questions, so it’s time for you to answer mine. Which is more important, the past or the future? I’m very curious about your answer.”

Nosfy was demanding a question-and-answer exchange. I still had more questions of my own, but I also wanted to see how things would play out. As part of my usual selfishness, I decided to answer her first.

“Hm, well, out of those two, I guess it would be the future? To be honest, I value the present the most, though,” I told her honestly. The light coming from the banner behind Nosfy looked like the light in an interrogation room. I felt like I couldn’t lie even a bit.

“I see. In other words, the past is no longer important to you? The past is less important than the present? Is the present all that matters?”

“I’m not saying it’s the *only* thing that matters, but you can’t move forward if you only look back. You said that yourself before...”

“So what you’re saying is, if there were sins in the past, you’re going to pretend you don’t know about them because you don’t remember? Do you think that because it happened a thousand years ago, the statute of limitations will be waived? That’s a very positive way of thinking. Then again, I certainly agree with you.” Her reply was probably tinged with sarcasm. She didn’t wait for me to speak before continuing. “No, there is no point regretting the past. We should look forward and do what we need to. That is the right thing, in my opinion.”

These were the same words she’d admonished Lorde with yesterday. However, it seemed like there was some deeper meaning to her words. I continued with my questions, trying not to miss the details of her change of heart.

“Now it’s my turn to ask something. Why is Lorde trying to do the Trial *now*?”

“Because that’s her selfish desire. I’m working with her as a friend, and as a result, I’m now an agent for the Thief of Wind’s Essence. Hee hee, are you surprised? I would like to know what you’re feeling right now, Master Kanami.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised. I thought if anyone would be here, it’d be Lorde. And you say you’re working on behalf of this floor’s Guardian, which means...”

“Yes, the Guardian of a floor has exactly one job, which is to make sure no one passes unless they are qualified. Hence, I will not allow the two of you to pass until you have gone through Lorde’s Trial,” she said, continuing to giggle.

I hadn’t misheard her earlier declaration of hostility. Moreover, I knew that she was in her right mind while doing this. As the tension in the room rose, I

asked something that had been on my mind for a while now. “Hey, Nosfy, were you and Lorde able to make up?”

“Yes, we made up quickly. She forgave me with a smile on her face. That’s why she let me be the target of the summoning and have this conversation with you here on her floor. Yes, thanks to you, I was able to become friends with Lorde. And yet...” Nosfy spread her hands wide and gestured to the state of floor fifty. “As you can see, Lorde is crying right now. She’s smiling, but she’s still crying.”

The endless plain. The edges were sunny, but the center was a howling storm. Nosfy said that this was Lorde. I remembered Alty’s words—she had referred to floor ten and said that it was “her.” I supposed it must be the same for the other Guardians as well.

“As her friend, I want her to smile instead of cry. I want to somehow stop this rain of tears...”

“So Lorde is crying after all?”

“Yes, she cries when she’s alone. Therefore, I’m going to push forward with my selfishness.” Nosfy continued to laugh as she repeated her wish from yesterday. “Please go see Lorde again. And cheer her up again. I will continue to wish for that until it comes true. Because that’s my lingering attachment, isn’t it?”

“The only way to cheer Lorde up is to bring Ide down here. I’ll be back soon. Can you wait until then?”

“I cannot. Even though you’ve been talking about Ide nonstop, there’s no reason to bring him here.”

“Yes, there is a reason. Lorde needs a family who will understand her.”

“That’s right. She needs a family that understands her. I think so too.”

“Then...” I raised my voice, frustrated that this conversation was going around in circles. Even though we agreed, our discussion was going nowhere.

“Doesn’t Lorde already have a family?” Nosfy asked.

This was a statement that changed the very premise of the conversation. I

didn't understand what she meant by it. Or rather, I could guess at what she meant, but I didn't want to accept it.

"She already has one? Where?"

"There." Nosfy pointed to the boy standing behind me—at Liner. "Be happy, Hellvilleshine. You are Lorde's new younger brother." Speculation turned to reality. It was then that I realized the true purpose of this roadblock. "A brother who doesn't need Lorde to be a queen. A brother who can speak frankly, without hesitation, and is fun to be around. A brother who shares the same wind attribute, who is easy to teach, and very, very adorable. Hmmm...perfect, isn't it? With Liner, there is no need for Ide. That's the answer Lorde gave me."

"*Wynd Flamberge!*" Liner slashed at Nosfy before she could say anything else. It was an all-out blow clad in the magic of the wind, but Nosfy dodged it lightly.

"Oh dear..."

I was the only one who was late to the fight. Seeing my unpreparedness, Liner shouted at me as he swung his sword again.

"Sieg! Do you still believe she's not an enemy?! Look at how she's acting! There's no doubt, she has no intention of letting us pass! Just give up!"

I wanted to listen to her desires as much as I could. I wanted to believe until the very end that she wasn't our enemy. But I heard the sound of those fragile hopes shattering.

"No, Liner. It's not that I don't want to let you through. I just want you to go back to the start a bit. Come, Master Kanami, shall we return to floor sixty-six? Until Lorde smiles, this place is closed to traffic, so we have no choice. We have to go back to the drawing board again and again and again, okay?" she said, giggling.

Her desire was to get Lorde to consistently smile. But Ide was necessary for that. And to get Ide, we had to get aboveground. However, in order to get to the surface, we first had to make Lorde smile. I could only assume that she was no longer willing to let her desire be fulfilled.

"Sieg, you don't have to defeat her! You just have to get around her! You'll fight that way, won't you?!" Liner shouted.

As their words flew back and forth, I resolved myself. “I guess I have no choice...” I mentally prepared to do battle with Nosfy, the Thief of Light’s Essence.

“So you’ll do it? But I think an unfinished Master Kanami and his inexperienced knight are insufficient when it comes to dealing with me, don’t you?” Nosfy tried a gentle smile on me as I drew my sword. She pulled out the banner of light she’d stuck down earlier and held it like a spear, thrusting the point at us. “Let me show you the difference in our levels—literally.”

With those words, her light magic exploded and swelled. At the same time, Liner and I ran. We didn’t signal to each other, but we were breathing perfectly in sync as we split left and right to try to get past the Guardian. In response, she adjusted the length of her light banner and attempted a large horizontal cleave. The range of attack was wide enough to reach us both.

“Keep running, Liner! I’ll shift the distance and get it to miss! *Dimension: Faultline!*”

I cast a spell to keep us from harm. Instead of compressing space, I stretched it. The gap created by my magic was enough to keep Nosfy’s attack from reaching us...or it should have been.

“What?!” The space that had been stretched out was simultaneously, effortlessly recompressed. The gap that had been created was quickly filled, and the misalignment was repaired. There was no gap in distance between us and the blow, and both Liner and I were hit by the tip of the flag.

I defended myself with my arms as quickly as I could, but the centrifugal force of the impact blew me away. It was an attack that could have broken me. In fact, I could see through Dimension that Liner, who had believed in my magic, had had his defensive arm dislocated.

“Damn it! Sieg, what happened?!” He immediately stood up and started questioning me.

“She used my magic? No...I used the spell twice?” I searched for the cause. The magic that had just occurred was *Dimension: Faultline*—twice. Furthermore, I was definitely the source of both of them. I consciously released it the first time, but the second time, it wasn’t intentional.

“Hee hee, is this really the time for such idle chatter?” Nosfy began charging us as I looked for an answer. Her target was Liner, her intent clearly to subdue the wounded first. I used magic to prevent that from happening.

“*Dimension: Faultline!*” I tried to compress space to shorten the distance, but... “Again?!” My magic didn’t work. The space I compressed was stretched out again in the next instant. The same magic was simultaneously triggered in the opposite direction, rendering mine useless. There was no doubt in my mind anymore. When dealing with Nosfy, my magic was being activated twice, which caused the opposite reaction as they canceled each other out.

During my failure, Nosfy and Liner made contact. Liner tried to use a gust of wind magic before he was pulled into a close-quarter encounter.

“*Sehr Wynd!* What?!” The same thing happened to him. The spell certainly went off, but it was canceled out by a duplicate.

Nosfy attacked, smiling. Liner managed to defend himself by moving his remaining arm and blocking the banner with his sword. However, Nosfy overpowered him, and he was blown back a distance, almost dislocating his remaining arm.

“Liner! Our spells are being cast twice, canceling each other out! Don’t expect me to be able to cover you! And try not to use magic!” I used my feet instead of magic to move over and help him. Along the way, I analyzed the puzzling situation. There was one thing in this space that was most suspicious. I focused all my attention on the banner of light in Nosfy’s hand. Then I followed the movement of the magic power that filled the air around it, trying to catch it down to the smallest detail. As a result, I was able to discern the true ability of *Nosfy’s Banner* or whatever she’d called it. I could tell that that flag was not a weapon, but a medium for activating mind-interference type magic. The light it generated was always casting the magic of *Discussion* like Nosfy had shown us before. We hadn’t noticed because the object wasn’t quite us. The object into which the light magic was flowing...

“It’s in our blood! Nosfy’s light magic is seeping into it!”

The target wasn’t our flesh, but our blood. No, more precisely, the magic formulas engraved in our blood. The formulas themselves were directly

involved in the *Discussion* and because they dealt with unconscious magic, that *Discussion* had been resolved unconditionally. Like tricking a baby who couldn't speak, the light magic was hijacking the formulas inside us.

"Liner! This light is taking over the magic formulas in our blood! Nosfy's magic seems to work even if the other party isn't a living creature! She lied when she told us this *Discussion* was magic without coercion! We have to wash the light away somehow!"

I understood what this inexplicable phenomenon was, but responding to it was difficult. First of all, the light itself, which was the magic's medium, could not be physically avoided. Since it filled the entire space, it could not be neutralized. And since the magic that was being activated twice wasn't our own magic, but Nosfy's, which was innately imbued with light to begin with, it was activated without any discomfort being felt. That was the crux of it. Our MP was not decreasing. Only Nosfy's magic was being used. It was not forceful, like dark magic, but very congenial. That's why we hadn't noticed it before and why it was hard to defend against.

"I don't have time to wash it off!" Liner yelled. It would clearly be impossible for him to deal with it, since he had his hands full going on the defensive.

That's why I had to do my best to rush in. When I finally reached a distance where I could cover him, Nosfy turned halfway toward me. In profile, I could see her mouth twitch, and then she muttered a spell.

"Connection."

Dimensional magic, not Light magic. Even though Nosfy had spoken the spell, it was me who cast it.

"Damn it!" Magic began swelling out of my left arm of its own accord. By the time I processed it all, the spell had already finished casting. A huge *Connection* door instantly appeared, like it had been pasted onto the ground. It was a huge gate, the likes of which had never been built before. It was white, not purple, and the density of its magic was so intense that I could tell just by looking at it that it would never break down even a tiny bit. I never in my life would've been able to make something like it. And it gaped open, a huge maw in the middle of floor fifty.

“All right, now that that’s open...” Nosfy’s movements quickened as she spoke. Her speed was so fast that I could tell that she had intentionally been holding back until now.

Naturally, the injured Liner couldn’t respond in time. The tip of the banner pole hit him in the stomach and he bent over double, having trouble breathing. Then a piece of cloth from the light banner wrapped around him like a gentle palm, and...

“Aaand...GOOOAAALLL!” With a cute shout, Nosfy handled Liner like a lacrosse ball and slammed him into the huge *Connection* door. He was sent to some other place, probably to where Lorde was preparing the Trial.

“Liner!”

“That’s one...” Nosfy smiled languidly as she turned toward me.

Shit.

I would probably be sent through that doorway next. For a moment, the option of being purposefully beaten into submission came to mind. But that was not what Liner would want. He was a friend with whom I had shared a room and meals with. I knew that much about him. Above all, it was what I’d said to him: self-sacrifice was the easy path, so don’t take it. That’s what I’d told him. As much as I was dying to go help him, that was the easy path. The best thing to do now was to bring Ide here as soon as possible, even if that meant splitting up. Once aboveground, I would have plenty of reinforcements waiting for me.

“Damn it!” I gritted my teeth and started running. I ran as fast as I could, not toward Nosfy or *Connection*, but the staircase leading to floor forty-nine.

“Hee hee, you’re starting to act just like Master Kanami from a thousand years ago. For the sake of your goal, you cut off those who are slowing you down. It is a very ‘right’ choice. Even I would do that.” Nosfy caught up with me at full speed, jumping right next to me in a single bound. Then, with her extraordinary physical strength, she waved the banner to the side.

“No! I just trust Liner! He’ll pave the way for us, even if he has to do it alone!” I replied, rebuffing the banner with my sword before turning backward and

readying myself. Nosfy's physical ability was too much. I knew it would be impossible to run and leave her behind, so I had no choice but to use my sword to fight her off. Since I knew how her Light magic worked, I had no choice but to fight mainly with my Responsiveness skill and my sword.

"Well now..." Nosfy quirked an eyebrow as we exchanged blows in melee range. She'd probably thought she'd be able to subdue me more easily. She seemed surprised at the level of my Swordplay skill, since I had been the rearguard this whole time. Lorwen's Swordplay had enough power to compensate for the difference in physical ability. However, it was not enough to create an advantage that would allow me to cut her down in one go. We clashed words and weapons as I searched for an opening to escape somehow.

"Damn it! You were hiding some annoying magic, huh, Nosfy?!"

"I wasn't really hiding anything. Dedication to other people is the foundation of Light magic, after all. I'm just sharing with you what has been gifted to me."

"Your magic is using our magic of its own accord!"

"I have been given permission to use magic after *Discussing* it with your blood. You have no right to abuse me over it."

"If you want to use my magic, you need to get my permission! You need to *Discuss* it with *me*, not my blood!"

"Then you would refuse to lend me your formulas."

"Of course! That's the normal response! What's with this 'blood' and '*Discussion*' anyway!"

"Hee hee, I'm sorry. It's the basis of peace negotiations to *Discuss* the opponents' weaknesses."

"Damn it!"

She was just being evasive. Her responses to the conversation, and the battle we were having weren't good. Nosfy, who'd given up on a head-to-head battle with my Swordplay early on, began to respond by changing the shape of her banner a thousand different ways. The basic technique was that of pole fighting, but she changed her weapon into many different things: a spear, an

axe, a naginata, a long sword, a pair of swords, a dagger, and so on.

On top of that, she treated them all as if they were her limbs. There was no doubt that she had not only a high numerical value for the skill Weapon Combat, but also a complete set of individual skills for each weapon. The difference in physical ability was huge, and on top of that, she had a thousand different weapons. We had already fought for almost five minutes, but I didn't feel like I could break her down even if we fought for an hour at this point. My strength was sapped, and I began to feel short of breath. Sweat was pouring down my forehead, and I could feel it starting to drip into my eyes.

I paused my sword briefly to catch my breath and took one large step backward. Nosfy didn't follow me and instead laughed as she stood against the stairs leading to floor forty-nine.

"I'm good at endurance games like this. Yes, I am very good at endurance." She exhaled lightly and looked completely unruffled. She wasn't completely free of fatigue, but compared to me, it was heaven and earth.

Wiping the sweat off my brow, I considered how bad the situation was. Nosfy wasn't using her magic at all, and she was going out of her way to go head-to-head with my Swordplay. In other words, she was this strong despite the fact that she wasn't fighting in her own domain. To break out of the situation, I would need to be reckless.

Speaking of recklessness, what came to mind were memories from my time on the surface. The most reckless thing I had done was the fight against Palinchron. At the end of that battle, with that foul magic, I'd...

Should I use *that* spell? That was probably the highest-level magic I could use at the moment. But it wasn't suited to combat. And to put it another way, the "cost" to cast it was also very high. If possible, I didn't want to use it with this body. Besides, I'd used it only once against Palinchron. I didn't even know if it would work again a second time. There were too many uncertainties.

If I was serious about winning, I should pour all my magical power into the cards in my hand that I could use right now. But this was only floor fifty—the middle of the Dungeon. Even if I could win, if I ran out of gas, I'd have to return to Viaysia after all. The location didn't allow me to fight my best, and I couldn't

find a way out of the current situation. Nosfy must have seen my frustration. She continued to watch me closely, even as she fanned my anxiety.

“Hee hee hee, it’s easy for me, isn’t it? Even if I don’t have to do anything here, if I wear you out, that alone will be my victory. Now, Master Kanami, I’m not sure if you can make it to the surface with that kind of fatigue, especially without Liner. Do you have enough magic power left? I’m sure you’re hungry by now too, aren’t you?”

She continued to giggle. She understood the conditions of her victory. Based on that advantage, she rebuked me.

“Please, stop this reckless behavior and return to Viaysia at once. And then accept Lorde’s Trial. It is your duty to do so. Yes, this is the duty that is imposed on those who pass through the floor of a Guardian.”

My resolve solidified at her words. I had not yet done anything reckless. This was not even in the realm of recklessness.

“And more to the point, it is also about responsibility. You must take responsibility for the past. Therefore, let us return together. Back to the real Viaysia of a thousand years ago!” she continued.

The recklessness would start here! I would do my best to defeat Nosfy and finally make it back to the surface!

“Dimension: Faultline! Dimension: Faultline! Dimension: Faultline! Dimension: Faultline!” I screamed my spell out and ran. I ran with all my strength at the same time that I poured all of my magic into my spell. I knew it would be counterbalanced, so I had to play by sheer numbers. I tried to mass-produce a route through myriad spatial distortions so that I could pass by Nosfy’s side. There was a possibility that she couldn’t handle more than one spell at a time.

“Here we go...but it’s still within range of my predictions.” When Nosfy held up her hand, all the spatial distortions were instantly repaired.

It was a response that could only have been in anticipation of this suicide attack. But that was what I’d expected. A Guardian would be able to do that much. Since I didn’t have the benefit of *Dimension: Faultline*, I was running straight toward Nosfy and immediately unleashed the main spell I had

prepared.

“Distance Mute!”

While listening to the crunching and scraping sound of my brain, I clothed my entire body in *Distance Mute*. If numbers were no match, then it was a battle of quality. Putting the maximum amount of magical power into a single spell would mean that Nosfy couldn't prepare an equivalent one. As it was, I would slip through her body and make it to the stairs to floor forty-nine.

“I know it's difficult to re-create a spell of that intensity, but I've seen this magic before. You're going to slip through, aren't you?”

Nosfy was calm in the face of my suicide attack. She gave up on offsetting the magic prematurely. However, she was not out of reach of my full-body *Distance Mute*. From her point of view, offsetting the spell was just one way to do it, but there was no need to be particular about it.

“Therefore, it is also still within my predictions. *Distance Mute*. I'll cover just my right hand in that out-of-phase dimension. Just in time too.”

Using me, Nosfy put a weaker *Distance Mute* on her hand. And with that hand, she took my arm, which was coming straight at her, and tightened her grip on it like a vise.

“Damn it! Let go!” I tried to break free but was overcome by the strength in her hands.

While she was overwhelmed by my Swordplay, it was a different matter when it came to Martial Arts. She was clearly accustomed to fighting. With a calmness that convinced me of that, she grabbed my arms and leaped so high that she reached the Dungeon ceiling. Below us was the gaping mouth of *Connection*.

“Checkmate. I won't let you reach the surface. You're never going anywhere ever again.”

“You!”

Nosfy laughed and let herself drop, still holding my arms. Together we fell into the depths of the Dungeon. We passed through this dimension and fell sixteen floors. It took us only a moment to go through *Connection*. Then the

moment of darkness passed, and soon the world changed—from the stormy Dungeon to the empty castle of a thousand years ago.

I was back where I started.

Chapter 5: Escape from the Land of the Dead

What awaited me at the end of my fall was a wide-open space. At first I thought we were going back to my room or something, but it seemed this *Connection* linked to somewhere else entirely. Or rather, since Nosfy had just announced her hostile position, the *Connection* between my room and floor fifty-seven had disappeared. It was clear that she had prepared some sort of trick ahead of time.

My options for escape had been reduced. Nosfy let go of my hand, which she'd been holding tight enough it felt like my bones were about to break. Then she waved to the green-haired woman sitting on the throne a little ways away.

"I'm back! And I brought them with me, Lorde."

It was a throne. In other words, this was the throne room in the center of the castle. Majestic thick pillars lined the stone walls, which were discolored with soot, and there were a large number of candles flickering suspiciously. There were only two doors: one was the grand door through which the queen greeted her people, and the other was the queen's own door behind the throne. There was a red carpet with bold embroidery stretching from the throne to the main door. I was on my knees atop that carpet.

The situation was worse than the worst. I'd gotten to floor fifty so quickly, but now I was right back on the reverse side of floor sixty-six.

I'm back to square one! I thought. I was still in the midst of the worst of it. My face contorted and I ground my teeth.

"Accelerating. Accelerating. Accelerating. I am an accelerating, accelerating, accelerating, spirit." The woman with green hair, who could only be Lorde, was repeating a messy incantation. No one else had magic power as uniquely vast as she did. The throne was adorned with luminous green magic. There were several small flags with a design of a bird and a sword, which might have been the coat of arms of Viaysia, hanging on the wall behind Lorde.

It was a strange spectacle. The room was completely enclosed, but there was a breeze. The wind was blowing not only the flags but also Lorde's hair. Unlike usual, Lorde had undone her green ponytail. She looked closer to the girl I'd seen in the garden on the second morning, as well as the Sovereign Queen Lorde from my dream.

She slowly raised her face to look at me. My eyes met with her emerald green ones. They were shining brilliantly, but there was a mysterious darkness to them, as if they were covered by a jet-black film. It was as though a stormy forest had been condensed into two small spheres. There was not the slightest hint of amiability or charm, but rather an overflowing solemnity. I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe.

But I also felt grief. The Lorde sitting here was extremely dangerous. It seemed like she was on the verge of a critical meltdown. If I touched her, she would break. But I couldn't find the words to say that to her.

Nosfy casually called out to Lorde from her place next to me. "Huh? That's strange, where did Liner go? I'm sure I dropped him here, but I don't see him anywhere..."

Lorde's shoulders jumped at Nosfy's words. She looked away and mumbled, "It was Reynand Vohlz. He noticed the battle happening in here and came in and took Liner away..."

"Oh, so that's what happened. I mean, it ended up being a battle..."

"He rejected me! Rejected!" Lorde's language was strange. The charm was gone not only from her appearance, but also from her language. It was such a drastic change that one might have suspected she was an impostor.

"General Reynand Vohlz? The only one who survived the wear and tear on his soul? It seems that only he can act freely even if we tamper with the timeline of this place. But how could he outwit you in just the short time I was fighting Master Kanami? I suppose he is still a fierce general of the Great War, even if he has gone bad."

"That Vohlz! He said I was crazy! He even went so far as to call me broken! He said... He said!" Lorde was still focused on herself. Her words were the same as always, but their meaning felt different from before. Her air, mannerisms, and

tone of voice—everything about them was different. Her completely unhinged language didn't match the Lorde I knew. I had a bad feeling about this, but the two of them continued talking.

"Yes, that is a terrible thing to say. I'm sorry, Lorde. I thought there was the possibility that he would disregard the rules because of the way this place works. That was my mistake," Nosfy lamented as she apologized profusely. The clichéd performance was, as always, accompanied by a sense of creepiness, but Lorde accepted it without any discomfort.

"Listen Nosfy! Vohlz betrayed me and conspired with Kanami! He was trying to take my precious vassal and brother from me! Why? Why is it that only Vohlz, who has never been kind to me, is the only one still here? He has always interfered with me, now *and* in the past! Unforgivable! Absolutely unforgivable!"

"Yes, that is really unfortunate, Lorde. I'll take care of your worries about the future. Right now, I'll take care of it." Nosfy's voice was soft but oozed cruelty.

Lorde, who had been repeating herself, shuddered at the relentlessness of her words. "You will take care of it? What...do you mean?"

"You don't need the general anymore, do you? The only four people who are really conscious in this place are you, me, your vassal, and your brother, and that's enough. Let the others be an audience. That will bring you closer to the world you want."

"You will...erase Vohlz? It is true that what he said is unforgivable, but he has been a loyal subject who served Viaysia to the end... Until he is gone..."

"It's his kindness that led to Hellvilleshine's escape. Does your world really need a general? Let's release his soul."

Lorde slowly nodded as she succumbed to the pressure of Nosfy's words.

Nosfy giggled. "That's good. You promised all of your fellow kids who fought so hard that you'd go back together and start over. It's okay. Soon I will make up for that anxiety. So go back to your normal self. Now, calm down."

"Okay..." Lorde let her anger dissipate under Nosfy's rebuttal.

Nosfy saw this, smiled with satisfaction, and then turned to leave the room. “I’m off, then. In the meantime, Lorde, please persuade Master Kanami.” She went out through the great door, leaving me and Lorde alone in the throne room.

“That is right; it is just as my friend says. First is the Trial.”

The reason I hadn’t moved this whole time wasn’t because I wanted to stay and talk to Lorde, but because I was simply under so much magical power that I couldn’t turn my back to her. Ever since I’d fallen into the throne room, Lorde had been exerting a pressure on me that befitted her position as queen.

She finally spoke to me. “You have come, my knight commander. I have been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Are you Lorde?” I had to ask this most important question first. If my assumption was wrong, then there was no reason to stay here.

“Is it strange that I am?” She tilted her head with a graceful movement.

“A little. The way you’re talking is a bit old-fashioned.” There were still traces of her in her behavior and status.

[Quinquagesimal Guardian] The Thief of Wind’s Essence

“I see... It is strange. But this is my original self.”

“Why are you like this?”

“Oh, it was the cost of a wind incantation. I have gone back to the old days.” Her charm was gone and she had become stern. Her gestures, which had been like those of a small animal, were gone, and her movements had become leisurely. Her youthfulness had faded, and the life was gone from her eyes. Anyone looking at her would think the same thing—she was old.

Lorde’s sharp eyes seemed to read that thought from my expression. She chuckled and corrected herself, pointing at her own body. “I did not grow old. This has made me young again. I was too old up until now and my speech was too broken, but this is normal. I am finally a child again.”

I didn't understand what she meant when she said she was a child again while talking in such an old-fashioned way.

"Oh, how I missed it all. Yes, I used to talk like this. But it is not enough. The life of an Essence Thief is too long, and I cannot truly say I have returned until I go back much, much farther. Yes, I must go back much, much farther..."

Lorde's expressionless eyes wandered around as she talked to no one in particular.

She looked sickly. Like a patient in the throes of a fever, she began addressing me.

"You, Kanami. When does one change from being a child to an adult?"

I wondered if this was the biggest problem she was facing at the moment. What made a child versus an adult? Above all, she seemed to want to know where she stood in it all. I was at a loss for an answer, but Lorde shook her head with a calm expression.

"It is okay. I do not expect an answer. Even I am still unsure. I can tell you one thing, though: The queen who sat here with her grandiose mannerisms was a child. She was an adult, but she was more of a child than anyone else."

She herself was saying that a thousand years ago, the Sovereign Queen Lorde had been a child.

"I miss it. I used to welcome you from my throne like this. I overcame the opposition of many of my vassals." She laughed. It seemed like she was trying to reminisce about the past, but I couldn't keep up with her at all.

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember what happened back then..."

"I want you to answer me even if you don't remember. Do you know why I welcomed you, the head of the South, into the North a thousand years ago?"

Since I couldn't remember, I could only shake my head.

"Indeed. Now I will tell you the real reason. I explained to my vassals with a bunch of nonsense I had made up, but the truth is that only you told me to stop being queen."

I could sympathize with her a bit at this point. Perhaps this was what Lorde

had wanted to say all along. I think, above all else, she wanted to tell me, having lost my memory.

“You told me that I was downright weird for talking this way, like an old person. You even told me to speak more like a child. You told me that it was fine to try to live up to the expectations of those around me, but that it didn’t suit me at all...”

And it seemed like she wanted me to say the same things again now. I could see that crazy look on her face.

“I was without a doubt the Savior of the North. But at that time, you were my savior. Of course, I could not say that out loud.” Lorde looked like an adult, squinting her eyes and reminiscing. She wasn’t a child, but an old woman trying to spend the rest of her life thinking about the past.

“You were the only one who ever understood what I never said aloud. Only you noticed my suffering and said you would save me. You told me you would make my wish come true! *You* said that! Now, fulfill the responsibility you took on then! Become my vassal and convince Liner to be my brother!”

That was Lorde’s answer. I had just told her this morning that I would help her and that I would grant her wish. But I couldn’t repeat the same words now. Of course not. Now, they would have a different meaning. If I said I would save her now, I wouldn’t bring Ide back here, but would be making Liner Lorde’s new younger brother instead. That wasn’t possible. I knew better than anyone what awaited us at the end of that lie.

“I can’t do that.”

Lorde seemed puzzled and started to tremble when she saw me quietly shaking my head. It was a natural denial for me, but not for her. “Why... Why not? Please, Kanami. Please become my vassal! The country of Viaysia cannot exist without you! It was true then, and it remains so now. I can no longer do this alone...” Unsteady as a flickering flame, she stood up from her throne and muttered a few feeble words. “Nosfy told me. She said that with your magic you could extend the life of this place. But it comes with the condition that you must remain here. So please, continue to stay here for a long time...”

That was the first I’d heard of it. I braced myself for what was coming next. It

seemed like Liner wasn't the only one who was in danger.

"Don't tell me you're going to lock me in here..."

"I want to. I am sure that is why I have been waiting for you here this whole time. Yes, I have been waiting for you for such a long time..."

The first time she said it, she sounded crazy, the second time loving. Like the previous Guardians, she reached out toward me.

"After hearing the details about the other Guardians from you, I was convinced! All of the Guardians were waiting for you! Even in death, only their souls remained! Bound to the depths of the earth, their memories were faint. Even though a thousand years had passed and they had become monsters...even then they waited for you! The one who appeared from another world to save them! So you have a duty to fulfill all of their lingering attachments. That is how I feel. So...please...I beg of you."

"You're saying it's my duty to stay here?"

"Yes, that is correct. Please stay here and maintain my peace of mind."

What had started as a selfish wish had become the duty of someone with no memory of it. Well, that was fine. It was acceptable to do that much. However, I couldn't allow Lorde to be mistaken about her own desire. That made me angry.

"You're wrong, Lorde! That's the wrong way to keep the peace! Waiting here with the four of us won't change anything for you! This is no substitute for family in the first place! The family you cherished so much was Ide in that painting, wasn't it? Not Liner! Your friends from that orphanage weren't me or Nosfy! You're only prolonging your time here by making replacements and prolonging your suffering at the same time! Don't mistake your true feelings! I'll bring you your real brother soon, so all you have to do is wait and—"

My angry rebuke was interrupted by an even angrier one.

"No! *You* are wrong, Kanami! I can no longer call Ide my brother! He has become nothing more than a being who worships me as queen! I do not need that! I do *not*! I do not need Ide or Seldora! I have a new brother and a new friend now! Ide and I were never related by blood anyway! So what is the

problem with having a new brother here?! Now I have Liner and Nosfy! And my most trusted vassal!”

She pointed at me. Lorde could only see us now. The three of us trapped in this place were all she had left of her world. It was as if the past and Ide had never existed, just the three of us.

“Once I realized that, I could not stop,” she continued. “I cannot control it. I thought that what I truly wanted was far out of reach. But I was wrong, and this morning I finally realized it. Before I knew it, I had everything I wanted! Yes, it was worth waiting a thousand years! A thousand years!” She began laughing uncontrollably, her eyes unfocused.

I looked into her eyes and understood what she was trying to say. The anger that had been building in me slowly began to dissipate.

“Therefore, I will not allow you to go to the surface! I will never see that clueless Ide again! Kanami, Nosfy, and Liner are enough! Not just enough, but perfect!” She continued to laugh hysterically. Her eyes only saw what they wanted to see. I already knew that. She’d been broken a long time ago. It was no wonder, when I thought about it. I thought back to when I first met her. How could a girl who had lived a thousand years speak with such composure? How could she smile like a normal girl?

“I don’t care about the past anymore! There is plenty of time to weave a new one! The peace of Viaysia will last forever! Because Nosfy and I worked too hard! Yes, a reward! I remembered something! I promised someone a reward! I had promised to make peace in the North forever! I have to fulfill that promise too! If I can manage both of these things, my lingering attachment will naturally disappear! Yes, I will disappear! I will disappear!”

The broken Lorde laughed, believing in that absolutely incorrect lingering attachment. She was already so battered that she couldn’t hold herself together without believing in that fake one. My outlook had been naive. Mr. Reynand had told me that Lorde was crazy during the first few hundred years. There was no way she *wasn’t* broken. That’s why he’d asked me to save her. My imagination hadn’t been enough. As the souls of the inhabitants of this place were worn away, automatically re-creating what had happened a thousand

years ago, Lorde was left all alone. She kept talking about her lingering attachment even though she knew that no one, not even her own family, would ever return.

A thousand years passed like that. Was I really trying to understand how Lorde felt after spending all that time alone? Should I try to care even a little about the heart of a girl who realized that she could never fulfill her lingering attachment and was frightened that she might not be able to disappear forever? I'd thought that since she was the Sovereign Queen Lorde, she would be fine. Even then I had suspected that there was something more to the situation.

I'd been *really* naive. As soon as I woke up, I should have headed for the surface at any cost. If necessary, I should have pushed on, even if I had to steal food here in Viaysia. I should have brought Ide back with me right away. No, I should have grabbed Lorde by the collar and brought her to the surface. Because even when I met Mr. Reynand, it had long been too late.

"No..." I denied it to myself, even as regret and despair filled my body. I could not give up. I never wanted to end up like that again. I poured my strength back into the pit of my stomach and tried to correct Lorde's path, even if just a little.

Her response was immediate and tinged with insanity. "No!!! It will not be any different! It will not! After all, I myself am the one who declared what my lingering attachment was! What difference does it make?!"

"It does make a difference!"

"Kanami, you said you would help me! Back then *and* this morning! You said you would save me! Me!!!"

Perhaps it was because the argument had turned into a battle of emotions, but Lorde began hyperventilating. It was like she was inhaling and exhaling with the same breath. Her face contorted as she breathed in and out. Unable to bear the suffocation, she reached out for the price of an incantation.

"Haaa haaa haaa! *Accelerating, I am Accelerating, Accelerating, Accelerating, Accelerating, Accelerating!*" She was incanting to make herself feel better. It was an incantation that lightened the heart, but the cost was cutting, and cutting, and cutting away at the caster. The more she used it, the more

distorted and deranged it was becoming, with the words taking on a whole new meaning. The simple incantation was actually channeling huge amounts of emotions.

“Accelerating. Accelerating. Accelerating. I am an accelerating spirit. Overflowing, chasing, a running spirit. Filled with death, yet faster, a running spirit. Lose my dreams, become the sky, a running spirit.”

The drug-addict-like expression on her face revealed her dependence on the incantation. It was too much to look at her. She was neither cheerful nor solemn, just chaotic.



“Lorde! Stop your incantation! You’re making it impossible to speak calmly!”

“Haaah haaah... What are you talking about? I am calm...”

Her eyes, peeking out from under her messy green hair, were filled with reason. Yes, she was broken in many ways, but I could still hold a conversation with her, perhaps because of her incantation. I had to think. I had to think of an experience I’d had some time ago. It was always something more than a battle that defeated a Guardian. If I could find that, then it wasn’t too late.

“I understand, you are calm. So I want you to listen to one of my experiences. It’s about a path I followed—the path you’re on now.”

“My path? What do you mean?”

“I once spent time with another girl and thought of her as my little sister. It’s a story about that time.”

That seemed to be a surprise to Lorde. Her wide eyes asked me to continue my story, though she didn’t say a word.

“Once, when I was defeated by the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, my memory and self became blurry even to me, and I was trapped in a make-believe happiness with a sister who was not Hitaki. But such a fake world was soon destroyed. Even if you find happiness in a false world, you will never be satisfied with it! I know that very well! Even if you could escape to a world where no one expects anything from you, your past—where things *were* expected of you—will never go away! You will scream silently from the bottom of your heart, you will become bitter and unbearable, and in the end you won’t exist anymore!” I recalled my life in Laoravia and openly told Lorde about my regrets.

“I cannot do that! I cannot do that, and that is why I am here now!”

“Even if you adopt Liner as a brother who expects nothing of you, that doesn’t change the fact that Ide, a brother who did expect things of you, exists! That truth is stuck in the corner of your mind, and you’ll never get rid of it! A replacement is still just a replacement!”

“You... You are always saying things that seem right!”

But it wasn’t getting through to her. This was only my experience. And it was

about my relative, someone Lorde had no relation to.

“Everything you are saying is a grown-up theory! If I could work according to that theory, I would not have been struggling from the very start! Now I am a child, not an adult, so even if I know what I am doing, I cannot help it! I make mistakes even when I know they are wrong!”

Lorde finally abandoned the debate and simply started complaining. It was the same as the end of the conversation between her and Nosfy yesterday. It was no good saying the right thing. I knew that, but I’d done it anyway.

“I have decided to be a child! I will start my childhood all over again with Nosfy! She said she would be a child again with me!”

“Even if you could start over, it wouldn’t be the same childhood you originally had!” I said.

Lorde’s shoulders began to shake at my words. Then she grew teary-eyed and began to moan loudly. She had almost started crying when presented with a sound argument. Her appearance and tone of voice were so dignified that I had been mistaken at the start, but now she was more childlike than ever.

“Why, then?! Why am I not good enough?! You granted Lorwen’s wish, did you not? And Nosfy’s! Do not discriminate! Discrimination is bad! I cry really easily! I cry all the time when no one is around!”

Tears were a form of pressure all on their own. Once she started crying, it would be impossible to have a rational conversation. And if I continued to press her with more questions and answers, she would end up crying even more.

“Damn it...” I was at a loss for words. I knew that I had to prepare something other than speeches for Lorde, but right now all I had were the “right words.” I gave up on trying to reason with her. “I understand. That’s your answer. I’m sorry, Lorde. It’s my fault for not making it in time,” I apologized.

Hearing that, Lorde regained her offensive spirit, wiped her moist eyes, and then laughed. “What are you saying? You did not make it in time? But you did! You made it down here before this place collapsed. I am grateful to you, Kanami.”

“But I didn’t make it in time to save you. Since I don’t remember anything, I

couldn't find the words to help you. I'm sorry for forgetting my past self. Really, I'm sorry."

This was no longer a conversation. Lorde kept begging me and I kept apologizing. We were running at perfect parallels to each other. Having given up trying to convince her, I moved on to asking her about something else that had been bothering me.

"Hey, Lorde, did Nosfy propose this plan?"

"No, Kanami. I invited her."

"I see." I was a little tempted to blame Nosfy even if it wasn't her fault. But if Nosfy hadn't been here, Lorde would still have ended up in this situation in the not-too-distant future.

"Well, it seems this is the end of the story. Now give up, fight me, and lose. Life here is not so bad, I assure you. Childhood is wonderful for everyone. The four of us will happily live together forever."

"I refuse to do that. I can't live like a child now. Besides, I have to go. My sister and friends are waiting for me aboveground."

"If that is how you are going to be, then..."

Our conversation was over. Lorde's magic power began swelling outward. Since I couldn't persuade her, I had no choice but to make a break for the surface. I put all my strength into my pivotal foot to dash out the door that Nosfy had left through. But at the same time, the magic to start the war was unleashed.

"Sehr Wynd!"

It was a familiar intermediate Wind spell, constructed in a manner I was familiar with. However, the end result was completely different from what I was used to. The *Sehr Wynd* had absorbed a great deal of Lorde's magic before being released, so it wasn't a gust of wind, but rather a full blast. It was so powerful that it filled the throne room and burst like an overfilled balloon.

The wind buffeted my entire body. Pieces of the destroyed castle went flying with that blast of air. Even as I lost my stance, I traced the trajectory of all the

debris flying through the air with *Dimension* and got rid of what was coming toward me with a single slice of my sword.

Only two people remained in the throne room: me, with my sword at the ready, and Lorde, with green particles spewing from her back. The chamber, which had just lost its ceiling and walls, was exposed to the open air and being drenched by the pouring rain. The weather in Viaysia, which had remained unchanged for so long, had turned into a major storm.

Like floor fifty, the wind was howling outside and rain was pouring down in sheets. Raindrops dripped from the end of my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword, which I had pointed straight at Lorde. I began backing away to make my escape.

“I’m not giving up, and I’m not going to lose. I’m leaving for your sake. Of course, I’ll take Liner with me.”

“It is pointless; you will never escape. Look around you. You will not find any more food for your journey.”

Lorde spread her hands and wings wide. The throne room was located at the top of the castle, and now that it had lost its top, I could easily see all the way down to the castle town. I turned *Dimension* slightly outward and glanced at the city of Viaysia.

“The city looks...different?” I couldn’t be sure because the storm had disrupted my dimensional magic, but it wasn’t the Viaysia I knew. The city spread out under the castle was similar, but not identical.

The first and most important difference was the size. The area was huge, incomparable to anything else. I couldn’t see the edge of that unique world. It was no longer a country, but a group of countries—a vastness that could better be called an empire. It was still adorned with an abundance of vegetation, but the colors were different. Instead of green, there was a dark brown that was scattered everywhere. It was as if it had been ravaged by the flames of war.

No... The fire was still smoldering. The peaceful country of Viaysia was gone. Perhaps what was here now were countries that had expanded their lands by war and remained at war.

“This is what it truly looks like,” Lorde announced. “This is our truth. Count your sins with me, Kanami. Even if it takes thousands of years.”

I knew intuitively that this was the North that Lorde and I had abandoned a thousand years ago. At that moment, I felt like something mysterious was holding my ankle. As raindrops pelted my cheeks and drenched my body, I understood. The biggest obstacle to reaching the surface was the past, and that was the Trial that Lorde had prepared for me.

I clenched my fists as I looked at her, her hands and wings outstretched, her breathing disordered and uncoordinated. I also put strength into my unmoving legs. The situation had changed suddenly, but my resolve hadn't. Nothing else had. I would reach the surface on this battleground. I would not make any mistakes. I would overcome the past and the Dungeon as quickly as possible and return to the surface, where my friends were waiting for me. I would do that in order to save the Thief of Wind's Essence, who was suffering right in front of me.

To the events of a thousand years ago, I made a vow that I would never stand still, and ran off.

Afterword

I managed to get it out. This is the ninth volume of *Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Deepest Level*. Although it might have become *Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Surface*, this is definitely the ninth volume of *Dungeon Dive: Aim for the Deepest Level*.

As for the contents of this volume, unlike the usual clickbaity title, I think it was very much about the Dungeon. However, because of that, I think there were many gloomy scenes in the Dungeon, so I would like to make the next volume a bright one that blows away all that dimness. How will the hero, Kanami, overcome the complicated Essence Thieves, who are both heroines and bosses? What will his expression be when he meets the genuine heroines waiting for him on the surface? Stay tuned to find out.

And finally, thank-you time! I'm so thankful, I want to shout it every time! First of all, thanks to the lovely Nosfy on the cover. I honestly thought it was going to be Lorde at the end of volume 8, but it turned out to be Nosfy based on the story developments. I would also like to thank all the people involved in this book, including those who picked it up.

Thank you all so, so much. This ninth volume is thanks to all of you! See you soon!



DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level
9

By Tarisa Warinai Illustrated by Saki Ukai



[SEXAGESIMAL GUARDIAN]

Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence

"IT'S SOMETHING I'VE
THOUGHT ABOUT A LOT."

Aikawa Kanami

"WHAT ARE YOU THINKING,
DOING THIS?!"



IN HER
NATURAL
STATE, LORDE
LOOKED LIKE
THE YOUNG
PRINCESS OF
A POWERFUL
COUNTRY.

[QUINQUAGESIMAL GUARDIAN]

Lorde Titee, the Thief of Wind's Essence

Bonus Short Stories

Party Members Return to the Boat After Being Defeated by Palinchron

The defeated members of the party were healing their wounds on the deck of the *Living Legend*, which was anchored off the eastern coast of Varences. Worst off were Reaper and Ms. Sera, who'd experienced the brunt of the World Restoration Array. Lady Lastiara had them lying with their heads resting on her knees as she continuously applied healing magic to them. I couldn't see their expressions, but Ms. Lastiara was mumbling something to herself as she cast the spell. She had been like that ever since she'd left Kanami. No, more accurately, she'd been like that since receiving the magic of the Thief of Wood's Essence.

I—Snow Walker—was looking down on the three of them from the viewing platform atop the ship's main mast. *We've lost*, I thought.

Palinchron Regacy had been unsettled by the visit from the Thief of Wood's Essence and the apostle. There was no doubt that had been an unexpected development. Then, six more people had launched a surprise attack. But now half our fighting force had been neutralized and forced to return to the ship—a truly unfortunate result for the battle. The only two people left on the battlefield now were Kanami and Maria. With these injuries, we might not even be able to recover Ms. Dia from the apostle. There was no other way to describe our defeat than as a total loss. And on top of that, the two irregulars, the Thief of Wood's Essence and the apostle, had fled from the fort. I was sure that Palinchron would be fully prepared to face Kanami and Maria. Would the two of them alone be enough to break through?

I was quite worried, to be honest. I had realized something the first time I fought Palinchron: he may have been weak, but he was the kind of man who would never lose an important battle. From his usual demeanor I got the sense

that he was the kind of guy who was always a jerk but would invariably come out ahead if he wanted to. His projected persona was a key part of his preparations for important fights like this one.

“We really let our guard down...” The seven of us had assembled with pride. With this group, we could defeat anyone. In the back of my mind I’d even been thinking, naively, that I might not have a chance to participate. I was full of regrets, but I shook my head to clear my thoughts, clenched my fists, and focused on what I could do at the moment, which was stay vigilant and keep watch.

When we parted, Kanami had asked me to protect everyone on the ship. I would absolutely do that. However, there was one more thing that was stuck in the corner of my mind that I couldn’t get rid of. He’d told me that out of all of us, I was the most qualified to lead. And I think he had been planning to say that if he didn’t come back, I was to take over.

I began clenching my jaw too. There was no more room for naivete or carelessness. Kanami, the hero, was no longer on this ship. And the other hero, Lady Lastiara... I listened closely to try to catch what she was saying.

“It wasn’t me. Of course I wasn’t enough. The only one who could keep up with him was Mar-Mar. Because I’m not Tiara...” Lady Lastiara’s usually stalwart heart was wavering. It wasn’t just the defeat; there was something more important that seemed to be eating away at her. I could understand why Kanami had sent me back to the ship. I really was the only one who could move properly at the moment.

“I will protect everyone...” I whispered as I turned my gaze from the deck to the mainland. The continent trembled. The sky was distorted and dark clouds were spreading overhead. A sinister black magic was gushing from the continent, accompanied by a diffusion of black light.

Just then, a pillar of bright-red flame pierced the heavens. It burned through cloud after cloud, writhing and spreading as if to engulf the planet. The mainland looked like the end of the world. It was clearly visible, even from the eastern coast where the ship was located. I wondered if Kanami and Maria, who were probably at the center of the mainland, would be okay. My shoulders

trembled with unbearable anxiety.

“Huh? Mar-Mar?” There was a familiar girl lying down near a bush next to the cliff where the ship was anchored. She hadn’t been there a moment ago when I’d looked there. “Lady Lastiara! Maria is here! There, look!” I shouted down to my companions immediately. But there was no reply from the deck. All I could hear was more of the muttering I had heard earlier.

“Yes, I... I’m still... I should have given it up back then...”

I jumped down from the observation platform and took Lady Lastiara by the shoulders. With the message from Kanami in my heart, I threw away all politeness as I shook her. “Stay with me, Lastiara!”

“Huh? Oh...I’m sorry, Snow...” she said, finally raising her head to look at me. But there was no life in her eyes. All of the brilliance she had shown at the Brawl was gone.

“I’m going to go get Mar-Mar. Please wait here.” I didn’t wait for a reply.

“Okay...”

I leaped from the deck onto the ground and went over to the bushes where Mar-Mar was lying. I spread a bit of my magic out and checked for traps. I was checking carefully, and in the middle of it I could sense some magic power disappearing. Quickly, I turned to look for it, but there were only faint particles remaining. I couldn’t tell for sure, but it looked like it was Dimension magic. Had Maria been sent here via *Connection*? Had Kanami sent her? My questions were endless, but I gently took Maria in my arms as I spoke to her.

“Mar-Mar, are you okay? Are you awake?” From the look of it, she didn’t have many external injuries, though it seemed like she had used up an unnaturally large amount of magic power. The pillar of flame we’d seen earlier was most likely her magic, then.

“Ohhhh, I’m... Ms. Snow?” she answered, but she didn’t move her body a bit, not even a twitch. It seemed she was running out of physical strength as well as magic power.

“I’m sorry for what you went through, Mar-Mar. Is Kanami...”

“He’s still there fighting...alone...”

It was the answer I had kind of expected but hadn’t wanted to hear. His allies had been dwindling, and now...

“He’s facing Palinchron alone?” He was still fighting. I felt my anxiety swell as I confirmed what Maria had said. I knew Kanami was strong. I knew that better than anyone. But I also knew that Palinchron couldn’t be measured by concepts of “strong” and “weak.”

“Yes, alone. If I don’t go back and help, he’ll...”

I realized this was no time to dwell on my own anxieties as I watched Maria try to crawl back to the battlefield. I began to understand what Kanami had meant when he’d told me I was the most suited to be the leader.

“Go to sleep, Mar-Mar. It’s dangerous to go by yourself. We’ll go together as soon as everyone recovers.”

I might have been a coward, but I knew that if any one of us went to help Kanami, we would be doing exactly what Palinchron wanted us to do. I grabbed Maria and carried her to the ship. We couldn’t help Kanami now.

“Damn it!” I knew that staying was the rational choice, but I didn’t like it. I wanted someone to save Kanami. It didn’t matter who, even if it was an enemy. I just wanted someone.

As I wished that, I felt a powerful pillar of wind rush up to the heavens over the continent beyond my line of sight.

Gardening with Lorde and Liner

After the battle with Palinchron Legacy came to an end, I, Liner Hellvilleshine, was consumed by the World Restoration Array and ended up deep in the Dungeon on the reverse side of floor sixty-six. Waiting there was the thousand-year-old country of Viaysia and its ruler, Lorde, the Thief of Wind’s Essence.

When I landed here, I knew immediately that it was a deeply unusual and delusional place. Sieg, who’d fallen down with me, was of the same opinion, and he asked me to keep an eye on Lorde. That was how I ended up working

alongside her as she did her job as a gardener. It was my role to keep her distracted so that she wouldn't notice Sieg making his plans to return to the surface.

I didn't really get any sense of accomplishment from being a gardener, but since I was also a decoy, I felt a particular energy filling me up. I greeted Lorde with a smile, and she quickly jabbed her pointer finger at me.

"Okay, Liner, at work you have to call me 'boss'! *Boss*, okay? Yes, I am your boss! I'm your boss starting today!" The fact that she repeated it four times showed that it was her dream to be called that. However, I had already experienced this crap before. Just the other day, when I'd asked her to teach me wind magic, she'd repeated the word "master" four times.

"No, Lorde. I already called you 'master' during magic training. Shouldn't that cover me here too?"

"Hmmm...hmmmm, it's hard to abandon being called 'master'... But today I'm the boss! I might as well try out both, right?!"

I sighed. "Fine. When you're teaching me magic, you're 'master,' and at work, you're 'boss,'" I agreed. I was used to this level of selfishness from my sister in the Hellvilleshine family. That was why...

"And when it comes to daily life, I'm your sister!"

"Absolutely not."

"Nooo!"

I bluntly refused to call her my sister. I did have an instinctive desire to fulfill her request, especially when her cheeks puffed out with frustration. But I knew it would be wrong. We were talking like friends now, but deep down we didn't trust each other. Soon I'd have to be concentrating on my part of the surveillance work. I would do my best to be a gardener and keep Lorde's attention away from Sieg.

"Okay, boss, let's do our work. Please let me use your tools."

We got to work quickly. The tools for trimming the branches had already been prepared, and we'd greeted the homeowner whose garden we were to be

working on. She was watching us from a distance with a smile on her face. She seemed to want to watch Lorde at work.

“Liner, have you done yard work before?”

“A little bit, on the surface. I’m pretty sure I can do the basics well enough. Let me know if I’m doing something wrong, though.” I deftly trimmed the trees using the selection of shears she had. With my previous experience, I was able to remove the obvious obstacles in the garden without destroying any of the original features.

Lorde saw what I was doing and seemed surprised. “Huh? Huh?! Why...you’re so good at this, Liner.”

“I usually use a sword, so I’m pretty good with blades.” I was well-known for my dexterity. I could handle just about anything, though it was all probably second-rate. I wasn’t like Sieg, who had the same dexterity but was the very best at everything. “Hey, don’t waste your breath. Let’s get on with it. I’m the kind of guy who puts his whole heart and soul into his work.”

“Oh, okay. I got that kind of vibe from you. But right now you’re...” Lorde began to work hurriedly as well. However, her movements were rough. It wasn’t that she was clumsy, but her skill level was unusually low when compared to her magic. She was moving her hands like a novice, though the work itself was adequate, probably due to her years of experience. In short, her work as a gardener was skewed.

As I kept a watchful eye on her, wondering if there might be a clue to her strategy, the owner of the house, who was watching from afar, called out to me.

“You’re pretty good, aren’t you, newbie?”

“Oh...no, not really. But regardless, do you have any other issues with your house? I’ll see to them while I’m here.” From my experience on the surface, I had confidence in myself as a jack-of-all-trades. I could restore furniture and inspect the magic leylines...for the most part.

“No, you can just focus on the garden. Actually, there is one thing I would like you to do. If you could, prune all of the tall trees there. I was thinking of having

them dealt with next month, but if you can manage it, I would be very appreciative.”

“Sure, I can handle that.” It was outside of today’s scope of work, but I got right to it. I stood on the wooden step ladder and extended my shears for branches that would be out of reach for a regular person. I clipped the branches and it seemed like the homeowner was just about to praise me.

“*Wynd!*” Lorde’s magic kicked up a gust. It was basic magic but powerful and sharp—a wind that made it clear she was worthy of being the Thief of Wind’s Essence. It swept through the garden, tearing up all manner of greenery. It was magical pruning at a speed and perfection that could never be duplicated by human shears. Lorde stood at the foot of the step ladder, beaming with joy, her chest heaving. “Phew! That’s what I can do!”

“Yeah, that’s amazing...but then why do you have these tools?” I looked at the shears in my hand, fed up with her childish use of magic.

The homeowner was watching us and smiling, as if she’d been waiting for this to happen. “It’s no use, newbie. If you do better than Her Majesty, she’ll just end up sulking,” she told me, laughing.

“I’m not sulking! I’m just trying to show him how good I am! I’m! Not! Sulking!” Lorde made excuses like a child. The homeowner looked at me warmly, and I began cleaning up. After Lorde’s magic pruning, there was nothing left to do here.

“Okay, Liner, we’re done! Let’s go to the next one! Also, the magic ban is lifted today! Let’s see some magic to go along with the work!”

“If Wind magic can be helpful, then I’m all for it.” I wondered if it was beneficial to the job. I was getting paid to do one thing, and in the middle of it I was doing something else.

“Don’t worry about it, newbie. There isn’t a single person in this town who would reject something Her Majesty proposed,” the homeowner said, reassuringly.

“Huh. But someone should stop her, right? Otherwise, she’ll just keep going on and on, won’t she?”

“I’m sorry, but Lorde is our queen...” The woman’s response was so succinct that it felt warped. “Please take care of her. If anyone can stop her, it’s you, the only one who’s not from the North.” She looked at me with pleading eyes.

Stop her. It felt like those words could mean so many things.

“Yes, if she’s doing something stupid, I’ll stop her. It’s my duty.”

That was how my first job as a gardener ended.

On the way to the next job, Lorde grew angry with me. “After all, you’re my assistant today, Liner! If I think about it, it’s cheeky for a newbie to be using the shears on his first day! You should watch and learn from me right now! And then praise me!”

“Okay, okay. I won’t intrude anymore. I’ll just be your assistant.”

I looked behind me as I spoke. There stood the homeowner, watching Lorde’s fussing. For some reason, the woman’s eyes looked very sad. It would be a little while before I learned the meaning of that gaze and the truth of the darkness behind it.

The Otherworld Heroines' Otherworld Massages, Part 5

"Hee hee hee! Now it's my turn to massage you!" Reaper said as she climbed on top of me while I lay face down in the bed.

Her soft thighs touched me, and our body temperatures mixed together. But my pulse was normal. I didn't feel dizzy or nauseous, and my mental state showed no sign of going haywire. I was in control. I had matured enough to be able to describe myself like that. After Maria's, Snow's, and Lastiara's massages, my spirit had been completely broken. Just hearing the word "massage" had made me squeal like a little girl. However, in order to overcome the trauma, I had to go through the pain of repeating it. At the end of the massage was enlightenment.

"Bring it on, Reaper. Nothing can surprise me anymore."

"Huh?! My big bro, who was just trembling like a little puppy, has suddenly— But I won't lose! I give the most interesting massages!"

"No, I don't want an 'interesting' massage. Then again, I suppose you can do whatever you want. You look a lot gentler compared to everyone else."

"You're... You're underestimating me! Me! Once a feared death goddess! You're tarnishing my good name?! *Dark!*"

A spell went off behind me, and my head was enveloped in darkness.

"I want to say 'don't just use your magic because you can,' but that paltry spell doesn't faze me. My heart rate is still normal, and I'm in the same mental state as I was at teatime this afternoon."

"Okay, I'm gonna start! I didn't know you'd conquered that primordial darkness that all people fear. I mean, really, what exactly did you go through? I really haven't made your heart beat faster at all? I'm getting worried..."

"Don't suddenly bring all that up! It makes me sad to think about."

"Hmmm, okay! Well, I've been preparing a lot of things since first hearing about the massages, so you're gonna be getting all of them! First, I'm going to counteract *Dimension*, because it's important that I be invisible!"

“Okay, okay. I can just stop using *Dimension* myself.”

“Now, the first one! Yell, big bro!” I felt a slight pain in my back. Then, a pulsing pain spread down my spine. The sharp, thin object that pierced my clothes was shrouded in darkness, so I couldn’t see what it was, but I had a general idea.

“Ah, acupuncture. You brought something pretty good, huh?”

“Why are you being so normal about it?! It’s needles! Needles! It’s a massage, but they’re needles! There’s a lot more to it than that! Shouldn’t you be screaming? Or saying ‘ow!’ at least?!”

“No, acupuncture isn’t that rare in my world...”

“Seriously?! I thought acupuncture massage was something only I knew about, not something that was actually possible, but I guess I was wrong...”
Reaper had gained a connection with all of the people in the country of Laoravia and absorbed their experiences. This acupuncture needle technique seemed to be information she had obtained at that time.

“Well, fine, number two, then! Next I’m gonna light a fire! So, I’m going to ask you to take off your top for a moment, big bro.”

“Oh, sure, that’s fine. I’m not that embarrassed if it’s you, Reaper.”

“All right! Do it! Then I’ll light the fire.”

I deftly took off my shirt while lying down, exposing my skin to the girl. It might’ve been a little easier for me compared to my time with Maria since I was used to it at this point.

Heat spread along my back. “First acupuncture, now moxibustion? Maria already did this.”

“What? Damn, she beat me to it. Then I’ll ignite it with all my might!”
Undaunted, Reaper started to ad-lib, accelerating the heat. However, I was not the kind of person to make a fuss over that level of warmth. Actually, it was just the right amount.

“Aaah, it feels good.”

“No way! This is, like, super hot!”

“Really, you are quite sensible. Truly...”

Compared to Maria’s firepower, it genuinely was heavenly. Perhaps because Reaper had connected with so many people, she had both the sensitivity and common sense of the average person. That’s probably what had led to this straightforward massage.

“Fine! Number three! This one should definitely get a reaction!”

Something sticky, cold, and slimy spread across my back. I raised my eyebrows a little at first but quickly decided that there wasn’t a problem. In any case, it wasn’t causing me any damage, and that was good enough. After being burned at the stake, subjected to electrical currents, and experiencing internal destruction through vibration and liquid manipulation, I could only call this a healing experience.

“What?! You’re not surprised?!”

“Is this oil? No, some kind of plant mucus?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah...it’s called an oil massage. I mixed it with healing herbs and stuff.”

“Right. I see...”

It was so sensible that I agreed with her twice. Even though my eyes had been purified by Dia’s massage, I could feel that more tears were ready to come out. Dia’s shoulder rub was nice, but Reaper’s massage was even better. I mean, the mental relief was unbelievable. First of all, because it was Reaper, her massage—the most risk-free one on the ship—was naturally the best.

“Ugh! Why are you so calm?! I thought I was going to surprise you!”

“Ha! Not even a bit, Reaper. You’re not good enough to surprise me.”

“Damn it! Then I’m going to have to use...force!” Clearly dissatisfied with my composure, she brought her oiled hands up to my sides and began to tickle me.

“Hey! Reaper! That’s not a massage!”

“Hee hee, you didn’t have the reaction I wanted, big bro! Take it! Laugh! Be surprised!”

“Ha ha! Seriously, stop it! Ha ha ha!” I wiggled around on my stomach in the face of her adorable tantrum. I tried to get her off my back, but she laughed, dodged, and continued to tickle me.

“Ha ha ha!”

“Hee hee hee!”

Our laughing voices echoed through the room. It was a time of relaxation, healing, and deep enjoyment, even though it was a massage, which was usually a time of fear. It was both proof of and a reward for my passing the trial of massages. I was massaged by Reaper enough that day to feel refreshed in mind and body—but little did I know, in the midst of being healed, that a follow-up massage by the rest of the group, who had been watching the whole thing, would strike the next day!

Let's Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 9

Just the other day, I had expressed my determination to become stronger in front of the girl of my dreams, Ms. Snow. The Elt-Order was the most suitable system for proving my growth. Dueling accumulated experience from actual battles, and if you won, you could get prestige along with money. Above all, it did not contradict my goal of returning to my original world. I began to duel more aggressively than ever before. In return, I felt that I spent less time as Lady Karamia's butler.

Today, I finished one more duel and began my customary strategy meeting at one end of the academy's cafeteria.

"Liner, thanks again for observing today. You've always been very helpful."

"It's the least I can do for you."

"Let's plan the next duel while we eat. Even if I don't win, I want to get at least one hit on El next time."

"Sounds good. I don't mind, but I do have a question..."

"What's the matter?"

"Why is Lord Siddark here with us when you just had a duel with him?" My friend, Liner, while sipping his soup, looked at Elmirahd Siddark, who was sitting with us, and raised his eyebrows.

El shrugged gracefully and replied on my behalf. "The answer's simple, Mr. Hellvilleshine. I'm here because we recently became friends and rivals in love."

El and I exchanged glances, nodded to each other, clinked our cups together, and praised each other's good work to prove to Liner that we really were friends.

But Liner was undeterred by this and continued to speak up as a man of common sense. "Rivals in love? Is that how it is?"

"Unlike the rabble of the aristocracy, Kanami and I have a pure rivalry. We are competing with each other to win the love of Ms. Snow," El replied.

“Ha ha ha, that sounds very fishy. Even if I believed it, it’s still strange that you’re here. We’re trying our best to defeat you, but you’re listening in on our planning. Are you both aware that you’re crazy?”

“You’re more sarcastic than I expected, Hellvilleshine. I don’t dislike it.” El seemed to like Liner for some reason. It validated my choice to confess early on that I had been the cause of all this so that there were no unnecessary fights between the would-be friends.

“Liner, I asked El to be here. I want his advice going forward.”

“Oh, you invited him? You’re asking your own dueling opponent for advice on how to defeat him? Do you realize how pathetic that is?”

“I know. But I’ll do anything to become stronger, no matter how shameful. I think what I have to do now is to seek strength by any means necessary.”

My reply left Liner speechless. As an aristocrat, it was hard for him to accept, but as an individual, he understood.

“I would expect nothing less of you, friend. That’s not easy to do here at Eltraliew Academy, you know. Basically, there are a lot of really vain people here,” El replied.

“No, Lord Siddark. You yourself have come here so brazenly after being asked. Do you know the subtle intricacies of the factions here?” Liner looked around us with his eyes downcast. I had a lot of enemies right now because of my status as a scholarship student and the incident involving Lady Karamia’s alleged lover. Even now, students who didn’t like me were staring at us from a distance.

“I understand, and that’s why I’m here. I hope the name of the Siddark family will be of some help to you.” Amid all the attention, El sipped his tea proudly. Apparently, he was making a statement that the Siddark family was on friendly terms with us. Thanks to him, the bar had been raised for those who would try to lay their hands on me.

“Surprising, Lord Siddark. I didn’t think you were the kind of person who would do such things.”

“It’s true, I’m not. However, I’ve decided that my interactions with the two of you are useful. I want to add you to my network for the future.” He expressed

his calculated goodwill clearly.

Liner seemed convinced and merely replied quietly, “Then I won’t say anything more.”

El nodded in satisfaction and continued. “Well, now that you, the surprisingly cocky youngest brother of the Hellvilleshine family, are convinced, let’s begin the strategy meeting. Yes, let’s plan to make Kanami a hero!”

El liked to use the word “hero.” Thinking back, he might have liked me because I’d boldly declared “I will become a hero” when I’d confessed my feelings to Ms. Snow. El was looking for a friend who wanted to be a hero with him.

“First of all, let me be clear: at this stage, the probability of Kanami’s victory over me is zero. Even if you use magic tools, it won’t make a difference. I believe that you are now in the stage of developing your basic abilities and accumulating experience in actual battles. For that purpose, you should continue to duel with me. It is also good for you to find out my habits, since I’m your immediate target.” El glanced over at me as he said this. His eyes were filled with the hope that one day I would be able to stand next to him as an equal.

Liner followed suit and began offering his thoughts. “I have no objection. No matter how much power one has, the experience of those who use it is important. Especially for you, having only been at the academy for a short period of time. It seems you’re still getting used to the feeling of magic.”

“That may be true but...” El turned to me. “Why are you fighting mainly with magic and magic tools, Kanami?”

“Because it’s his greatest strength, and he’s one of the best at it in the Academy,” Liner answered.

“I think that talent hides Kanami’s true nature. People around me, including you, treat him like an alchemist or a magical engineer, but for me, it’s more...”

This was how El discussed the best way to beat himself, but our conversation was interrupted.

“Mr. Kanami! Is it true you want to duel Elmirahd Siddark?!” a loud voice

echoed through the cafeteria. This out-of-the-ordinary shout was heard by all, and everyone's eyes turned toward the interloper.

El replied calmly, "That is true, Lady Karamia."

She ground her teeth at his response and swore a little but quickly regained her composure, walked over to us, and began questioning me. "That's not what you promised, Mr. Kanami. I can't forgive you for fighting a duel without my permission, nor can I forgive you for having *him* here right now. Are you planning to join his faction?"

I was working as Lady Karamia's butler, so I wasn't sure if it was a good idea for me to be having dinner with El. "Absolutely not, Lady Karamia. El is definitely my enemy. But at the same time, he's my friend, and that's why I'm asking him for advice," I explained.

El seemed happy with my choice of words.

"Phew, so he really is your enemy." Karamia's eyes were still steely as she looked at us. The conflict wasn't over yet. "Even so, it's a big deviation from your original agreement. You were supposed to support me, as one ranked third in the Elt-Order, and help me win against the top-ranked Heroine and second-ranked Overlord."

"Yes, I still want you to reach the top of the academy. I will do my best to help you in your competition with Ms. Philtia. But please leave El, who is ranked second, to me. I will beat him and drop him to rank three or lower," I proudly swore under the watchful gaze of many students.

El was delighted, Liner whipped his head up, and Lady Karamia...

"That's it?" she asked, anxiously.

"Huh? That's all I want. Anything else—"

"It's not just Siddark, is it?" she interrupted me.

I knew what she meant, so I decided to be honest with her. "If possible, I would like to challenge the Azure Fury as well. I want to defeat only those two by myself. I know I am being selfish, but please..."

"Why is that?"

“Why?” My mind was filled with the image of Snow Walker, whom I had met on the rooftop of the academy. That beautiful hair, face, mouth, eyes...

But Lady Karamia turned her face away without listening to my reasons. “No, it doesn’t matter,” she interrupted me again. “I will win by force and dominate. That is my only dream.” At that moment, I felt her quiet magic power swell and quicken. She suppressed that surge of magic, turned around to hide her face, and said only a few last words. “I have interrupted you. Now I will leave you. I am busy fulfilling my dream.” With that, she disappeared as quickly as she had shown up.

As I watched her leave, I correctly understood the meaning of the words she’d left behind. I was sure that Lady Karamia wanted to dominate my entire existence. Because of her love for me, she strongly wished that I would not see any other woman but her. However, even though I understood her feelings to an extent, I couldn’t stop. If I did, everything in my heart would become a lie.

“Kanami, aren’t you gonna go after her?” El asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t have the strength to do it yet...”

I clenched both fists, realizing that I had one more reason to become stronger. And I prepared myself for the fact that Elle and Ms. Snow would not be the only ones I would have to beat in a duel. I intuitively understood that *she* would be the one waiting for me at the end of the battle in this academy’s Elt-Order.

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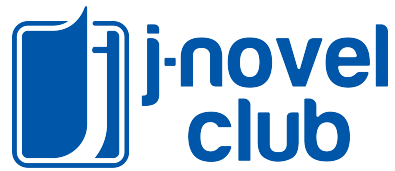
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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 9

by Tarisa Warinai

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